

How Does Irish Higher Education See Itself?

Ellen Hazelkorn and Tom Boland

In July 2019, the Irish government published proposals to reform higher education (HE) governance in response to growing concerns around perceived mismanagement or misgovernance. For institutions, such changes pose threats to autonomy to manage internal, institutional affairs by a political system wedded to command and control.

HE governance varies between countries. Some have direct ministerial responsibility for higher education while others have an intermediary or buffer organization. Ireland is similar to Hong Kong, Israel, New Zealand, and Scotland in that the higher education authority (HEA) provides oversight, funding, and policy advice and policy implementation. New legislation proposes to rename the HEA as the Higher Education Commission, and to give it additional regulatory responsibility for all higher education providers.

Proposed changes coincide with growing student enrollments, global competition, and ongoing funding constraints, putting the system under considerable pressure. This confluence of factors seemed an opportune moment to survey how higher education views itself and is viewed by others on issues such as national policy; quality and relevance to skills needs; international education; governance, management, and accountability; and research.

The *Higher Education Report 2019*, setting out the results of a survey sent to senior leaders in Irish higher education and key stakeholders, was published in November 2019. Of the positives, respondents indicate strong endorsement of the quality of the system and its relevance to the needs of the Irish economy. There is strong support for key strategic objectives for higher education, such as engagement with the skills agenda, cross-institutional collaboration, and the redesignation of polytechnics as technological universities following a stringent assessment process. There is also strong support for a bigger role for private providers, for alignment of further and higher education, and for a better balancing of the research, teaching, and learning missions of higher education.

Lack of Confidence in Themselves and Senior Colleagues?

But issues of accountability, regulation, institutional governance, and management are all viewed negatively by respondents. A key fault-line in the debate on Irish higher education is the degree to which HE institutions (HEIs) have the freedom to manage their own affairs vs. measures of accountability, which all agree are necessary, but which amount to heavy-handed regulation. While institutional autonomy is guaranteed under Irish law, for 52 percent of respondents to the survey that is not their lived experience. Twice as many respondents consider that the current system of regulation exercised by the department of education and skills and the Higher Education Authority is not appropriate, as respondents that think that it is. Eighty-seven percent believe that the performance of HEIs is negatively impacted by public sector constraints (e.g., in terms of pay, control of staff numbers, etc.).

At the same time, respondents believe that current institutional governance and management systems are not appropriate for the challenges facing higher education. Only about 30 percent of respondents agree that governing boards understand their role or that HEIs have clearly allocated responsibilities for decision-making at all levels of governance and management. A similar proportion thinks management processes, e.g., strategic planning and review, risk assessment, and performance management, are successfully implemented by and embedded in institutions. Just over 20 percent believe institutional management capability is appropriate to the standards required to meet current challenges and responsibilities facing higher education.

Abstract

A survey of senior leaders in Irish higher education shows considerable support for key national objectives for higher education, but issues of accountability, regulation, institutional governance, and management are all viewed negatively by respondents. The survey and this article were completed before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented a whole new set of issues for governments and institutional leaders. Yet all these issues remain relevant.

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Internal communication processes fare no better. Double the proportion of respondents say that staff are not informed of key developments and decisions in an appropriate and timely way, as say that they are. Higher proportions of negative responses also arise on family-friendly policies, policies to promote gender equality at senior levels, the adequacy of human resource management, and general management capability.

These results, if accurately reflecting the views of the broader HE community and its stakeholders, reveal a worrying lack of confidence in current governance, management, and accountability systems.

Balancing Accountability and Autonomy

Two key issues emerge from the survey with wider international resonance. First, the ability of higher education to respond appropriately, effectively, and efficiently to massification, globalization, and technological change depends on the quality of its governance arrangements and its leadership. This is because change does not just happen but must be led. Yet, as Middlehurst observed, university presidents and other senior leaders often rise through the ranks over time, translating their experience as “amateur academic leaders to effective professionals” with little initial or continuous professional development. Many universities are confronted by a leadership succession crisis. Fifty-seven percent of respondents believe that reform of academic and administrative structures is essential in enabling the Irish higher education system to achieve world leading status, while a mere 14 percent see no need for reform.

Second, a key fault-line across many HE systems is the degree to which institutions have the freedom to manage their own affairs (autonomy) vs. the degree to which they are regulated by government (accountability). In the face of growing pressure for higher education to demonstrate greater commitment to the “public good” and student outcomes, tensions are rising. *The European University Scorecard 2017*, now in its third edition, measures autonomy against four dimensions: organization, financial, staffing, and academic. For Ireland, the picture is mixed, with relatively high levels of autonomy across all dimensions with the exception of staffing, where the moratorium on appointments, introduced in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, remains.

The survey highlights an appetite for reform that gives more autonomy to the institutions, while enhancing the competences and effectiveness of governance, management, and leadership structures. Quite where the balance will be struck remains to be seen, but policy makers would be well advised to consider how standards of governance, management, and leadership can be improved in HEIs rather than reaching automatically for tighter regulation. ▲

*Ellen Hazelkorn and Tom Boland
are joint managing partners of BH
Associates, www.bhassociates.eu.
E-mail: info@bhassociates.eu.*