

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was conducted under the 2018 NUI Dr Garret FitzGerald Post-Doctoral Fellowship in the Social Sciences. As a solo researcher, with a limited timeframe of two years, the aim was to open up enquiry into perceptions of universities' contribution to the public good in Ireland, as opposed to their undoubted contribution to the economic good. Mass participation rates in Irish higher education form an important context for the study, which was motivated by a concern that economic narratives currently dominate Irish discourses around higher education, eclipsing many outcomes with which university has long been associated.

The expansion of higher education systems has been accompanied by a process of differentiation. In Ireland, the recent establishment of a Technological University adds a further layer of diversity to a system that was previously classified as binary, the main differentiation being that between the university sector and the institute of technology sector.

The focus of this study is to explore and examine the perceived non-economic outcomes of mass participation in the traditional university sector. The scope of this study does not include the recently established Technological Universities in Ireland, of which there are two at the time of publication (2021).

This explanatory study is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with a sample of targeted respondents, drawn from two cohorts – one cohort (University) drawn from respondents working in universities in different capacities, and a second (Stakeholder) cohort comprised of personnel in civil society and state bodies as well as students, parents, employers, media, policy-makers, advocacy and community development groups, and representative bodies.

In the study, a distinction arises between the outcomes of higher education in general, and those arising from mass participation higher education where large numbers of graduates collectively influence their communities. Issues were broached with respondents by means of open questions inviting them to elaborate on their perceptions of the aspects of interest to this study. Appendix 2 provides the Interview Schedule. The findings report the perceptions of both cohorts on the contributions of mass higher education to the public good, along five broad dimensions, namely:

- Public perceptions of mass higher education
- Students' reasons for aspiring to higher education
- Society, culture and values
- Mass participation, citizenship and political engagement
- Funding

The study shows that there has been a shift in the perceived purpose of higher education in the last three decades in Ireland, from an elite academic activity and social good to serving socio-economic needs including job creation and business and industry innovation. This shift arose from demands from society, yet respondents felt that in the public mind, universities remain associated only with teaching.

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The major findings are summarised as follows:

- **Purpose of participation:** Respondents report many intangible benefits of university. Stakeholders express the view that university enables connections and promotes understanding of the world, which they value on a par with gaining qualifications. The University Cohort describe the purpose as fostering global citizenship and empowerment, expanding horizons, developing cognitive rationality and forming good citizens. In turn, having articulate citizens with highly developed independent thinking and personal efficacy, contributes to society on a wider level. Respondents report a belief that university provides a forum for discussions which is not replicable elsewhere.
- **Student motives for participation:** Respondents accept that career opportunities are a major motivational driver for students but they believe that other non-economic aspirations may be at work. Stakeholders report reasons of broadening horizons and embarking on an exciting new phase of life, a chance to meet new friends and engage with the world. University respondents perceive a passion in today's student cohort to solve world problems such as climate change, sustainability and poverty, and a strong ambition for meaningful work. Some University respondents report that students do not realise 'how they're setting up their future' because university 'makes you something... trains your thinking' (Piet). Responses convey a perception that students are not only influenced by their parents or driven by opportunities for sports or future work but that they are drawn to university to equip themselves to improve quality of life for all.
- **Outcomes of mass participation:** Respondents highlight intangible outcomes along the dimensions of skills, cognitive reasoning, personal development, empowerment, individual agency and autonomy, self-confidence, and good citizenship. Respondents perceive mass higher education as having a significant impact on society in terms of community engagement, volunteering and increased personal agency, which enables graduates to address social issues. Empowering individuals on a large scale translates into a social benefit. University Cohort respondents report that higher education creates more than individual benefits because the outcomes are far-reaching, influencing graduates' families, workplaces and communities. They describe what one respondent terms 'a ripple effect' from graduates, causing a significant positive influence on wider society and thus contributing to the public good.
- **Expertise:** Respondents identify expertise across all disciplines as a valuable contribution to the public good. They point to societal benefits from the expertise of academics for example in informing public debates, in a non-partisan way.
- **Values:** Values represent an important dimension of university's contribution to the public good: responses describe how higher education influences people's behaviour and values, which impacts on how society imagines itself, such as changing norms around gender roles. Values are not explicitly taught, but learned through the norms on campus and the behaviour of enthusiastic university teachers. For example, values such as giving back to society, are signalled on public occasions such as conferrals, which endorses the culture on campus.

- Social cohesion: Defined as ‘the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper’ (Stanley, 2003:5), respondents had differing positions on social cohesion as an outcome of higher education. Based on their perceptions of diversity and values of tolerance and inclusivity on campus, the great majority of Stakeholders consider higher education promotes social cohesion. University respondents describe how diversity and inclusion are purposely pursued on campus as a means to promoting cultural awareness and social cohesion. In general, University Senior Management and professional support staff endorse the view that through commitment to diversity and inclusivity, higher education positively impacts on social cohesion, however university lecturers doubt the policy of diversity leads to any sense among students that they are all members of the same community.
- Lifelong learning: The issue of lifelong learning and access to university for non-traditional students prompted strong responses from both cohorts. Stakeholders advocate more flexibility both in the timing of entry to higher education, and the possibility to change track. University respondents also express a belief that more flexibility is necessary so that access is available over the life-course rather than aimed mainly at school-leavers.
- Social mobility: Within or between cohorts, there is no consensus that higher education leads to social mobility. Some University respondents perceive social mobility as an outcome for less well-off graduates, others believe it is a function of the course pursued, or of uneven access to networks. The University Cohort highlights how university increases geographic mobility, where a degree is considered an ‘Academic Passport’ enabling graduates to establish careers overseas. Some Stakeholders highlight that social mobility is measured by earnings, which overlooks other important benefits such as graduates employed in areas which are personally rewarding, but not financially so. In terms of life satisfaction, it is fair to posit that not everyone is motivated by material gain, as the data indicates many people value meaningful work above financial gain, and wish to reach their potential rather than maximise earnings.
- Political Engagement: Differing viewpoints emerge regarding the influence of mass participation on political engagement. University respondents express a view that higher education can restrain populism by virtue of the university value of freedom of speech which enables debates, and the role of higher education in developing critical thinking skills and promoting an understanding of society. Some Stakeholders believe populism in Ireland has not featured widely in Ireland as it has elsewhere, and attribute this to Ireland’s high rates of participation in higher education.

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‘...to provide higher education as and for public good ...is about helping students to see and nurture their capacities to live in the world and to encourage them to deliberate on what professional responsibility and active citizenship implies.’

Solbrekke and Sugrue (2020:11)

- Citizen formation: The question of good citizenship as an outcome of mass participation gave rise to contrasting views within and between cohorts. Opinions differ as to the contribution of mass higher education in developing good citizens and encouraging political engagement, ranging from a majority view that higher education promotes political awareness, which may or may not lead to actual engagement, to the contrary view that the economic mission which dominates higher education today has stifled any challenge to social structures from students. University/STEM respondents perceive increased levels of political engagement on campus, in particular observing that green issues have replaced the somewhat left-wing stance associated with university. There was consensus that higher education is a positive force in the political arena, as it raises the quality of discourse and discernment. This theme highlights that the economic mission of higher education has not obscured the earlier paradigm of citizen formation.
- Funding HE: Respondents identified the existence of constraints on the attainment of public good outcomes from university education. Both cohorts consider that higher education currently operates under considerable constraints, particularly around funding and stretched resources. Respondents expressed their views on how higher education should be funded. Both cohorts considered various options, from state-funding, students’ self-funding with state loans where needed, and state support for disadvantaged groups, to employers contributing more to the cost of higher education. Many respondents argue that state-funded higher education is justified because the state and society at large benefit from having people who are willing to invest their time and effort in higher education, and who proceed to contribute to society at a higher level. Regarding the aspect of research, Stakeholder respondents explain that Ireland has the opportunity to compete for EU funding, but raise concerns that Ireland may not be well prepared, due to funding constraints. A perceived preoccupation with international rankings was flagged as a concern, as measuring and ranking are viewed by some as easily manipulated and therefore unrepresentative of the true value of a university.

## Structure of the report

Chapter 1 places the study in the historical and ideological context of higher education policy in Ireland. The second chapter presents the background to the study and considers the relevant literature. Methods are described in Chapter 3, including participants' profiles. Chapters 4 to 8 discuss the findings, describing the perceptions expressed in qualitative interviews with respondents who work in universities, as well as respondents from outside the university sector who are cognisant with the issues, purposes and missions of university. Five broad themes are considered separately, commencing with 'Perceptions of mass participation in higher education' in Chapter 4. The main conclusions are outlined in Chapter 9, while Chapter 10 proposes recommendations for the attention of policy-makers and higher education managers.