



The Contribution of Mass Higher Education in Ireland to the Public Good: Perceptions from within and outside Irish Universities

Dr Ann Averill

NUI Discussion Paper No. 2



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland



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Print ISBN **978-0-901510-88-4**
eOnline ISBN **978-0-901510-89-1**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHSS	Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
BCI	British Council Ireland
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DBIS	Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (UK)
DCU	Dublin City University
DEIS	Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools
Dept	Department
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
IDA	Irish Development Agency
IFUT	Irish Federation of University Teachers
MU	Maynooth University
NUI	National University of Ireland
NUIG	National University of Ireland, Galway
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
RIA	Royal Irish Academy
S	Stakeholder
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SES	Socio-economic Status
SFA	Small Firms Association
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
THE	Times Higher Education
U	University
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
UL	University of Limerick
UN	United Nations

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.

Acknowledgements

This study was made possible by the National University of Ireland (NUI) 2018 Dr Garret FitzGerald Post-Doctoral Fellowship in the Social Sciences. Thanks are due to the many people whose support contributed greatly to this research, especially NUI Chancellor Dr Maurice Manning and the members of the NUI Senate Education and Society Committee, Dr Attracta Halpin, Registrar at NUI, Professor Pat Clancy (NUI Senate and UCD), Ms Patricia Maguire, Dr Emer Purcell and all the staff of NUI for their support in so many ways. I am grateful to the School of Sociology, University College Dublin for appointing me Visiting Research Fellow, with all the privileges attendant on that position. I am grateful to those who took an interest in my work, including Professor Rowena Pecchenino and Professor Mary Corcoran of Maynooth University. Last but not least, thanks are due to the forty participants who willingly shared their views and gave of their time.

1 INTRODUCTION: THE IRISH UNIVERSITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This study explores perceptions of how the phenomenon of mass participation or massification of higher education in Ireland contributes to the public good. Research examines the perceptions of respondents as to how mass participation in higher education might influence society along several dimensions beyond economic considerations. The study considers the values that Irish higher education seeks to impart to students, and the perceived success of transmitting these values into broader society as graduates proceed through life. Based on the literature review, it is clear that the recent emphasis on the economic mission of higher education (O’Sullivan, 2005:135; Walsh, 2018:486) has obscured the many other important aspects of mass participation that contribute to the public good. On reviewing the literature, it became apparent that researchers in Ireland have focussed almost wholly on aspects linked to economic good, such as widening participation, access and inequity. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by exploring perceptions of higher education’s non-economic contributions to the public good, along such dimensions as expertise, value formation, social cohesion, social mobility and political behaviour. A brief account of recent government policy follows, which aims to situate this study in the context of the differing paradigms of higher education through which today’s model has evolved.

1.1 Evolving government policy and higher education in Ireland

Higher education historically embodied differing missions, such as the philosophies of Newman and Humboldt, which continue to have implications for contemporary higher education systems and institutions. Given his foundational role in Irish higher education, the Newman Paradigm is particularly relevant in the Irish context. Humboldt’s influence is indirect, in that it contributed to the development of the American ‘research university’ since World War II, with emphasis on particular types of research, and publication, and in turn, the American model has influenced Irish higher education. These, and other, paradigms are briefly outlined below:

TABLE 1 PARADIGMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Paradigm	Mission
Newman	Character formation; good citizenship
Humboldt	Research/knowledge generation
Napoleonic	Training of professionals/serve the state
American Colleges	Newman, Humboldt, Napoleonic paradigms blended with new mission of community service
Economic	Newman, Humboldt, Napoleonic and American paradigms plus a new mission to aid national economic development
Internationalisation	21st Century, rooted in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)’s Bologna Protocol, including the European Credit Transfer System (ECTs), to encourage and facilitate student mobility

According to Clancy (2015:3), '[t]his fusion provided us with the 20th century triad of teaching, research and public service missions, which remain perhaps the most influential role definition' of higher education.

In the Irish context, the Newman Paradigm was foremost. Walsh (2018) points out that religion was seen as an integral part of higher learning, in contrast to the Humboldtian mission, which was non-denominational. However, it is noteworthy that in 1908 the National University of Ireland was established as a non-denominational university, where religious training was expressly prohibited (Dunne et al, 2008). Walsh (2018) discusses the historical context of higher education since independence, and identifies a radical shift from that prevailing in the 1940s, when the university was viewed as elitist and irrelevant to wider society. At that time, the Department of Finance refused to fund universities because it 'regarded spending on higher education as a luxury benefitting only a small minority, many of whom were likely to be lost to Ireland through emigration... the dominant popular movements of the era perceived the universities as channels for the achievement of religious and cultural objectives' (Walsh, 2018:93). According to O'Sullivan (2005:135), with the Programme for Economic Expansion in the late 1950s and early 1960s, 'the identity of those who were accepted as legitimate commentators on education issues also changed. Economists came to be accepted as the natural sources of informed and analytic observation on social issues in education in a manner that equated society with the economy'. This heralded the emergence of the Human Capital Paradigm (a further iteration of the Economic Paradigm) in Irish education policy: '[e]conomists dislodged the pedagogue previously represented by priests, religious congregations, or headmasters' (O'Sullivan, 2005:136). For the OECD, the key to modernisation was education (O'Sullivan, 2005:137). O'Sullivan (2005:149) argues that this new paradigm reconfigured education as investment, rather than a consumption item, so that increased funding became imperative. From the late 1950s, the focus was on secondary education, which was the route to employment in the expanding public service, and this new paradigm 'presented politicians with economic reasons for acceding to populist demands for an expansion of educational provision' (O'Sullivan, 2005:149).

Traditionally, Ireland had a two-track system of higher education institutions from the 1970s; one being the university institution and sector with theoretically based programmes often leading to specific occupations such as teaching, law or medicine, and the other (being the vocational or occupationally-oriented institution and sector (Clancy, 2015:37). Clancy (2015) points out that the latter fell outside the aegis of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the state-agency for higher education funding and policy, so that the State itself, through the central Department of Education and Science/Skills, retained high levels of control of 'regional technical colleges' and 'institutes of technology' to direct their activities 'in pursuit of objectives formulated by the state... [to] develop courses that would cater for the emerging labour market needs of an expanding industrial economy' (Clancy, 2015:255). This 'dual control' exemplifies the 'society-to-school' relationship (Brint, 2013).

Until recently, the Irish higher education system was binary. The advent of the Technological Universities in 2018 introduced a new layer of diversity to Irish higher education. Where previously the main differentiation was between the university sector and the institute of technology sector, there is now a new type of HEI, combining elements from both universities and institutes of technology (DES 2011).

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 institutes of technology or the recently established technological universities.

1 INTRODUCTION: THE IRISH UNIVERSITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Walsh (2018:345) states that higher education became a central element of national economic development during the 1990s. In 1992, a Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World*, initiated programmes for professional development of academics, quality assurance of teaching and learning, as well as a new monitoring role for the Higher Education Authority. Walsh (2018:307) describes how, by 1995, social and cultural transformations such as ‘the decline of traditional religious divisions’ and the move away from economic protectionism, ‘created a potent consensus in favour of expansionist policies’. A new emphasis on research accompanied initiatives for expanding participation. Walsh (2018:399) states that, in the late 1990s ‘[e]nhancing research capability emerged as a key policy objective for the Irish state for the first time’. According to Walsh, although economic development was undoubtedly the prime driver for educational policy change, non-economic variables also informed change. Furthermore, a shift away from manufacturing created an imperative for alternative employment opportunities. A new phase of mass participation in higher education was initiated, which imposed new demands on universities, as well as increasing the visibility of higher education in the public mind. Mass participation has given more people access to higher education than in previous generations:

TABLE 2 ALL HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLMENTS IN IRELAND, 1969-70 TO 2017-18

	1969-70	1979-80	1989-90	1999-00	2009-10	2017-18
All HEIs	26,628	49,313	85,138	160,611	200,412	231,710*

(Sources: Clancy 2015 and HEA 2020)

* includes ‘colleges’ enrolments of 10,915

This phase coincided with the Celtic Tiger, which was attributed by the OECD in 2004 to the upskilling of Ireland’s workforce since the 1960s (Walsh, 2018:344). Walsh (2018:486) states that ‘[t]he central place of higher education in economic development became an article of faith among policy makers from the late 1960s through to the first decades of the twenty-first century’. There followed ‘a dramatic increase in social demand for higher level courses’. The (2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (known as the Hunt Report) repositioned higher education as an economic asset (Walsh, 2018:440). According to Clancy (2015), government policy endorsed the strategy outlined in the Hunt Report.

In 2016, the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education, chaired by Mr Peter Cassells produced its report entitled *Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education* (subsequently known – and referred to hereinafter – as the Cassells Report). This report reinforced the view that higher education has had a positive impact on Ireland’s development, as well as on society, individuals and employers. The 2016 report states that ‘higher education has value because it greatly adds to... the flourishing of our integrated social, institutional, cultural and economic life’. It highlights four dimensions where higher education contributes to society (DES, 2016:17):

1. a high quality student experience drawing on research and excellent teaching and scholarship;
2. innovation and knowledge creation across society to support prosperity and facilitate human development;

3. fostering capabilities of graduates to meet the changing needs of organisations in the public, private, and social sectors, while enhancing individuals' wellbeing and careers;
4. increasing access to higher education as part of the social contract.

The Cassells Report (DES, 2016) highlights how the spheres of higher education, business, government and civil society overlap to address today's challenges.

The early 2000s saw a new paradigm of Internationalisation gain traction. This had its roots in EU initiatives such as the Bologna Protocol (1999) and the introduction of ECTS, the European Credit Transfer System, designed to promote student mobility within and across member states of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Walsh, 2018:390). EU Policy promoted a 'modernisation agenda' for higher education in the early 2000s. The European Union reinforced knowledge-based economic development and Ireland embraced this paradigm as an opportunity to catch up on overseas competitors. By the late 2000s and the financial crisis, reduced reliance by HEIs on the state for funding became a key policy aim (Walsh, 2018:392). Internationalisation represented an opportunity for HEIs to compete for a new revenue stream, by attracting international students. The Minister for Education in 2012, Ruairí Quinn, recognised the 'challenge to the system as reconciling future demand for participation growth with the severe limitations on public resources and the need to protect and enhance core quality' (Clancy, 2015:272).

More recent initiatives in State policy have focused on lifting the status of the Institute of Technology sector, with the Technological Universities Act (2018) and subsequent launch of Technological University Dublin in January 2019. According to Fitzpatrick (2019), the president of Technological University Dublin, this new model of university has a different remit. The Senior Policy Coordinator at European Universities Association, Jorgensen (2019) points out that awarding PhD qualifications is one distinguishing feature of the university. He describes the changing role of universities in Regional Innovation Ecosystems as requiring new ways of thinking and a need for interdisciplinarity, rather than restriction into a single discipline. He describes this changing role as preparing students for disruption by way of entrepreneurial skills, problem solving, leadership skills, and exposure to Artificial Intelligence. Jorgensen argues that students learn through engagement in a context, rather than knowledge transfer. Most importantly, as universities are a global pipeline for ideas, students must be encouraged to contribute to the community.

A further development in Ireland has been the establishment in 2020 of a dedicated government department for further and higher education, research, innovation and science. Until 2020, higher education remained integrated within the Department of Education and Skills. Since the new coalition government in 2020, higher education has a peer minister in cabinet, a development which mirrors the situation in neighbouring countries such as France and the UK. A high priority for the new Department of Further and Higher Education is delivering a Technological University in the South East of Ireland; the Technological University for Munster, arising from a merger between Cork and Tralee IoTs, opened in January 2021. Addressing the likely next in line Technological University in the south-east of Ireland, the Minister of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris, TD, (2020) noted, 'a TU in the South East will re-energise the region and bring significant benefits in terms of increased reach, international recognition, research capacity building, FDI attraction, skills retention and creation and intensified regional development'. The priority reflects a government emphasis on the economic good of higher education.

1 INTRODUCTION: THE IRISH UNIVERSITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

According to the Cassells Report (DES, 2016:14), '[t]he participation rate for 18-20 year olds has grown from 20 per cent in 1980 to a current level of 58 per cent'. The CAO (2016) reports that 47,600 applicants accepted places on courses at levels 6, 7 and 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in that year alone. In 2017, the total number of full-time students in Ireland was 181,039, and an additional 39,625 part-time (CSO, 2019). Growth continues apace, and the HEA states the 2017-18 numbers in higher education were 232,000 (HEA 2020). This raises questions about how the attributes acquired in higher education by a large proportion of a generation manifest in the social, cultural and political world, and what ways this new phenomenon might contribute to the public good. What values are embedded during the extra years of education? How do those values shape individuals on their life trajectories? And to what extent does a significant cohort of graduates contribute to the public good?

1.2 Research question

The initial research question for this study was 'How might the outcomes of mass participation higher education in Ireland contribute to the public good?' In the process of gathering data the research question changed to 'How is mass participation in higher education seen to influence Irish society and contribute to the public good?' This change was partly due to a realisation that the original hypothesis may be prejudicial, and partly due to themes that emerged during data gathering, which signalled some negative aspects of mass participation. On further analysis however, it became apparent that these negatives were less the outcomes of expanded participation *per se*, rather than consequences of the under-funding with which higher education struggles. Other issues arose pertaining to structures of higher education, such as a perceived lack of valued alternative pathways, which was seen as problematic, however, this is outside the scope of this study. A section on funding is included in the themes, which unpacks public perceptions around perceived problems arising from under-funding. The emphasis remains, however, on the intangible, unquantifiable, non-economic outcomes of mass higher education, and their relationships to the public good.

1.3 Theoretical framework

This study explores perceptions of the outcomes of mass higher education in Ireland, and in what ways mass participation might influence Irish society. Theorising from the perspective of 'school-to-society,' as opposed to the dominant 'society-to-school' approach, the study focuses on the non-economic contribution of higher education to the Public Good (Kamens, 2009; McMahon, 2009; Brint, 2013; Bowen, 2016; Baker, 2018; Marginson, 2018). This conceptual approach sets this study apart from the many excellent studies that have emphasised the economic outcomes, and their contribution to the public good. Human capital theory assumes higher education imparts work skills determined by the economy, overlooking higher education's full impact on society. Brint (2013:278) states

[W]e see very few studies of the... school-to-society link – whether this be the effects of formal education on the structure of labor markets (through credentialism and professionalization), on culture (through the creation of tastes, values...and status cultures), or on individual behavior following the completion of schooling (through, for example, changes in parenting or in religious or political participation).

Brint, in a 2009 lecture, highlights how current debates in the US are dominated by the influence of society on how schooling is delivered (society-to-school); he advocates a reversal of this lens, diverting the focus to how education influences society (school-to-society): 'today's... sociology of education is the study of the effects of social structure and school organization on educational achievement... it overlooks the dependence of society on the production of the carriers of school socialization and knowledge' (2013:279). Brint exhorts the development of 'a stronger appreciation of education's contribution to the construction of society and culture' (2013:279).

Sociological theories of education include conflict theory, which sees education supporting society by reinforcing the power of the elite groups over others, which maintains the social status quo (Collins, 1971). In this way education can be deployed as a mechanism of exclusion, or a merit-based process to all social advancement. Cultural reproduction theories similarly hold that society is arranged to reproduce social inequalities based on culture and class, with education contributing to the acquisition of credentials, cultural capital, and social networks. Education thereby determines status in the social structure and bolsters that of privileged social groups (Bourdieu, 1984). Durkheim emphasised the instrumental role of education, in that the individual's interests are not the main aim of education. Instead, education is principally about reproducing the conditions of society (Durkheim, 1995). This is achieved by instilling particular intellectual and moral states in each individual. Parsons and Platt (1970) identified two features of learning in higher education: assimilating the cognitive content of the subject under study, and also internalising values and norms. The latter is termed 'socialisation'. Parsons and Platt (1970) view this socialisation during the time of 'studentry' as an extension of adolescence where the student is protected from many external pressures but at the cost of financial independence. At a time of mass participation in higher education, the youth cohort becomes segregated into two – those who have participated in an extended period of 'studentry,' and those who have not. Collins (1971) defined 'technical function theory,' which maintains that technological change brings about a constant demand for increased skills, and in turn requires longer time in education in order to acquire the skills and capacities for highly skilled employment. Through education, individuals accumulate human capital, which they can exchange for economic capital. Human capital theory assumes education imparts work skills determined by the economy, and minimises education's full impact on society. By framing education as an individual investment with private economic benefits, it becomes the responsibility of the individual to participate, or not.

According to Baker (2018), the old sociological paradigms in the sociology of education are no longer adequate to explain contemporary phenomena. Baker (2018:67) believes an education revolution is underway and this 'education revolution is a cultural phenomenon more than a material or political one, although it has major material and political consequences'. There is an educational restructuring of jobs, occupational credentials and profitable skills, and an increase in the cognitive complexity of jobs, all of which have significant consequences for society. He refers to several areas where higher education impacts on society, such as family, fertility, political engagement and activism, religious adherence and graduates' worldview, stating that the non-instrumental outcomes of higher education are in need of examination. Similarly, Smolentseva (2018:185) states 'despite the fact that higher education has been in the focus of social research for several decades, its social role in a society, in social development, and its inter-relations with society have not been thoroughly studied'. Smolentseva considers it vital to understand how society and higher education are inter-related, to enable its effects on society to be considered.

Definitions of the terms employed in this study are elaborated in Appendix 1.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explores the literature on higher education and the contemporary debates in Ireland as well as the UK, USA, and further afield. The first section discusses research in Ireland on dimensions of public good associated with higher education such as political engagement, volunteering and community engagement, and cultural development. This discussion highlights the overlap between public good and economic good, in that economic good is one dimension of public good, but it has become the central focus. This points to a lack of research on other areas of higher education in Ireland, such as how mass participation may contribute to the public good in non-economic ways. Studies from the UK, Denmark and Sweden confirm the shift in focus to the economic good in those jurisdictions since the late 1970s, and note a recent awakening of concern for the public good (Myklebust, 2019; Singh, 2013; Johansen et al, 2017; Kezar, 2005). The literature in the second section explores how the economic paradigm of higher education gradually came to dominate discourses on higher education, in the UK, Australia, the USA, and Ireland. Several studies examine how the increased emphasis on economic outcomes has influenced attitudes to higher education, for example causing discourses of opportunity and betterment to become associated with university across the Western World, or in some cases causing a 'student as customer' narrative to develop. For example, Williams (2016) contends that in the UK, government higher education policy reoriented the view of public good away from knowledge as a good in itself, in favour of objective knowledge outcomes directed at national economic benefit, employability and earnings.

The third section examines the literature on public perceptions of higher education in Ireland, and the reported reasons of students for their positive regard and aspirations to participate in higher education. Reasons tend towards economic objectives, such as enhanced employment opportunities and better income for the individual. These rationales correspond with government discourses around higher education which are dominated by the concept of economic good, both for individuals and for the national economy. Furthermore, studies in Ireland indicate that tertiary education has become a 'cultural value,' aspired to by most (Smyth et al, 2010:102), if not an economic imperative (Marginson, 2018).

This leads to the fourth topic, exploring students' reasons for aspiring to higher education in Ireland. This section discusses studies that found university is predominantly viewed as the route to careers by students and parents, with only rare mentions of self-development or a desire to learn. This dominant view of higher education being the portal to career success and higher earnings, raises questions about equality of access, and the fifth section explores issues of equity and access. As repeated studies have highlighted inequities around access, the sixth section explores initiatives taken to counter-act inequality in accessing higher education. The final section explores the changing roles of higher education in Ireland.

This Literature Review will show that narratives of higher education as an economic good have dominated and eclipsed consideration of other impacts of higher education on society, so that the non-economic outcomes have been neglected. As a result, higher education is framed as a 'society-to-school' relationship with higher education subordinate to and subject to the needs of society (Brint, 2013). This view neglects to consider the social impact of having large numbers of graduates in society, apart from economic good. This leads to the question, how do the non-instrumental outcomes of higher education influence society and contribute to the public good? By exploring perceptions of non-economic contributions to the public good of mass participation higher education in Ireland, this study addresses this gap in the literature.

2.1 Higher education and the ‘public good’

The term ‘public good’ is used in many different contexts and across diverse academic disciplines. Carpentier & Courtois (2020:11) identify four ideas of the public good in higher education, namely, public service, serving the public, production of public knowledge, and representing the public. They describe public good or ‘general interest’ as a guiding principle of French public law:

The notion of *interet general* is ‘the foundation stone of state action, determining its purposes and guaranteeing its legitimacy’ (Truchet 1998). It emerged in the 18th century, when it began to replace the religiously and morally connoted notion of ‘*bien commun*’ (literally ‘common good’)... as the guiding principle of social life. The notion of *interet general* is at the heart of French Public Law.

Parallels can be drawn with the guiding principles of the Irish Republic, as defined in the Directive Principles of Social Policy in *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (1937). Article 45.2.ii of Ireland’s Constitution asserts that social policy will be directed towards safe-guarding the common good:

That the ownership and control of the material resources of the community may be so distributed amongst private individuals and the various classes as best to subserve the common good.

This study seeks to explore how higher education contributes to society, in terms of these understandings of ‘common good’ or ‘public good’. Pecchenino’s (2018:1) conceptualisation of the ‘common good’ is a social contract owed to all members of society, structured around the fact that ‘for the individual to flourish, society must flourish, and for society to flourish the individual must flourish’. Pecchenino states that through laws, culture and norms, society supports and educates individuals and enables them to work, through the political system, to further improve society. However, Pecchenino (2018:1) observes that this striving towards the ‘common good’ has been disrupted by an economic system that concentrates on the individual so that, for economists, ‘if the individual flourishes the individual flourishes, full stop,’ indicating a lack of concern for societal flourishing outside the arena of economics. In an era of mass higher education such as Ireland now experiences, the narratives of economic good are loud, and narratives around funding of higher education draw on rhetoric of individual economic benefit, often side-lining outcomes of human flourishing.

In a similar vein, Leibowitz (2013:xxiii) defines the term ‘public good’ as ‘the flourishing of human beings as a valuable end, instead of seeing human beings as instruments of economic well-being’. The conceptual perspective of this study most closely aligns with Leibowitz’s (2013) conception of higher education and the public good, highlighting its role in fostering the flourishing of human beings, who are politically engaged with society, and ethically informed.

In the above conceptual context, more research is required to qualitatively evaluate the outcomes of higher education, in terms of the public good, in Ireland. While the 2019 *Indecon Assessment of the Economic and Social Impact of Irish Universities* focused primarily on the economic outcomes of university, the report did include limited reference to other kinds of outcomes. For example, the report assessed the benefit to society from volunteering, which is expressed in terms of Euro value of unpaid work rather than the non-material benefit of the work for the community. Social mobility was also addressed, and the report stated that 15% of those who accessed university in 2017 came from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Indecon

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report did not, however, include a measurement of the outcomes of university education for these students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report addressed the public good aspect directly in terms of social and cultural contributions of universities, reporting that universities prepare a cohort of people who become significant in the arts, both as artists and in promoting the arts. This was assessed in a quantitative way, measuring footfall at events. For example, it highlights attractions such as the Helix Theatre at DCU, and the Book of Kells at Trinity College Dublin. Regarding the Book of Kells, this and other illuminated manuscripts are highly valued as priceless art and religious texts, by a broad school of academics and the public with interests in religion, art history and medieval history, and would draw crowds regardless of their location. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that Trinity College Dublin and other centres of learning have played an important role in preserving such artefacts, thereby contributing to the public good. The Indecon Report (2019) asks respondents whether they were encouraged at university to engage politically, and 45% of respondents indicated they were. However, the report does not highlight that finding as significant.

Abrahams and Brooks (2018) address the area of political engagement and higher education in a cross-national study comparing Ireland and England. They draw on the work of Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) who contend that universities play a crucial role in developing youth political participation. A university campus can bring together enough like-minded people to enable political networks to form, and also provide resources such as meeting rooms and materials to enable campaigning. Furthermore, Abrahams and Brooks (2018:112) found that 'students in both countries [England and Ireland] spoke of the liberalising and politicising effect of university... through a process of mixing with people from a variety of backgrounds... opening their minds to different issues.' Their study highlights how students see themselves 'as an educated group and as such a resource for society and their communities' (Abraham & Brooks, 2018:113). Their finding signals an important aspect of higher education's contribution to political engagement, which is a dimension of the public good under-researched in Ireland.

On another level, Irish higher education's contribution to the public good has been researched in terms of value for money. Hazelkorn and Gibson (2018:258) address the public good in the Irish context, and state that

Recent years have seen many governments adopt the format of a national strategy or development plan for HE as a means of setting out national objectives – or arguably shaping the 'public good'.... These processes are in effect an attempt by governments to set out... the responsibilities of HEIs to society.

They advocate the importance of placing 'the achievement of public value at the core of decision-making', which indicates a conceptualisation of 'public good' as an economic benefit (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2018:263). Hazelkorn and Gibson (2018) concentrate on the *responsibilities* of higher education institutions (HEIs) to society, as they advocate good governance to balance the objectives of all stakeholders in order to advance the public good. The process described by Hazelkorn and Gibson (2018) demonstrates the 'society-to-school' influence, but leaves unexplored the *contribution* in less instrumental ways of higher education to the public good. Hazelkorn and Gibson (2018:3) consider whether a possible reframing of the process for determining the public good may be underway in Ireland, with attendant wider implications. In this they may have a point, as higher education policy may indeed have wider implications that need to be understood and planned for in the context of public policy. This exploratory study on the contributions of mass HE participation for Irish society is timely, in this respect.

In the USA, Pasque (2010:5) writes that there is

pressure on higher education... to work collaboratively with local and global communities to address complex issues including health care, the environment (land, air, and sea), incarceration rates, drug and human trafficking, educational and economic inequities, food and water sustainability, and other issues of disparities and social justice.

Notwithstanding its perceived main role as an economic force, Pasque's view suggests that higher education can still represent a beacon of hope in solving such wide-ranging societal challenges, signals the non-material importance of higher education. This highlights another contribution higher education makes to human flourishing – that of expertise, which universities place at the service of wider society. For example, the 2020 Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings measure universities' contribution to 'public good' in terms of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This cross-country comparison includes universities in 85 countries. It recognises the contribution of universities to 'making the world a better place'. Irish universities performed well in this ranking with all seven of the universities in this study attaining high scores on a variety of dimensions such as promoting healthy lives, clean oceans, clean energy, gender equality, sustainable and safe cities, innovation and global partnership. These aspects of public good contribute to the flourishing of individuals and of society and link with universities' role in knowledge production and expertise, which are highly valued outputs of higher education.

In the context of the UK, Williamson and Coffield argued in 1997 that 'the purposes of higher education cannot be separated from debate about the kind of society it is part of and is expected to contribute to' (1997:130). This raises the question of higher education's contribution to the public good from the perspective of citizenship and political stability. Williamson and Coffield (1997:127) argue that the link between values and knowledge has broken down; to address this, it is incumbent on higher education institutions to stimulate public debate about the values that inform decisions both in economic and political life. From this perspective, universities are understood to be in a position to nurture and publicly justify a climate where scholarship can be celebrated for its own sake, as this is the basis of all civilisations, cultures, and creative endeavours. Clearly, universities are caught in the middle of cultural contradictions of modern societies, which increasingly grow in complexity: 'Modern society depends on specialized bodies of knowledge to which only relatively few people have access. On the other hand, citizens and consumers need access to knowledge to make informed choices and to keep modernity... going' (Williamson and Coffield, 1997:127). In Williamson and Coffield's view, it is necessary to provide opportunities for adults to engage with learning, in order to continue both employment, and effective citizenship. This argument is in accord with Wickham (1998), Valimaa and Hoffman (2008) and others, who advocate lifelong learning in the context of upskilling in the service of one's career. Williamson and Coffield (1997) advocate lifelong learning not only for individual work-related purposes, but also as being essential for modern society. Consequently, universities are called on to provide lifelong learning to equip citizens to understand the societies in which they live, enabling good citizenship. In this way, universities serve the public good through enhancing social and political stability.

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Also writing in the UK, Mala Singh (2013) states the contribution of higher education to political stability requires engagement with the full spectrum of academic disciplines. The pursuit of knowledge to extend the limits of human imagination is essential because democratic and economically stable societies need a complex range of competencies, where poets and philosophers are as critical to society as engineers and accountants (Singh, 2013:6). Moreover, an exclusive focus on applied fields with economic possibilities undermines the arts and humanities, which are necessary for balanced social and cultural development. Singh (2013:6) states '[t]he fostering of ideas in a range of basic and applied fields is a necessary public good,' which nourishes social development in a range of intangible ways. The role of higher education as 'critic and conscience of society' has been upheld in the past, as fundamental to keeping democracy vibrant. Singh's view that values are being lost in higher education, is supported by a Danish study (Johansen et al, 2017), which analysed Danish educational policy plans over a forty-year period from 1978. They found that the concepts of the knowledge society and the knowledge economy transformed the roles both of universities and of students during this timeframe. The focus moved from a stated value whereby 'education is a way of achieving a more equal society' to a situation where equality was de-emphasised (Johansen et al, 2017:273). Brenda Leibowitz argues that, to counter this trend, issues of public good should be re-established in higher education, by identifying strategic choices, going beyond the expression of nostalgia. This requires clarity of conception, commitment, and the mobilisation of key players (Leibowitz, 2013:15).

Sweden's Stockholm University participated in an initiative to draw attention to the values within higher education. Myklebust (2019) reports that Stockholm University participated in a pilot, 'Living Values 2017-2019,' a project of the Magna Charta Observatory. The pilot responded to a perceived need for universities to refocus on their values in the face of increasing pressure from political and economic factors. In the case of Stockholm University, their publication, *Core Values – A continuous conversation*, compiled over a hundred responses from departments, individual staff members and faculties. The point of departure for their study was the core values of the Magna Charta Observatory, namely, academic freedom, autonomy, integrity and equity. Interestingly, the process of collecting comments at Stockholm University gave rise to a further examination of the university's fundamental values. Respondents addressed the university's institutional values – openness, innovation, willingness to cross boundaries – to see if they were adequate and suggested a wide range of values that should, they felt, be included in the core values, such as authenticity, tolerance, knowledge, curiosity, relevance, truth-seeking, civil courage and flexibility. The fact that respondents offered further values they would like to promote indicates an appetite for re-energising a values-centred approach for higher education.

In Ireland, 'Campus Engage' was launched in 2007 as a new government initiative, just prior to the financial and economic recession in Ireland. In 2006, the Higher Education Authority highlighted the importance of civic engagement among the student body, the importance of developing individual students 'as citizens in a democratic society facing profound change' (HEA, 2006). To this end, the HEA awarded funding for the establishment of Campus Engage, in 2007 (McIlrath et al, 2009:20), a sectoral scheme that aims to promote students and communities learning together; researchers working with society; student volunteering; and 'making an impact'. According to McIlrath et al (2009:28), '[i]n vigorating the civic function of HE is an acknowledgement that HE is about more than preparing students for the labour market – it is also about preparing them to be responsible citizens'. Since Campus Engage was established, 'institutional mission statements increasingly expressed commitment to enhancing levels of civic awareness and participation among the student body and the civic role of HE' (McIlrath et al, 2009:26).

2.2 Higher education and the paradigm of economic good

In the UK, Mountford-Zimdars et al (2013) analysed British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys from 1983 to 2010 to trace how the framing of higher education evolved over the three decades. They found that the surveys reported changed views over time, but on analysis, the actual questions put to respondents were found to have evolved, gradually being phrased in such a way that prompted compliance with government rhetoric. The early BSA questions tended to carry positive presuppositions and enquired about social justice, and arose from a position that higher education was a public good, not a private investment. However, in the more recent surveys, Mountford-Zimdars et al (2013:808) report that cynicism about higher education expansion crept into questions, so that respondents were implicitly reminded of its expense and the possible loss of the graduate premium due to massification, and questions about fairness in the admissions process gradually disappeared. Yet, despite higher education increasingly being presented in a negative light, respondents still seemed able to recognise its value. Mountford-Zimdars et al (2013) conclude that, in order to win the argument for a higher education system based on marketised principles, arguments supporting it as a public good are downplayed. Policy decisions in the UK focus on 'cost-sharing' measures, 'invoking the assumption that public funding disadvantages lower earners because the (participating) middle classes must be effectively subsidised by the (non-participating) working classes' (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2013:810).

This research illustrates ways in which narratives of economic good have eclipsed all other impacts of higher education on society. Shaw's (2013) UK study of female students who were the first in the family to progress to higher education further demonstrates this. Shaw found that 'where students' families have little or no experience of higher education their view of it is largely economic, as a route to a better job and greater financial prosperity. This view is continually reinforced by government' (Shaw, 2013:205). O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty and May (2016) studied students in Australia who were first in their family to access higher education, and also found that discourses of opportunity and betterment dominated, and a view that university is a means to social status and a route out of poverty. O'Shea et al (2016:1026) also identified a further motivating force in that students were aware they were realising the ambitions and dreams of their parents and grandparents. This signals a perception of higher education as the best hope for a brighter future. O'Shea et al (2016) argue that the dominance of discourses of betterment serve to eclipse other important attributes acquired from the university experience, such as self-efficacy, confidence levels, and heightened engagement in other spheres such as social and cultural. They point to the marketing strategies of higher education institutions that invariably focus on students' successful future selves, which connects this future to attendance at higher education, further propagating the belief that higher education is about economic betterment and disregarding any sense of inherent satisfaction in the learning journey (O'Shea et al, 2016:1031).

In Ireland, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) commissioned the *Indecon Assessment of the Economic and Social Impact of Irish Universities* in 2018. This major study highlighted economic benefits arising from higher education in Ireland both to the individual and to the exchequer as a result of taxation and consumption. Indecon calculated the graduate premium in Ireland to be €106,000 over a graduate's career whereas in 2010, the figure was slightly lower, at GBP 100,000 (accounting for the exchange rate). The UK literature points to a diminishing graduate premium arising from mass participation there. Marginson and others argue that '[a]t a given time there are only so many positions of social leadership, so many status-

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generating professional positions, so many middle-class incomes. The zero-sum character of positional competition kicks in' (Marginson, 2018:22). If the 'graduate premium' diminishes in Ireland, logically, so too will the return to the exchequer.

The main thrust of the Indecon report is based on *private* goods and the knock-on effects of taxes and consumption to the benefit of the exchequer. The Indecon report was timely, coming shortly after the news that a new €300 million 'Human Capital Initiative' (HCI) education fund would be 'overseen' by the business/industry sector. It supports the argument for State funding of higher education. However, it would also lend weight to the business/industry sector's argument that industry and education share the same objectives, as reported in the press, 'industry sources say employers and the education sector share the same ambitions of producing highly-skilled and flexible graduates' (O'Brien, 2018). Some senior academics such as Kathleen Lynch, Professor Emeritus of Equality Studies at UCD, have been critical of the increased influence of commercial interests in tandem with – or perhaps in lieu of – diminished state funding.

In the UK, Williams (2016:619) explores how British government policies have endorsed changed definitions of public good, which have impacted upon the higher education sector. Williams (2016:620) demonstrates that in

British government HE policy, the definition of public good has, over the course of several decades, moved away from knowledge as a public good in and of itself; to objective knowledge outcomes which can be used to reap a national economic return; and finally to a focus upon social inclusion and social mobility in the form of individual employability, increased earnings and job security.

Pursuant to the Dearing Report (1997) the narrative in Britain promoted the logic of students as consumers. Williams (2016:626) states that

Dearing breaks with the established discourse of national economic advancement and begins a focus on private economic gains for which students become investors in their own stocks of human capital... It is perhaps only logical that students are then expected to contribute towards the cost of this private investment.

Similarly, Shaw (2013:198) highlights the British case, pointing to a general 'desire for social mobility... being at the heart of much education reform but the common public justification for ... full tuition fees almost exclusively focuses on the economic benefits of higher education, to the individual and to the country'. Shaw cites former Conservative UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, who stated in 2010 that a graduate earns over £100,000 more over their career than a non-graduate, and therefore it is reasonable that graduates should contribute to the system. This narrative paved the way for that government's subsequent introduction of tuition fees. This narrative also eclipses the value of higher education as a means for personal growth, and tends to undermine the value of education unless it is explicitly aimed at economic return.

The 'student as customer' narrative is echoed in Collins and Bethke's (2017) study of the Asia-Pacific region, which they attribute to global and national rankings. Rankings have also promoted a more individual notion of the college degree. 'This consumer-driven approach in combination with a rapid rise in the price of higher education has left the college-going population, their parents, colleges/universities, and governments all focused on the individual benefits of higher education' (Collins & Bethke, 2017:1810). The economics-

oriented view is not confined to regions. The OECD's *Education at a Glance* (2011) report calculated that in the UK, US and Austria, each graduate creates public benefits worth US\$70,000, both economic, as in greater productivity, and social benefits such as reduced crime. (This is distinct from the 'graduate premium' accruing to the individual over their career). However, social benefits are by nature intangible and difficult to quantify, and tend therefore to be overlooked. According to Mathews (2005), the fact that higher education provides services should not detract from its overarching responsibility to a sovereign public; he highlights how the public must be prepared 'to exercise its sovereignty responsibly' (Mathews, 2005:71). Mathews defines the term 'public', in the Western World, as a citizenry engaged in the work demanded by democratic government. The term 'good' is what citizens determine to be valuable in their common life. In the West, collective decisions are the hallmark of democracy, so that from this perspective, the public is not a market, but a dynamic population.

Kezar (2005) describes a similar context in the USA where, although the labour market has always been served by higher education to some extent, 'the production of workers was never the primary goal of higher education' (Kezar, 2005:25). During the 1980s and 1990s, 'Reaganomics' created a market-oriented environment that permeated all aspects of life, so that 'higher education has become a 'market' in which individuals purchase goods for their personal benefit' (Kezar, 2005:25). Kezar (2005:24) describe higher education's public role as educating citizens for democratic engagement, support of local communities, making knowledge available to the community, collaborating with other social institutions to advance knowledge through research and develop arts and humanities, creating leaders for the public sector and developing the intellectual abilities of students. She contends that the values underpinning this social role have been eroded by the latter-day focus on economic benefits and attributes this to several forces, such as neoliberalism, which posits that the public good is served by a protection of individual rights and the freedom from interference by the state. This – Kezar asserts – has disrupted the traditional link between higher education and society. Higher education traditionally fostered higher-order thinking and wisdom, preparing students for public life as opposed to merely a career. This was a key element of higher education's contribution to the public good (Kezar, 2005:28). Since students were reframed as purchasers of services instead of members of communities, public discourse and the media have focused exclusively on the job prospects available to graduates, paying no attention to the social benefits (Kezar, 2005:35).

Fishman et al's 2017 study of public perceptions on higher education in the United States, *Varying Degrees*, based on phone interviews with a sample of one thousand adults, found that:

...people are aware that the American Dream is increasingly out of reach. They recognize, however, that higher education is an important social good. Not only do individuals with a college education make more over their lifetimes, but a more educated populace benefits society in multiple ways, including by increasing tax revenues and lowering unemployment (Fishman et al, 2017:4).

This typifies a recurring view of what constitutes the public good in terms of economic benefits for the individual who participates in higher education, and for the public in terms of economic contributions from taxes and reduced welfare costs. This is a view that may have contributed to actions such as the withdrawal of public subsidies for tuition in social sciences and humanities undergraduate programmes in the UK in 2010. These cuts came after a decade of neoliberalism, which regards the notion of 'private' as individual freedom from state intervention. Marginson contends that state withdrawal of subsidies for certain areas of study

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demonstrates that 'when the great majority or the only benefits of higher education are defined as private economic enrichment, the rationale for public good activity vanishes, along with the public funding that supports it (except in basic research)' (2011:414).

Forstenzer (2017) challenges the 'competition fetish' in UK higher education, which seeks to facilitate private providers in obtaining the title of university and gaining the right to award degrees. He opposes this trend to allow universities be defined by their ability to meet market criteria e.g. delivering customer satisfaction. Forstenzer (2017) discusses how the 1963 UK Robbins Report assigned four functions to universities: instruction in skills, the search for truth, promotion of powers of the mind to develop cultivated men and women, and transmission of common culture and standards of citizenship. Similarly, in the USA, McMahon (2009:254) argues that higher education promotes unquantifiable, but none-the-less essential, social benefits which accumulate over time, and that contemporary perceptions of higher education in instrumental, economic terms disregards social benefits. Focusing on the USA, McMahon (2009) describes social benefits as political stability, lower crime rates, increased quality of life and enjoyment of human rights. These intangible benefits of higher education, accumulating over time, prove 'standard narrow social rate of return estimates to be most seriously understated' (McMahon, 2009:255). Yet, these economic-based rates of return are the criteria frequently employed by families and young people deciding on higher education options. Decisions based only on earnings underestimate the true return. McMahon argues that public information on social benefits is poor, compared to information on market benefits.

The literature outlined above is dominated by what Brint (2013) terms the impact of a 'society-to-school' approach, rooted in a belief that higher education is an instrument directed by society, in terms of who gains access, what knowledge it imparts and to what ends. Brint (2013:276) argues that current sociological understandings of education in the USA, overlook the reciprocal *school-to-society* link explaining the effects of formal education on the structure of labour markets, culture, society, or individual behaviour (Brint, 2013:278). Effects include the organisation of schools and how this acts as a template for workplace behaviour, normalising notions of meritocracy, and competitive rather than collaborative behaviour. His point is that education shapes societal forces. Binder (2013) concurs with Brint's view, and states that graduates emerge from educational settings with 'organizationally produced selves intact – then graduate into society and shape it' (Binder, 2013:282). These thinkers highlight the importance of the role of university beyond the conferring of credentials and qualifications. The non-economic outcomes of higher education extend into wider society for the good, or otherwise. As Walsh (2018:493) puts it, '[h]igher education performs a multiplicity of valuable functions... its intrinsic value to individuals and society cannot be measured in economic terms'.

2.3 Public perceptions of higher education

In 2010, the Irish Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)'s Smyth, McCoy, Whelan, Quail and Doyle analysed the 'Growing up in Ireland' survey of over 8,000 nine-year-old children in 2007/2008. Smyth et al (2010) studied parental influence on educational outcomes among nine-year olds in Ireland, and found that in all social class and educational cohorts, most parents want their children to attain higher education. While the reasons behind these aspirations were not disclosed, Smyth et al (2010:102) argue that, 'tertiary education has become a 'cultural value', aspired to by most... However, parents differ in the extent to which they have

the necessary cultural and educational resources to help their children realise this goal.’ This was reflected in research done in 2018 by Kavanagh and Weir, of Dublin City University (DCU)’s Educational Research Centre, on Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme primary schools. They found that 95% of parents wanted their 9-year-olds to progress to higher education (Kavanagh and Weir, 2018:45).

In 2018, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) collected information in a quantitative survey of adults aged over 16, on their perceptions of higher education. The survey questions related to areas such as funding, effectiveness of Irish colleges in terms of preparing graduates for the labour market, specific skills deemed important for the workplace, and in preparing graduates to contribute to the overall betterment of communities. The HEA survey reported that ‘the Irish public believes that the State should be paying at least half the share of third level education fees, with a quarter being funded by the individual and the remaining balance from businesses’ (HEA, 2018c:6). Over 90% of the Irish public perceive higher education as being very important for Ireland’s global reputation, national economy, and attracting foreign direct investment (HEA, 2018c:10). Just over half believed that the higher education sector was adequately funded (HEA, 2018c:13). Notably, the survey did not ask for inputs concerning the value of research or knowledge generation at Irish higher education institutions.

In 2015, a study into attitudes to higher education was prepared by Amárach Research for the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education. This qualitative study captured the views of 80 people from a broad demographic including students at both second and third level, and their parents who themselves comprised graduates and non-graduates. Amárach (2015) found that younger respondents see third level as beneficial for career opportunities, whereas older people see it in terms of personal development. Amárach did not differentiate between universities, institutes of technology and private colleges. Overall, respondents perceived economic benefits arising from third level, but the perception among non-graduates that graduates earn more was not universally shared among graduates. Amárach report that the public view of third level institutions is as places of teaching, inferring that academics’ activities not related to teaching are unrecognised (for example, academic research). The Amárach study found that higher education is well respected nationally, and seen to be beneficial for the country.

Lyons (2013) focused on Irish students at primary and secondary level (32 boys and 32 girls aged 9 to 18) to understand their perceptions of university and how these were formed. The findings were that perceptions are influenced by many sources. Students who have family members who studied at university have a good understanding of the institutional realities and the general experience of being at university. Guidance counsellors are an important influence in linking university education and better career prospects. Respondents generally thought of university as the route to a career or good or better jobs, with specific courses at university perceived as the route to gain specific qualifications. Lyons (2013:80) attributed the perception of university as a route towards career development to parental and family influences, which was evident across the social spectrum. Parents who had themselves benefitted from higher education and professional qualifications, urge their children to do likewise. Respondents whose parents or other family members graduated regard their success as models of how a university education can empower them for their own future careers. In some rare cases, respondents ‘talked of learning new things and of developing as a person. Some touched on the idea of research’ (Lyons, 2013:80). This aspect of higher education was the stated motivation for only a minority. It seems that the instrumental aspect promoted by official narratives has permeated the Irish public mind, so that higher education and economic ends are now inextricably linked.

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As Gallagher (2012:62) puts it,

What the Irish public has no doubt understood as being the two fundamental challenges facing Irish higher education are funding and access, since these are the only two issues regularly highlighted in the media... we ignore a third matter, which is the value or purpose of Higher Education.

This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by exploring perceptions of higher education's non-economic contributions to the public good, such as expertise, social cohesion, social mobility, political behaviour, and value formation.

2.4 Students' reasons for aspiring to higher education

In the UK, Shaw (2013) conducted a study of 52 undergraduates who were the first in their families to attend university, as well as six graduates three years after graduation. Respondents were asked their main reason for going to university, and what they felt was their parents' view of their child going to university. Graduates were also asked their main reason for going to university, and also, what they perceived, in hindsight, to have been the main benefits. The undergraduate cohort saw higher education as a means towards economic advantage, as did their parents. The graduate cohort also gave economic benefits as their initial motivation but in hindsight, none felt this was the main benefit, pointing instead to personal growth and self-confidence, a love of learning, and a different view on life (Shaw, 2013:204). A further study of 258 first-year students at a London university by Balloo et al (2017) investigated student motivations for going to university. Students reported their motivations were (1) to improve their career prospects, (2) enhance quality of life, and (3) personal development. Other motivations included interest in the subject, to discover themselves, to gain independence and to make friends. However, by far the most common reason given for attending university was to improve career prospects.

Irish students' reported motivations for aspiring to higher education resembled those of students in the UK studies (Balloo et al, 2017; Shaw, 2013). The studies conducted in Ireland by HEA (2018c), McCoy et al (2018), Smyth (2018b), Lyons (2013) reported positive perceptions of higher education in Ireland. However, Irish studies also highlight other aspirations associated with higher education, which relate to freedom, and acquisition of status. For example, Lyons (2013:72) reports that students look forward to university because of anticipated freedom, and choice in the course of study. Responses also indicate aspirations among all social groups and family educational backgrounds, for cultural capital. Lyons, (2013:89) found there were two levels of status that motivated students. The first relates to the status of their chosen universities in terms of excellence in teaching methods and this standard of excellence is believed to be embodied in all who graduate from those universities. The second dimension of cultural capital relates to the name of the university as a portal to a social elite.

Also writing in the UK but drawing from international research, Marginson (2018) discusses three elements of the modern university. The first element presents the university as a business which, though not actually driven by profit, seeks market share, with a social role in the lives of communities, families, and economies. The second element – and this is the aspect which apparently surprised Shaw’s respondents – is the self-forming student who, even if there is a reluctance to form themselves through learning, they are there, acquiring social networks, immersed in student politics or cultural activities, or simply immersing themselves in knowledge which is fulfilling in itself. The third element involves local, national and international academic communities, which comprises faculty who want to be there because it is a way of life they desire. This way of perceiving the university diverges from the narrow view of higher education for individual economic benefit or that of the national economy. Marginson (2018) challenges the view that has become embedded in the public mind, of governments expanding higher education provision to meet the needs of the national economy. In reality, he argues, expansion is driven by family and student demand – a view which supports the finding of Smyth et al (2010) that progression to higher education has become a ‘cultural value’. The process is accelerated as middle-class cohorts reach full participation, and participation expands to other socio-economic cohorts. At this point it is increasingly difficult for young people *not* to participate, because the penalties of not having higher education qualifications grow more severe both in terms of social status and employment.

The Higher Education Authority (2019a) reported that the majority of 2017 graduates secured employment in Ireland, did not emigrate, and earn incomes averaging €33,000. ‘78% of that class are now working, 14% are in further education or training, 5% are seeking work and up to 4% are engaged in other activities (e.g. travel)’ (HEA, 2019a:2). This being the case, inequality of access is a serious consideration.

2.5 Higher education, access and inequality

An element of socialisation instilled in children during education is the concept of meritocracy in Ireland. The idea that the brightest student is awarded the highest marks fosters an acceptance of meritocracy in school children, and promotes the view that hard work leads to rewards. Those who succeed in school and college, and eventually rise to high office, are framed as justifiably deserving (Clancy, 2020). Those who do not prosper, therefore, are not seen as victims of social structures and uneven distribution of resources – rather, their lack of flourishing appears as insufficient merit. In this way, inequality becomes acceptable. The concept of meritocracy seems to promise equality of opportunity, but overlooks the inherent inequalities in society. This is borne out by the fact that [r]esearch in Ireland and in other countries over recent decades has revealed that ... Middle class families have utilised... the educational system to maintain their advantaged position. Social reproduction has continued’ (Clancy, 2020:13).

Much research has been undertaken in Ireland around access and inequality. For example, in their study of the ‘non-manual’ cohort of the School Leavers’ Surveys conducted by the ESRI from 1998 to 2007, McCoy and Byrne (2011) examine factors that influence young people’s decision-making on post-school choices. The aim was to understand why this cohort is under-represented at third level. Despite the increasing participation rate in Ireland of over 55% at the time of their study – which is a dramatic expansion in participation from just 20% in 1980 – the figures mask inequality of access to higher education in Ireland. Their interviews enquired into the home and family environments of the participants, school experiences, engagement with school, peer influences, career and educational aspirations. Respondents were 22-23 years of age and had taken a

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range of post-school pathways, including entry to the job market, Post-Leaving Certificate (further education) courses, and apprenticeships. Their reasons for not progressing to higher education ranged from the pull of the labour market, which at the time of the survey was thriving; a perception that the financial commitment was too great and would cause hardship for their families; and lack of guidance or encouragement caused them to feel it was not an option for them. McCoy and Byrne (2011) conclude that due to a combination of greater distance from social origin, no issues of social demotion compared to their peer-group, and lower likelihood of success, this group was acting rationally by not choosing higher education. A qualitative study undertaken in six DEIS (lower socio-economic designation) schools by Scanlon, Jenkinson, Leahy, Powell and Byrne (2019) found that more young people aspire to progress to higher education than actually enrol. Similar to McCoy and Byrne (2011), they identified the barriers as lack of confidence at the prospect of entering higher education, fear of not being 'good enough,' concerns about not belonging or being stigmatised, and fear of placing a financial burden on the family.

These studies indicate an inter-generational aspect to educational disadvantage. Progress to higher education is linked to parental educational level in that there are 'much lower levels of application for higher education among those whose parents had lower secondary education or less, with higher levels found among those with post-school education' (McCoy et al, 2014:81). In this way, disadvantage is passed down over generations. The same finding emerged from the EUROSTUDENT survey of 2005, which highlighted a similar pattern across European countries (Clancy, 2015:73).

2.6 Countering inequality in higher education

Smyth (2018b) describes the nature of higher education funding and student support in the Republic of Ireland. In the mid-1990s, tuition fees for higher education were abolished, in the belief this would widen access. Smyth (2018b:n.pg.) reports that '[f]arming families were the only group to experience a relative increase in representation after the abolition of fees... many farm families [had] access to support of student maintenance grants'. Denny (2010:56) examined the impact of free fees in Ireland and reports that '[t]he free fees policy has not had the effects that were hoped for in improving participation from students from disadvantaged backgrounds'. This was attributed to disparities at second level, where students from higher socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds could avail of private tuition to prepare for the Leaving Certificate. Demonstrably, lower income leads to many other disadvantages, such as unsatisfactory housing and poor healthcare, which combine to disadvantage students from lower SES backgrounds. To address inequality that arises at both primary and secondary level, the DEIS (Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools) programme was introduced in 2005 to direct additional resources to schools with concentrations of disadvantaged students. Specific goals and actions included reducing class size, providing meals, encouraging teachers and parents to raise their academic expectations of children and encourage parental involvement with the school. Weir, Kavanagh, Kelleher, and Moran (2017:29) reported that 'of the specific aspects of parent involvement assessed by studies... Parental expectations yielded the largest impact on academic achievement'. The DEIS model caters for home visits to encourage parents to interact with school, and enhance their own skills through workshops.

Weir and Kavanagh (2019) examined student achievement in relation to medical card possession (a proxy for low family income) in both DEIS and non-DEIS secondary schools. They also examined the extent to which a 'social context' effect operates in schools. Such an effect refers to the extent to which student outcomes in a school are negatively affected by increasing densities of students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, over and above the impact of the student's own background. Their findings support the view that poorer academic attainment arises in schools where the student body is drawn from predominantly disadvantaged backgrounds (Weir and Kavanagh, 2019:2). The study found that Junior Cert retention rates at DEIS schools are now on a par with non-DEIS schools, and that attainment gaps between the two types of school at secondary level, continue to narrow. Of concern, however, is that gaps still do exist, which are rooted in the broader societal problem of income inequality. Clancy (2015:22) points out,

Education does not operate in a vacuum; wider socio-economic forces set the parameters of its operation and mediate its impact. Since education is a public service there is a heavy responsibility on policy makers to ensure that it serves the common good rather than any sectional interest... the persistence of serious inequality presents a major challenge for public policy.

Supplementary routes to higher education have evolved, including the HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) initiative for under-represented socio-economic groups whereby eligible students can benefit from reduced entry points to access courses, with further learning support during undergraduate studies. Another initiative is 'mature entry' for students over 23 years of age, where a broader set of criteria are employed for admission including formal and informal education, training and experience; and DARE (Disability Access Route to Education), which assists students with disabilities. However, it has been shown that expanded education provision can only impact inequality when demand from the more privileged classes becomes saturated – as occurred with second level after fees were abolished in the late 1960s. Clancy (2015:70) describes this as MMI: Maximally Maintained Inequality where social selectivity endures in Irish higher education, especially for courses offering graduates the highest earning potential, such as medicine and law. The binary system also exhibits a continued social selectivity. Despite the fact that over half of undergraduates avail of grants, Smyth (2018b:n.p.) reports that 'middle class young people are still more likely than their equally qualified working class peers to go on to higher education, especially university'. According to Clancy (2015:71), expanding higher education can reduce inequalities of access, but this outcome is not inevitable.

In her study of higher education in the UK, Williams (2016) argues that advocating equality of access to higher education with the aim of attaining social justice, reinforces the government rhetoric that education's purpose is individual economic gain, and therefore undermines the social role of the university as depository of knowledge. Williams states that the '[p]ublic good has been redefined as the collective private gain,' a stance challenged by some academics with limited success, because it 'falls into an intellectually receptive climate' (Williams, 2016:629). Williams (2016) advocates challenging the instrumental perspective on higher education, to reformulate it in terms of university's social role being about knowledge, academic freedom, and a critical eye on social political landscape. This introduces the concept of 'the public good' and reverses the conceptual lens from being one of society's impact on higher education (in terms of access, funding, achievement and so forth), to a study of higher education's impact on society.

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2.7 Higher education's changing role

In recently published work, Solbrette and Sugrue (2020:4) contend that

In a... higher education landscape that obliges academics to invest more time in applying for research funding, and in producing more publications to enhance institutional rankings, there is considerable potential to alter missions. Such alterations to the ends of higher education rupture the largely taken-for-granted purpose of higher education, namely to contribute to public good.

Their description may be viewed as an accurate depiction of the changing role of *academics* in these times of straightened public finances for universities. However, Solbrette and Sugrue's view that public good is the 'taken-for-granted' purpose of university is somewhat at odds with the stance of this present study, which argues that the economic mission has, or threatens to, eclipse all other purposes and contributions of higher education. This shift in emphasis is described by others, here following.

Wolf (2018), a UK-based economist who specialises in education, describes how higher education is now broadly seen as the cure for unemployment, because it furnishes graduates with skills. She remarks on a cultural change, given that until the 1950s or 1960s, university used to be considered irrelevant. Wolf cautions that returns vary, because returns are a function of social structures and the vicissitudes of the economy. She cautions against extrapolations, because just as this may have been the case, it will not necessarily continue. Mass participation, in her view, is about making the workforce better, to yield a larger real output. But piling up the numbers cannot achieve this in the face of stagnant productivity growth. The result is a spiral of qualifications, whereby people must signal their employability by staying in education longer and longer – which is not a recipe for equality, as it marginalises the less well off. Finally, she argues that, in the UK, many graduates earn less than an average non-graduate. If this is indeed the case, it dilutes the narrative that higher education is an economic good.

Gallagher (2012:61) points out that in Ireland, the two fundamental challenges facing higher education are perceived to be funding and access, as these are the only issues that are aired in the media. She cautions that a third matter needs to be addressed, namely, the purpose of higher education. Critical of what she sees as the promotion of academic credit as the vital goal of all youthful life, she deems this a battle front between uncritical acceptance of this norm, and true academic values. The values in question are deep understanding, rigorous, precise thinking, and sustained attention to detail – as against grades, credits, and rankings (Gallagher, 2012:70). The fact that such a space as university exists is itself important, because 'it affects the way whole societies think about being human'.

Gallagher's case resounds with Barnett's *Being a University* (2011), which also critiques the contemporary situation. Barnett states that universities in the West, and Persia, India and China were traditionally valued as a space where a full encounter with knowledge could 'open up new forms of human being'. This led to a view of the university 'as an institution through which individuals could come to stand in a new and surer relationship with the world' (Barnett, 2011:13). Universities served as a depository where medieval illuminated manuscripts were preserved and valued as 'encounters with a meta-reality that provided a special order of meaning' (Barnett, 2011:17). As mentioned earlier, the Book of Kells is a valuable artefact and a link with the transcendental, in the care of Trinity College Dublin. Barnett observes that this sense of 'other-worldliness'

has vanished and the modern university has assumed a more pragmatic orientation, leaving behind both 'donnish domination' and God. However, the ideal of care for humanity has survived, and according to Barnett can find a new way to prevail – and – he believes, there is more than one 'idea' of a university (Barnett, 2011:18).

2.8 Conclusion

This review has examined literature relating to themes of public good and the values of higher education, the economic good, public perceptions of higher education, students' motives for going to university, the demands of society on higher education, issues of equity and access, and the changing role of higher education. All of these themes provide the context of this study and are expanded in the research findings, set out in Chapter 4.

The review of the literature indicates that studies about Higher Education in Ireland have mainly focused on issues of economic benefits, access and inequality, as well as perceptions of higher education among the public. Research in other western countries has examined the area of how higher education contributes to the public good, however, there is a gap in this respect in Ireland. Recent exceptions to this general trend are Solbrekke and Sugrue's (2020) study on HE *praxis* as and for the public good and Hazelkorn and Gibson's (2018) study of public good, looking at how governments set out national objectives that shape the 'public good,' by which they mean 'the responsibilities of HEIs to society'. This latter conceptualisation of public good leans towards achieving value for government investment in higher education, which is a dimension of economic good, rather than the less tangible dimensions of public good such as mass higher education's impact on society through informing graduates' values or political engagement.

This study explores respondents' perceptions of the non-economic outcomes of mass higher education, and their views on how the outcomes and values of higher education contribute to the public good. It examines respondents' views on the purpose of university, which was identified in the literature as having been lost sight of (Gallagher, 2012; Singh, 2013). This study discusses equality of opportunity in terms of lifelong learning, extending access to higher education over the life-course, and social mobility and how mass higher education may influence political engagement. In this way, the study addresses a gap in the literature in Ireland on the contribution of mass higher education to the public good, from the perspective of individuals within universities – the University Cohort – and outside of universities, loosely categorised as the Stakeholder Cohort.

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The gap in the literature that this study addresses is the aspect of public good, which apparently has been obscured by the focus on the economic good. Approaches to the study of public good outcomes have included quantitative research of public opinion, or have conceptualised public good in terms of value for public investment. Another approach for studying public good involved critical discourse analysis of policy plans over a forty-year time-span, used by Johansen, Knudsen, Kristoffersen Steffen and Sund (2017), which traced higher education's changing emphasis along five dimensions of public good, i.e. economics, global competition, individualisation, citizenship and equality. Rather than a broad investigation into public opinion, or a historical study of evolving policy, the focus here is to tease out the discourse on non-economic outcomes of mass higher education, using in-depth qualitative interviews with key individuals in the system (University Cohort) and persons indirectly involved who are familiar with its functions (Stakeholder Cohort). Qualitative research enables a nuanced view of respondents' perceptions, and sheds light on deeper motivations that underpin standpoints, which quantitative research often misses. As this is a small study, involving one researcher with a limited timeframe, feasibility was an important consideration in the project design.

3.1 Ethical considerations

As this study does not involve any vulnerable groups or persons, no ethical issues were anticipated in the carrying out of this research. Ethical Exemption was obtained through University College Dublin on behalf of the NUI Senate, prior to embarking on fieldwork in July 2019. Interviews have been anonymised, and data gathered were treated confidentially and with all due integrity.

To protect anonymity, in the University cohort the names of respondents are randomly replaced by Met Éireann Storm names, and in the Stakeholder cohort names are replaced by Met Éireann Hurricane names, assigned in order of interview date. Storm and Hurricane names have been allocated chronologically from the relevant list for each cohort (i.e. University Cohort Respondent 1 was assigned the first name in the Met Éireann Storm names list, University Cohort Respondent 2 was assigned the second name in the list and so on), thus the gender of the alias is not necessarily the same as the gender of the respondent. For this reason, gender-neutral pronouns are used when referring to all respondents with the exception of those identified as mothers (Erin, Rebekah and Sebastien) for whom she/her is used (see Table 4 in Section 3.5 below).

3.2 Data gathering

The data presented in this study derive from eight months of fieldwork examining the complex issue of the non-economic outcomes of mass participation higher education in Ireland. 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 which was previously classified as binary, the main differentiation being that between the university sector and the institute of technology sector. The focus of the present study is on the traditional university sector and seeks to examine the perceived non-economic dimensions of mass participation.

The project was based on in-depth qualitative research that incorporated the views of respondents from several research sites within universities and civil society. For the purpose of this study, the seven traditional universities (University College Dublin (UCD), National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), University College Cork (UCC), Maynooth University (MU), University of Limerick (UL), Dublin City University (DCU) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD)) are included. The recently formed Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) is omitted, not only because it is newly established and its current graduates enrolled in Institutes of Technology, but also because it emerged from a background of vocational education and training; it was established on the recommendation of the Hunt Report (2011), which was clear that it should be a different style of university.

Respondents were recruited from two cohorts: the first (University) included people working in Irish universities. Half of these were lecturers in the areas of Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), while the other half comprised Senior Management and colleagues in administrative roles (such as Student Support); the second (Stakeholder) cohort includes key personnel in civil society and state bodies such as the Department of Education and Skills (DES), Higher Education Authority (HEA), Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), Small Firms Association (SFA), and the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT), as well as students, parents, employers, media, policy-makers, advocacy and community development groups, and representative bodies for employers, students and parents of school-going children. The rationale for targeting respondents in these categories was that in all cases they are familiar with the practices, functions, missions and objectives of Irish universities, they interact with HEIs either directly (in the case of those working in universities) or indirectly, in the case of stakeholders. Including respondents from both inside and outside the area of study permits a wider scope in analytical comparison (see Section 3.6). Due to this, the data in this study reflects the indicative views on mass higher education, from key individuals in the system who are conversant with the main issues being examined, 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 target of twenty interviews in each cohort, which was feasible for a time-limited study with one researcher, had been completed at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. As fieldwork was carried out before the pandemic, this study inadvertently captures a snapshot of the realities of higher education before the pandemic.

3.3 Participants' profiles – university cohort

In the University Cohort AHSS and STEM sub-groups, academics included five lecturers and five professors (of whom four were 'Departmental Head' – the term varies among universities, e.g. Head of School). The Senior Management sub-group included three registrars and two vice-presidents. The Support Group comprised four management-level personnel and one chaplain. The University Cohort comprises 9 women and 11 men.

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3.4 University cohort respondents

Targeted Recruitment aimed at equal numbers of respondents from different sub-groups in the university field: five from each of AHSS, STEM, Senior Management and Support roles. The majority of respondents (five each) were from UCD and MU; there were three each from UCC and NUIG, and others from UL, TCD and DCU. To ensure anonymity respondents' locations are termed as Dublin or non-Dublin. The aim is to include a range of perspectives.

TABLE 3 UNIVERSITY COHORT RESPONDENTS

Anonymised (Storm) name	Sub-group	Faculty/Position	Location
Atiyah	AHSS	Social Science	Non-Dublin
Brendan	AHSS	Education	Non-Dublin
Ciara	AHSS	Social Science	Non-Dublin
Hugh	AHSS	Humanities	Dublin
Iris	AHSS	Education	Non-Dublin
Jan	STEM	Science	Dublin
Kitty	STEM	Biotechnology	Dublin
Maura	STEM	Biochemistry	Non-Dublin
Piet	STEM	Engineering	Non-Dublin
Olivia	STEM	Science	Non-Dublin
Ellen	Support	Careers service	Dublin
Francis	Support	Mature Students Adviser	Non-Dublin
Gerda	Support	Chaplain	Dublin
Liam	Support	Program Manager	Dublin
Noah	Support	Alumni Manager	Non-Dublin
Dennis	Senior Management	Chief Executive Officer	Dublin
Róisín	Senior Management	Registrar	Dublin
Samir	Senior Management	Vice President	Non-Dublin
Tara	Senior Management	Registrar	Non-Dublin
Vince	Senior Management	Registrar	Non-Dublin

3.5 Stakeholder cohort respondents

Respondents include a variety of civil society actors with an interest in higher education, representing employers, students, non-graduate parents, advocacy and community groups, media, representative bodies and policy-makers. The Stakeholder cohort comprised 13 women and 8 men.

TABLE 4 STAKEHOLDER COHORT RESPONDENTS

Hurricane Name	Interest	Category
ANDREA	Community Group	Dublin
BARRY	Community Group	Dublin
HUMBERTO	Advocacy Prisoners	Non-Dublin
KAREN	Advocacy Disabled & Aged	Dublin
GABRIELLE	Post-grad TCD	Consumer
JERRY	Student	Consumer
MELISSA	Post-grad DCU	Consumer
IMELDA	Media	Dublin
LORENZO	Media	Dublin
CHANTAL	Students Union	Representative body
NESTOR	Departmentt of Education and Skills	Policy
OLGA	Employers Group	Representative body
PABLO	University teachers	Representative body
VAN	Higher Education Authority	Policy
WENDY	Employers Group	Representative body
TANYA	Parents Group	Representative body
ERIN	Non-Grad Parent #1	Dublin West: Mother of 2
REBEKAH	Non-Grad Parent #2	Co Dublin: working mum of 4 (2 DCU, 1 secondary, 1 abroad)
SEBASTIEN	Non-Grad Parent #3	Non-Dublin: working mum, 2 in secondary
DORIAN	Rural non-grad Parent #4	Rural: father, pub-owner.
MALIN	Employer	Retail Group, non-Dublin

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TABLE 5 SUMMARY OF CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONDENTS

Summary – Civil Society	
Advocacy and Community Development	4
Students	3
Media	2
Representative body/Policymakers	7
Non-graduate parents – W/C	3
Non-graduate parents – RURAL	1
Employers/Employers' representatives	3
Total participants	21

3.6 Rationale for two cohorts

Firebaugh (2008:22) suggests using a sample that permits contrasts for the effects of interest. In this way, conducting qualitative research among two cohorts of people familiar with the Irish higher education system highlights interesting phenomena, namely:

- How do perspectives differ between the cohort working in universities and observers from without?
- In what ways do interpretations differ between sub-groups?
- Do both cohorts hold similar views on the contributions to society of mass participation in higher education, along dimensions of social mobility, political engagement, social cohesion, cognitive development and values?
- In what ways do viewpoints differ regarding these key areas, as well as funding of higher education?
- Interviews varied in length from 45 to 90 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo for initial coding. Key categories that emerged in the data were annotated, and memos generated noting the emerging themes. These memos scaffold the emerging analytic story. Interview questions explore the ways higher education influences society and how it may contribute to the public good. The central questions were:
 - What are the non-instrumental outcomes of contemporary higher education in Ireland?
 - How do the outcomes of mass participation influence society? (*apart from the instrumental or economic outcomes*)
 - How does mass participation relate to social mobility?
 - How does higher education contribute to political engagement?
 - What *values* does Irish higher education impart to students and graduates?
 - What values promoted by university permeate society?

4 INTRODUCTION TO MAIN FINDINGS

This section describes the main themes that arose in the study, exploring the non-instrumental outcomes of mass participation in higher education in Ireland. Observed through the conceptual lens of ‘school-to-society,’ themes are explored separately under headings such as Perceptions of Mass Higher Education, Perceived Outcomes of Mass Higher Education, Equality of Opportunity, and Political Engagement, and are considered in terms of higher education’s contribution to the public good, which Leibowitz (2013) defines as the flourishing of human beings, who are politically engaged with society, and ethically informed. Discussions compare and contrast responses between two cohorts.

4.1 Perceptions of mass participation in higher education

The interview questions were arranged under five broad themes, one of which was Perceptions of Mass Participation in Higher Education. The questions in this cluster enquired into respondents’ views on the purpose of university and students’ motivations for going to college. This section explores the responses on these topics.

4.1.1 The purpose of university

Barnett (2011) states that traditionally, the university in the West, in Persia, India and China was valued as a space where a full encounter with knowledge could ‘open up new forms of human being’. This led to a view of university ‘as an institution through which individuals could come to stand in a new and surer relationship with the world’ (Barnett, 2011:13). To explore the contemporary view of university’s purpose, respondents were asked ‘What, would you say, is university for?’

Respondents in both cohorts point to the changing nature of higher education. For example, Van (S/Policy)¹ describes how the purpose of higher education has shifted in the last three decades:

There has been a change in that attitude towards the purpose and the value of higher education in the last two, maybe three, decades. We came from ‘education as a social good’, to free higher education... and then of course the student fees came in to some extent and things have changed slightly. But I think that balance is now being reconsidered again, because it may have gone too far towards the utilitarian side, and that needs to be reconsidered – what are we educating people for?

Van’s observation is a reflection on the trajectory of government policy. The 1990s ushered in a new phase of mass participation in Irish higher education, assisted by free fees. Walsh (2018:344) contends the prime driver for policy change in higher education was economic development, and that social variables and the wider context of modernisation influenced the change. This new phase, the Economic Paradigm, imposed new demands on universities, as well as increasing the visibility of higher education in the public mind.

¹ Respondents will be identified by cohort and sub-group; Van is from the Stakeholder Cohort (S) and the sub-group ‘policy’ as they work with the HEA hence the designation (S/Policy). Academics have a further designation of role, e.g. Kitty (U/STEM Lecturer) is from the University Cohort, the STEM sub-group and their role is ‘lecturer’.

More recently, the Hunt Report (2011) declared that 'HE is the key to economic recovery in the short term and to longer-term prosperity' (DES, 2011:29). This repositioned higher education as an economic asset (Walsh, 2018:440), and registration fees were increased. In the context of policy shifts, this section explores the answers from respondents, to understand their perceptions of what university is for.

Responses from the University Cohort similarly indicate that the purpose of university has transmuted in the last generation and now bears a variety of new tasks. This demonstrates the over-layering of each successive paradigm as society reformulates the mission it requires higher education to perform. These new tasks are described by Kitty (U/STEM Lecturer):

We're trying to be everything – we're trying to be a hub for start-ups, we're trying to have immediate impact with job creation. We're trying to separate ourselves from other institutions so we're having new initiatives the whole time. We're trying to excel at research...

This statement encapsulates the many commercial factors that now attach to universities under the recent Economic Paradigm, which are valuable to society in practical ways. This is a further illustration of the 'society-to-school' (Brint, 2013) phenomenon, whereby society places expectations on higher education to make contributions to society in ways that may not always have been the norm. Yet, it is not clear if these contributions are acknowledged by society. Kitty (U/STEM Lecturer) feels the multiple functions of university are overlooked and the public consider academics as teachers and nothing else:

People don't link the fact that they might see a scientist interviewed about some scientific breakthrough, and at the same time they think all university lecturers do is lecture.

Kitty's views are supported by the findings of Amárach Research (2015), which studied public perceptions and found that '[t]he perceived dominant role of universities is to teach students' and that '[t]here is very limited understanding of the research role of the Colleges'. Others in the STEM sub-group described the new economic mission of university. Jan (U/STEM Professor) acknowledges the vocational nature of higher education, and explains that it emerges from necessity in the Irish context:

We've become quite vocational, particularly in the STEM areas. Getting an education was seen as a way of making a living because there wasn't going to be a place for you on the farm.

From the individual perspective, respondents report a range of outcomes of university participation; for example, Malin (S/Employer) describes how university impacted on their life so that even though their academic skills were not strong, the intangible outcomes were significant:

My world opened up so much for me from going to higher education, my degree was useless by the way – I did a very irregular degree, I didn't excel, but I made some fantastic friends, I got some amazing experiences, and it gave me clarity in terms of what I did and what I didn't want. So, I got a huge value from that.

Erin (S/Non-Grad Parent) describes her view of university's purpose, saying it educates for life and bestows skills and opportunities:

It educates you for life in general... it gives you fantastic skills in whatever area you're in... it gives more opportunities.

Karen (S/Advocacy) describes how university is for opening minds and increasing social awareness:

It's for opening up minds, for seeing possibilities, for becoming socially aware, and becoming aware of your talents, or lack of them. And the niche into which you fit, if you want to keep going.

Humberto (S/Advocacy) sees its purpose as being about knowledge and understanding, as well as professional qualifications:

To enhance and raise our knowledge of the world and enhance our understanding, it fulfils both a wider knowledge requirement but also a professional qualification. I'd see those as two roles of higher education.

These responses describe higher education's purpose in the context of the individual. From a societal perspective, respondents from both cohorts believe higher education serves society by developing cognition and critical thinking in order to guide social issues. For example, Lorenzo (S/Media) describes university's purpose as enhancing thought and critical analysis:

...making you think but challenging your assumptions about what you see around you, and making you question structures in society.

The purpose of university in this context is seen as catering for the thinker making decisions for society.

Respondents in the University Cohort/Support sub-group describe a range of individual benefits. Gerda (U/Support) sees university as much more than conferring degrees:

People are not just coming here to get a degree, we want people to be fully functioning human beings. We want our students to help transform the world and make the world a better place.

In their view, people go to university for more than qualifications, and in turn, they are encouraged and enabled to contribute to society. Liam (U/Support) points to university's purpose in thinking critically:

People are better able... to think critically about the world around them and in every aspect. It gives people skills in analysing what's going on around them.

Francis (U/Support) sees university as being for community engagement and building friendships, which goes beyond the curriculum:

...to join clubs and societies and integrate. And it is about building friendships and understandings with people...

Piet (U/STEM Professor) stresses the importance of research, to ensure teaching is up to date:

A university has to be research-active if it's going to have up to date teaching. Otherwise it's like a secondary school.

4 INTRODUCTION TO MAIN FINDINGS

Piet's conceptualisation of the purpose of university resonates with the Humboldt paradigm of teaching and research. University respondents in AHSS are more sympathetic to older traditions and missions. Ciara (U/AHSS Professor) sees the purpose of university as relating to citizenship:

We have to balance what you would call the good citizen who is a citizen... capable of bringing things into the world that increases the quality of worldly experience for people... I think it's there in people's fundamental expectation and understanding. It's just been drowned out by an instrumental discourse which is loud, but it's noisy and it's boring.

In Ciara's view, it seems the Newman paradigm of higher education, with its focus on character development, is still discernible behind the new narratives and demands. Ciara believes that people's understanding of university's purpose as being for citizen formation persists, but it has been drowned out by the economic discourse. Ciara's (U/AHSS Professor) view of university's purpose resonates with the findings of Ó Mathúna's (2018) study of adult learners, which describes the transformative experience of higher education on their habits of reasoning. According to Ó Mathúna (2018:151-2), students reported that their experience of higher education had caused them to be:

...more reasoned in their thought processes and emotional responses... Students described how their thinking had become much clearer, how they were now better able to structure their thoughts to think in a critical way and analyse information... There was a genuine sense of discovery that there is more than just one way of seeing and interpreting the world...

The findings of Ó Mathúna (2018) illustrate the intangible benefits to cognition and critical thinking derived from higher education. While his study focused on non-traditional, adult learners, the findings articulate a process that is not exclusively the experience of adults.

Interestingly, when respondents in the AHSS academic sub-group describe what university is for, it is seasoned with the converse view of what it should *not* be for. For example, Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) explains that it is for the joy of knowledge and the love of ideas, and quickly adds it should not be just about jobs:

If somebody is going to get to a certain level, there needs to be a reason for it. Is it just a love of learning or what is it? It shouldn't be just competition for jobs. That's not what higher education should be about. It should be about the joy of knowledge, about thinking, and the love of ideas.

On the basis of Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) and Ciara's (U/AHSS Professor) observations it appears that these AHSS academics are comfortable that their job is to develop cognitive rationality. There is a point of convergence between the viewpoint of AHSS academics who reject utilitarianism, and Van's (S/Policy) view that the current mission has 'gone too far towards the utilitarian side'.

In addition to cognitive rationality and citizen development, Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) describes another purpose of university as a space to develop and exchange ideas. Hugh explains:

It's an opportunity, a protected space where you have permission to talk about ideas. ... you could say it's part of what the university is. The societies, and opportunities to get involved in causes that you might feel passionately about... having **a forum** for those kinds of discussions. And not having a forum for those kinds of discussions is kind of frightening.

Hugh's views are shared by O'Riain (2006), who testifies to the importance of having this space for reflection:

We need spaces where we can reflect upon what kind of society we are and indeed want to be. A society that educates graduates with strong skills, but with no time or talent for reflecting on what they want to do with those skills, will be a poorer society (O'Riain, 2006:197).

Iris (U/AHSS Lecturer) similarly feels strongly that university is for learning and an opportunity for serious intellectual pursuit:

Higher education has a very particular purpose... for the greater good of humanity, as well of course as imparting core skills and preparing people potentially for future careers... *for learning* obviously... sometimes it can be considered elitist to think that universities are and should be the seat of serious engaged learning and that opportunity for serious intellectual pursuit, *for its own sake* ...not just in terms of its utilitarian value in society.

Among Senior Management, Samir's view of the role of university is that, higher education should expand horizons:

The whole point of having higher education is to take your learning and awareness about the world to another level.

Samir (U/Senior Management) sees higher education as preparing graduates for international engagement. Tara's (U/Senior Management) vision of higher education is concerned with citizenship and connections with community:

Citizenship fundamentally... global reach, and community engagement. I think society benefits, industry benefits, by having good citizens.

These views among Senior Management reflect the internationalisation mission currently being promoted by Irish universities.

In summary, Stakeholders' views show they understand the non-economic aspect of university as opening minds, developing networks, increasing social awareness. They highlight the purpose of developing engaged citizens capable of critical thinking and making decisions for society. Stakeholders place acquiring skills on a par with enhancing understanding of the world. Responses among the University Cohort are more diverse. AHSS academics view their job as developing cognitive rationality and engaged citizens, leaning towards Newman's idea of the university. STEM respondents express greater acceptance of the instrumental purposes of universities, and describe how universities now have many commercial activities, under the recent Economic Paradigm. Piet (U/STEM Professor) stresses the importance of research, to ensure teaching is up to date, while Senior Management support the Internationalisation Paradigm. Tara (U/Senior Management)'s conceptualisation of the role of the university in forming citizens seems similar to that of Ciara (U/AHSS Professor), with perhaps a wider definition of citizen as global rather than national. AHSS academics emphasise the importance of university as a forum for self-discovery, for developing engaged, global citizens, and for developing the mind and the powers of communication. Thus university develops articulate people with advanced capacities to question norms who contribute to society.

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In summary, according to this sample of respondents, among the University Cohort the non-instrumental purposes of university include generating knowledge, enabling students to think independently and critically, and to better understand and engage with the world. University is seen as providing a forum for discussion, it develops the person, broadens the mind, and fosters connections with community and good citizenship – all factors that have implications for society, and illustrate the ‘school-to-society’ perspective of higher education. The Stakeholders’ responses describe higher education’s purpose in the context of the individual, ranging from professional qualifications to social awareness and networking, enhancing knowledge and understanding of the world. Responses endorse the view that by enabling the flourishing of human beings who are ethically formed and engaged with society (Leibowitz, 2013), higher education contributes to the public good.

4.1.2 Non-instrumental motives for progressing to higher education

This section examines respondents’ perceptions of the expectations of students, parents and society of higher education, beyond economic or career-related aspects. It explores a range of intangible outcomes of higher education, and how these may influence society. Respondents were asked an open-ended question: ‘What would you think are the two dominant drivers for students deciding to apply to university?’

Respondents acknowledge that career goals are a major motive for accessing university, however, they believe this is not the only motive. In many cases the dimensions of career and personal development were given equal emphasis by respondents. Responses in the Stakeholder Cohort described a range of non-economic motives for pursuing higher education. For example, Van (S/Policy) gave voice to the more personal factors influencing decisions about higher education – in his case, the desire to escape the limited horizons of a small town:

I came from a small town so it was about getting out of there!

Humberto (S/Advocacy) similarly describes the factors influencing rural school-leavers:

As someone who grew up in a rural area, I think my experience of life ... was comfortable in the sense of the known and the regular, whereas I needed to get out... and develop as a person, so that was also part of it. Because my opportunities would have been very limited.

This reason resonates with the findings of the 2019 study by Scanlon, Jenkinson, Leahy, Powell and Byrne, exploring the transition to higher education from DEIS schools in three locations (Dublin, Cork and Co. Kerry) by means of interviews and focus groups with parents, pupils and staff of DEIS schools, including career guidance personnel and school principals. They found that 66% of the student-respondents wanted to progress to higher education. Scanlon et al (2019:253) found that students had positive views of college for reasons of greater independence, active social life and access to leisure facilities:

Most of the young people in our research said that they would like to go on to higher education and had positive views of what college would entail, including an active social life, greater independence and access to sports and leisure facilities (Scanlon et al, 2019:253).

Rebekah (S/Non-Grad Parent) senses that her children are excited about progressing to higher education for reasons of starting a new phase of life and engaging with the world, even though they are remaining at home:

They see it as something exciting, a new phase of life where they start to get independent and learn about the world.

Olga (S/Representative Body) states that some students would welcome the chance of college to develop their sporting careers, but wonders if young people realise there are other outcomes of higher education, other than future work:

How aware are they, of what higher ed can offer them? Maybe it's sporting reasons. If they're a good inter-county footballer, do they want to pick a particular institution that'll help them develop better as a sports person? I think the institutions need to talk a little bit more broadly around what are the other elements that a higher education delivers.

Olga believes the emphasis on economic outcomes has obscured other valuable outcomes in the minds of school-leavers.

In the University Cohort, responses from AHSS and STEM academics, as well as Support staff and Senior Management indicate a conviction that students aspire to higher education for a range of non-economical reasons, rather than having purely economic motives. For example, Tara (U/Senior Management) reports high levels of altruistic motives among today's students:

What is emerging from the current cohort of students is they are passionate about solving world problems. People refer to the millennials and Generation Z... they are really focused on big questions whether they are questions of sustainability, climate action, poverty, the things that I suppose are really important...

Samir (U/Senior Management) likewise perceives altruistic motives and a desire for meaningful work:

For some people, there's earning a living, and then there's doing something that they're really passionate about... If they're a young student coming in, a good few of them now prefer to do something that fulfils them or that they're really passionate about.

The issue of status as motivation also emerged. Samir (U/Senior Management) describes how going to college, especially a high-points college, carries an element of prestige for the student – and the parents:

There's an element of prestige involved... so getting your child into the likes of Trinity is a status symbol. Regardless of the fact that maybe that's not the best place for them.

‘The whole point of having higher education is to take your learning and awareness about the world to another level.’

Samir (U/Senior Management)



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Ellen (U/Support) also acknowledges the influence of parents on decisions about higher education, saying 'I think parental expectations are important'. Among the Stakeholder Cohort, Sebastien (Non-Grad Parent) identified a snobbery attached to higher education in Irish society.

I think we put a lot of value in education. I don't necessarily think that's a wonderful thing... there's a snobbery around it I think.

Piet (U/STEM Professor) believes students are not explicitly aware of intangible outcomes when they undertake their studies:

As an undergrad, you learn the fundamentals of whatever discipline you're in. It makes you something – it makes you a scientist or an accountant or a philosopher. And so it specialises you. Probably trains your thinking... it's a hugely important time... I don't think they realise how they're setting up their future by a simple tick on a CAO form.

Piet's view is borne out by Stakeholder Nestor (Policy), who describes their personal experience of higher education, and how the intangible outcomes took them unawares:

There is an awful lot more that you get out of learning... and the process of having to do the research and write the essays, and have the discussions and have your thinking challenged... That was massively empowering. And I had no idea before it happened, that it was going to be doing those things.

Similarly, respondents in University/Support sub-group believe students want more than a job qualification. Ellen points out that half of students come because they enjoy the subject and want the college experience:

It's probably pretty even between those people who come because they want to explore the world, explore themselves, they enjoy the subject and they want to study it further... to those who are here because that's what mum and dad think you should do after you finish your leaving cert.

Liam (U/Support) describes how university attracts students who want to engage with society, develop the self and how one sees the world:

A student who wants to fully engage with society, to figure out what they love studying... use their higher education experience to develop themselves and how they see the world.

Gerda (U/Support) sees students as ambitious for their careers, but not exclusively for their own benefit.

The amount of students who I meet who tell me they are here to get an education and they are here to get a good job, but... they don't just want to work for money, they want to work for something that actually makes a difference.

The University Cohort expresses a conviction that students aspire to higher education for a range of non-economically oriented reasons, rather than purely economic aims. Their experience is that students are motivated by a desire to contribute to society, so that their career choices are not simply about private gain, but securing meaningful work and contributing to the public good.

To summarise this section, respondents acknowledge that career goals are a major motive, but they believe that is not the *only* motive. Responses in both cohorts describe how parental influence informs school-leavers' decisions, and how the intangible outcomes can surprise students, as at the outset they do not fully appreciate what higher education has to offer them. Stakeholders' views among parents, those in advocacy or representative bodies, and policy offer motives for progressing to higher education based on personal experience and observation. They report reasons of escape from rural areas, excitement at a new phase of life and the opportunity to engage with the world. There is also the social aspect, where higher education is seen as offering increased opportunity to develop talent in sports – even if that is not commonly associated with higher education. Stakeholders are more likely to draw on 'personal' experience, whereas the University Cohort describe a 'professional' understanding of what students want out of college. Respondents in the University Cohort indicate that many students are drawn to higher education to equip themselves to bring good things into the world, to improve quality of life for all; many are 'passionate about solving world problems' (Tara, Senior Management), and are motivated by social justice reasons to pursue careers which will be meaningful rather than lucrative, as well as a desire to engage with the world and contribute to society. This 'school-to-society' perspective supports the views of Smolentseva (2018:188) who states:

If traditionally education's role was seen mainly as the reproduction of society by training people for social positions and jobs... the present larger scale of higher education... allows it to be seen as a separate and enduring social institution, which in large part socially constructs modern society rather than simply reproducing it.

4.2 Conclusions: Perceptions of mass participation in higher education

On the question of the purpose of university, respondents in the University Cohort were committed to fostering global citizenship, expanding horizons and developing independent thinkers who engage with the world. Their reported approach is rooted in the Newman Mission. STEM academics express a greater acceptance of the vocational aspect of higher education than do AHSS academics, showing a leaning towards the economic mission. Senior Management promoted the internationalisation mission. Stakeholders expressed the view that university increases social awareness, enables connections and friendships and promotes understanding of the world, attributes that they value on a par with gaining qualifications.

Respondents described their perceptions of students' motivations to progress to higher education – accepting that career opportunities are a major driver. Responses indicated that university is aspired to not only for economic motives. Stakeholders reported reasons of broadening horizons. Responses in the University Cohort express a conviction that students aspire to higher education for a range of non-economically oriented reasons, and are motivated by a desire to contribute to society, so that their career choices are not simply about private gain, but securing meaningful work and contributing to the public good. These aspects associated with higher education, are perceived as enabling human flourishing and promoting engagement, so that, in this way, mass higher education contributes to the public good.

5 PERCEIVED OUTCOMES OF MASS HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

To explore perceptions of the outcomes of mass higher education and the 'school-to-society' influence of higher education in Ireland, respondents were asked 'Would you say having over 55% of post-secondary students progressing to higher level, might bring about any changes in society? If so, in what way?' A further question was 'If you think about outcomes of university education in Ireland today, what comes to mind?' Responses to these questions shine a light on a number of societal outcomes of higher education.

5.1 Mass higher education's contribution to the public good

The University Cohort highlighted a variety of outcomes of higher education that they believe have a significant influence on how society functions. The societal impact of higher education is magnified today, in view of the large numbers of graduates now in Irish society – over half of the 25-44 age-group hold third level qualifications (CSO, 2019). For example, Ellen (U/Support) explains that higher education prepares graduates to:

Be health-aware and be able to contribute to their own wellbeing. They should be engaging with the college and the wider community.

Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) also identified better health as an outcome of higher education, which benefits both individuals and society:

Definitely higher education is associated with better health outcomes and that's partly related to the fact that those with higher education...are better able to advocate for themselves...

Hugh points out how graduates are habituated to volunteering during their college careers:

I think volunteering is part of it. A lot of our students volunteer ... because they want to get the experience... So, society definitely benefits from the opportunities students get, to give.

Róisín (U/Senior Management) describes how higher education helps perfect a range of skills, such as written and oral communication, which enable graduates to better contribute to their workplaces and communities so that 'even just by weight of number, it [HE] has a very significant impact on society'.

Empowerment repeatedly emerged as an outcome of mass higher education that contributes to the public good. Stakeholder Andrea (Community Development) pinpoints the role of higher education in developing and enhancing people's confidence so that they become more effective citizens, with increased personal agency. This in turn, they believe, better enables graduates to address social issues:

I think education is key to solving social problems. Giving people confidence, giving them opportunities to do things that they wouldn't have had before...

Liam (U/Support) states that higher education enables individuals to be agents for change. This benefits society because:

People understand that they can have an impact on their environment and the society they live in, and that can be at local level, community level, household level in terms of climate etc.

Similarly, Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) believes higher education empowers individuals:

Agency is about believing and feeling that you can make your own decisions, you're an autonomous agent... The belief that you can act in this world... it's about having power... certainly it would have that kind of outcome. It's empowering people to act.

Hugh's observation supports the view of Clancy and Marginson (2018) who argue that 'Graduates are less tightly gripped by fate than are non-graduates'.

Responses describe how empowering individuals translates into a social benefit. Samir (U/Senior Management) explains how, by learning to take control of their own choices, individual graduates proceed to influence whole communities:

Giving people that educational experience... is very important, to show them, yes you can be empowered to take control of your choices and your behaviour... So it isn't just you on your own. It's a whole community.

Vince (U/Senior Management) describes the difference between a society with mass participation in higher education, and a society without a broadly educated population:

...a society with mass education, where half the population have [sic] a higher education degree... is quite a different society from a country where only 3% have been to university and only 20% finished secondary school. In terms... of the way politics is done, in terms of health outcomes, in terms of the way people behave. Higher Education changes the kind of conversations people have, changes the discourse, and it changes health, it changes society, it changes politics. It changes the whole of society... (Vince, Senior Management)

Vince's statement demonstrates a conviction that higher education serves the public good. Dennis (U/Senior Management) similarly explains how higher education is much more than an individual benefit, because the outcomes are far-reaching and benefit graduates' families, workplaces and society:

There's an individual benefit then once people have acquired, whether it is new knowledge, new skills, new confidence, they can apply that in all sorts of contexts, whether it is at home, society, the workplace. So, I think there is that kind of ripple effect that an individual has.

Dennis' concept of the 'ripple effect' illustrates how educating more people resonates far beyond the individuals who received higher education. The 'ripple effect' concept supports Vince's view that mass higher education 'changes the whole of society'.

A further illustration of this broader influence is explained by Ciara (U/AHSS Professor). According to Ciara, as higher education fosters cognitive flexibility and trains people to think rationally, and equips students with highly developed capacities, graduates are therefore 'capable of bringing things into the world that increase the quality of worldly experience'. In this context, graduates' enhanced skills benefit society at large. Examples of these 'things' are offered by other respondents. Stakeholder Chantal (Representative Body) describes how graduates *and their communities* benefit from higher education, because it fosters openness and critical analysis and increases engagement in society:

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Being more aware and engaged as an individual in *your* society and how that can impact you. You can be more open ... and instead of automatically shutting something down because you may not agree with it, you have the capacity to question it and to try and understand it... I suppose *critical analysis*, and that's a skill that's honed in universities.

Noah (U/Support) describes how higher education enables individuals to do good in society, through careers that serve the public:

We have applied social studies, and a lot of courses that are about that greater good. So they wouldn't necessarily be graduating into well-paid jobs, but it is a contribution back to society... the motivation is about doing good or wanting to give back.

Stakeholder Wendy (Representative body), similar to Ciara (U/AHSS Professor), highlights how higher education enables people to bring things into the world that increase quality of life for everyone:

When you think about the different types of products that are formed because people are more educated and have set up businesses...

Other respondents focus on a broad range of outcomes. For example, Stakeholder Lorenzo (Media) states there are long-term benefits to society from mass higher education, which range from creativity to flexibility, which equip people to navigate a changing workplace:

Once you go to university you are getting that sense of a broad education... critical thinking, creativity and so on, and it equips you to survive in an environment where the workplace is changing dramatically... if you're getting these key, basic, transversal skills...you will survive better.

In Lorenzo's view, higher education empowers individuals to survive and thrive in a changing world.

Jan (U/STEM Professor) sees a more general benefit for society from an educated population:

An educated citizenry will benefit any country, so the people who do those other [AHSS] degrees will then go on and follow careers that they want to follow.

Among both cohorts, the majority of respondents acknowledge higher education as having a significant positive influence on society. However, a minority raised concerns about unintended consequences of mass participation. For example, Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer), states:

I'd be concerned that certainly in some disciplines or in some institutions that critical thinking isn't given the weight it should.

Similarly, Andrea (S/Community Development) doubts that higher education contributes to society at any other level than skills acquisition:

I think people are trained to do things, not necessarily *think about* things... they're turning out computer programmers or technicians.

Olga (S/Representative Body) reflects on the competitive environment for graduates in the job market, which can compel graduates to pursue post-graduate education:

What happens is then more people want to stay in education for longer, and they do their undergraduate, then they feel they've to do a post-graduate, and then beyond that. It's nearly become – like that's the new bar. I think it changes society.

Olga believes that obliging young people to remain in education ever longer has a societal impact, although it is not clear if that is a positive, e.g. becoming more educated, or a negative, prolonging the educational life-stage infers postponing the next life-stages.

In summary, on the topic of mass higher education's contribution to the public good, respondents highlight intangible outcomes of having large numbers of people engaging with higher education along the dimensions of skills, cognitive reasoning, personal development, empowerment, agency, autonomy, confidence, and good citizenship. Responses highlight outcomes of improved health and more community engagement in educated populations, as well as more direct benefits such as knowledge generation, and volunteering. They explain how, what Dennis terms 'a ripple effect' from graduates, has a significant positive influence on wider society, contributing to the public good. Vince's description best explains this process, in that having large numbers of graduates in society 'changes the kind of conversations people have,' influencing politics, changing society. The OECD (2018) identifies higher education as a contributing factor to social and individual flourishing, not only in terms of economic benefits, but in terms of quality of life issues, so that not only individuals but regions with educated populations thrive:

Educational disadvantage typically means not only smaller salaries, but... shorter lives. A 25 year-old university-educated man can expect to live almost eight years longer than his lower-educated peer on average across OECD countries ... The vicious confluence of poor educational opportunities, low skills and limited employment prospects can trap people in situations where they are also far more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards and violence. As a result of this multidimensional inequality, while some individuals, cities and regions thrive, others fall further behind (OECD, 2018:3).

The views of both cohorts broadly concur on this theme, both in terms of mass participation's merits, and de-merits. A large majority reported positive outcomes. A minority in both cohorts raised concerns, such as doubts as to some outcomes, e.g. critical thinking, being universally experienced, and a perception that mass participation may increase pressure for graduates to differentiate themselves in the labour market, by staying in education longer, which may, or may not, be a positive outcome.

5.2 Higher education and expertise

The previous section covered the theme of intangible outcomes, which included ways in which graduates become 'capable of bringing things into the world that increase the quality of worldly experience.' This section is closely related to the theme of intangible outcomes, exploring ways in which graduates' enhanced skills benefit society at large. Respondents in both cohorts highlight expertise as a major outcome through which higher education contributes to the public good.

5 PERCEIVED OUTCOMES OF MASS HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC GOOD



Respondents in both cohorts highlight expertise as a major outcome through which higher education contributes to the public good.

For example, STEM academic Kitty highlights the interconnection between expertise and society:

Society couldn't function without experts in various disciplines that the universities are responsible for. So, by even existing, we're serving the common good.

Iris (U/AHSS Lecturer) points out how scientific and medical research contribute to the public good:

You'll have to look across the universities, and there is absolutely no doubt that producing people like medics who find cures for pancreatic cancer or whatever, it's inarguable that those people benefit society.

Piet (U/STEM Professor) sees the outcomes of universities in terms of their scientific, cultural and economic outcomes, stating that these dimensions are complementary:

There will always be opportunities in science and that would come out of knowledge... And I think it's always been the case. Medical schools for example – that's where science comes from. If you look at successful cities, from an economic development point of view, are usually university cities because the knowledge base is there, and people want the talent that's coming out of there.

Dorian (S/Non-Grad Parent) highlights higher education's role in developing skills that enable graduates to improve living standards, which benefits society:

...how to improve service offerings is a benefit to tourism... Society gets the benefit of a developed leisure industry too, like the hotels now have all upgraded to the point where every small town has access to a swimming pool in the local hotel. That was unimaginable 20 or 30 years ago. And I think it's safe to say that having hotel managers who went to college brought about that increase in hotel standards.

These perceived outcomes echo the findings of the Cassells Report (DES, 2016:17), which describes the non-instrumental outcomes: '...higher education has value because it greatly adds to understanding of, and hence the flourishing of, our integrated social, institutional, cultural and economic life'.

Other respondents highlight how academics make valuable contributions to politics by providing information on issues. Malin (S/Employer), for example, states that experts inform public debates impartially, by standing apart from political agendas:

Quite often you would hear lecturers talking about the housing crisis, so there is certainly a role for experts... to be able to inform. So that connection from the expertise there, to bring that into the common knowledge is important... they can give us that opportunity to hear something different... agnostic of party politics – say this is actually how economics or law work – that's an important role to play.

Van (S/Policy) sees higher education as contributing expertise in a non-partisan way:

Academics should be unaligned experts, and politically neutral, and I think they are that... when you see their contribution to public debate, it's usually is from an informed perspective rather than from a political perspective, and I think that's a good thing. That's a good contribution to society.

Van argues that higher education has undoubtedly contributed to public debates, and that the public values having access to this expertise, especially at times of crisis:

The reason people pay taxes and support academia is that you want expertise. And in a time of crisis, which I think we saw in that 2008-2012 ...there was a flight to quality of opinion. Because most of the narrative that we had had in the media and elsewhere had ...landed us in a lot of trouble, and there was...a flight to quality ... people from a dispassionate academic perspective offering a view on major issues and challenges, that was probably useful to us.

The role of universities as sites of research came to particular prominence during the Covid-19 pandemic, when Irish universities actively collaborated with government to inform public policy and also in practical ways by making available their expertise and their laboratory facilities to bolster testing capacity. In addition to collaborating with overseas institutions in the search for a vaccine, academics such as Professor Philip Nolan (MU) and Professor Luke O'Neill (TCD) explained the research of their teams to the public through the media. The role assumed by universities during the pandemic bears out the prediction of Marginson (2011:429) that:

Above all, higher education can make solidarity practical by tackling common human problems such as climate change and epidemic disease on a collaborative basis... Though we cannot anticipate all future uses of the university, ongoing higher education capacity must be ready for them... because some of the projects of today are prototypes for the solutions of tomorrow.

Responses acknowledge the role of higher education in knowledge generation, and the value such expertise contributes to the public good.

On the topic of expertise, the views of both the Stakeholder and University Cohorts concur in relation to the beneficial outcomes of higher education in its knowledge generation role. Responses in both cohorts acknowledge that higher education provides an important resource through its role as a seat of knowledge. Sharing the outcomes of research and knowledge generation contributes to the public good along the dimensions of health, culture, social issues such as housing, and public finances for example during economic crises. The Humboldtian missions of service and of research overlap with the American model of community service, whereby scientific advancement assists the community to flourish. In this way, higher education makes significant, if unquantifiable, contributions to the public good.

5.3 Mass higher education and values

Across the universities, values are showcased as part of the educational experience. For example, one Dublin university holds an annual 'Values in Action' award for staff who are nominated for their efforts in bringing the university values to life, who engage with the community and embody those values through their daily work. Another university, outside Dublin, identifies its core values are 'creativity, respect, freedom of expression, transparency, scholarship, equality, diversity, integrity, responsiveness'. Values are generally

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defined as ‘principles, standards of behaviour, or one’s judgment of what’s important in life’ (Oxford English Dictionary) and, in terms of academia, as deep understanding, rigorous, precise thinking, and sustained attention to detail (Gallagher, 2012:70). As Parsons and Platt (1970) argue, learning in higher education involves two simultaneous threads: assimilating the cognitive content of the subject and internalising norms and values. According to Kezar (2005:27), higher education is for societal good, and for fostering high-order thinking and wisdom, and preparing students for life rather than just for a career. In their view, these purposes are underpinned by values, namely the values of ‘equality, service, truth, justice, community, academic freedom, and autonomy’. This section explores the relationship between higher education and values in the context of Irish society, to understand what norms and values are internalised by students today. Respondents were asked to consider the values of higher education, by means of the following questions:

- In terms of institutional values, in your opinion what would be the foremost values universities in Ireland aspire to?
- How, would you say, do universities shape students’ values to line up with the college’s value system?
- Would you think college values actually transmit through graduates into wider society?

5.3.1 Values of higher education

Responses in the University Cohort describe the values underpinning higher education, and how values are transmitted on campus and in teaching. There is a consensus that the aim of universities is to develop a value system, rather than belief system. For example, Vince (U/Senior Management) believes that tolerance is promoted by mass higher education, and that benefits the public good. Vince explains the stance taken by higher education with the aim of opening minds, without promoting a particular political leaning:

...just because I happen to be liberal and like the idea that we should be more democratic, if we were to use the university system to sell that, is that not exactly the same as using the university system to sell fascist ideology? If you believe that education is meant to be about **not** selling a particular set of beliefs, but opening minds to discover it themselves, I think it’s problematic to start with the objective of a particular political outcome.

This describes how higher education teaches students how to think, rather than what to think. Róisín (U/Senior Management) similarly reports that higher education fosters a value system, as opposed to a belief system. They state that the values of higher education emphasise understanding cultural differences, an important issue in Irish society:

Accepting other worldviews is in itself a value system. So we certainly wouldn’t be setting about to try and propose that everybody should think in a particular way, and think about life in a particular way. ...the values that we would encourage... are not about belief in a system... understanding different cultures is really at the heart of modern society, modern Irish society.

Róisín believes having more graduates in society is beneficial because their values, personal development and relationships enable them contribute in a different way:

An educated society is going to be a better place... than an uneducated one. And in ... personal development and values and relationships... educated people will contribute in a different way.

Róisín states that the sum total of many educated individuals amounts to a social benefit. University/Support respondents similarly believe that society is richer for having many educated people, and they identify several ways in which mass participation higher education contributes to society. Ellen's view is that a graduate's degree has an impact on how they think:

...what graduates do bring – I don't think you realise it at the time, but you do have a different way of thinking when you leave, because you have been exposed to different things.

Having large numbers of graduates who have developed a broader worldview, is not just an individual benefit, but a social benefit. This supports the view of Meyer (2014:138) who argues that education enables us to value things, such as culture:

The intrinsic value of education goes beyond its contribution to job opportunities and their value. Education enables us to flourish in ways that have nothing to do with our competitiveness in the labour market.

Ellen (U/Support) describes how the educational experience on campus, which goes beyond classroom-based activity, can foster in students such values as community engagement and cultural awareness:

People come to get a degree, but actually there's all this other stuff that goes on outside the classroom which is... the educational experience. So...a student graduating should have cultural awareness... And they should understand personal and professional development, and lifelong learning. And it's not that they're being taught those things.

Ellen highlights how the intangible outcomes of mass higher education are not overtly *taught*, rather, students inhabit an environment where values, such as community engagement and cultural understanding, are norms. This infers that mass higher education confers intangible benefits, including cultural awareness.

It is apposite here to acknowledge the essential catalyst in this process, namely, university teachers, through whose teaching the values of higher education permeate the student body. Ciara (U/AHSS Professor) explains that the academics in Ireland's universities are dedicated teachers, highly committed to students not only in terms of academic outcomes, but on the level of engagement and values also:

We've got enthusiastic educators who want to get students to be engaged and involved and to care about their country and our species and the coast and the water quality and atmospheric quality, the future of the planet, and I do think that that sort of collective consciousness and interest in the future, is something that is quite noticeable in terms of what the university teachers aim to develop.

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Róisín (U/Senior Management) explains how university values transmit into society through graduates:

The impact is local, in that obviously it impacts the individual, I think it has an ongoing impact within the family and maybe within the closer community... you realise that you're part of a community and part of a society, and that you are therefore responsible within that, in terms of how to shape that society.

Róisín describes how the values of higher education, such as good citizenship, are imbued not by explicit curricular delivery, but by the behaviour of teachers and university staff:

It is delivered through the curriculum, but not formally – we don't have modules in how to be a good citizen. It's not delivered in that way, it is delivered through the values and behaviour of the people who are teaching. It's delivered through the values and behaviours of the whole university community and how we expect people to interact with one another.

Dennis (U/Senior Management) explains how all HEIs share a single purpose, but their cultures and values vary:

There is a commonality of purpose, in terms of trying to attain the best outcomes for individuals and for the institution. But how that gets realised is different in each place, which then ends up with very different cultures and values...

This aligns with the view of Binder (2013:282), who argues that features of each campus inform its unique culture and values and in turn influence and shape the students:

Cultural understandings of 'who we are on this campus' and the organisational features that structure students' daily lives bolster particular meanings shared by students. Graduates of these educational settings – organizationally produced selves intact – then graduate into society and shape it.

Gerda (U/Support) describes the university experience as promoting integrity, enabling graduates choose their path, instead of staying on a track of someone else's choosing:

...beginning to choose who you want to be... And the values that are important to you, and why. And make decisions that are appropriate to who you want to be, rather than just what you've always been told.

Gerda states values are part of this process of choosing the optimal path to pursue after college. Gerda's view is supported by Malin (S/Employer) who finds that graduates' values influence their life goals and career aspirations. Malin's observation is that the way young graduates today think and act reflects their values, and they want work that has purpose:

...graduates now, if they identify with the purpose and see themselves progressing – not necessarily promotion, but they want to see progress... But there is still that sense of working *with* the company, not working *for* a company. And adding that value.

AHSS respondents unanimously believe that higher education's values transmit to students and increase their capacity to contribute to society. Brendan (U/AHSS Professor) describes how higher education's values, such as giving back to society, are signaled on public occasions. This endorses the culture on campus and the community:

No matter who the Provost or the Vice-Chancellor is – they'll always have this thing about 'giving back to society'. Across the universities... people doing things like law, some of whom, arguably, are human rights lawyers and lawyers trying to help people...

Brendan describes here how the stated values of university are fulfilled by graduates. Iris (U/AHSS Lecturer) stated that university has the power to change people on a personal level:

Most students irrespective of their social origin will gain confidence, a sense of personal belief, hopefully some skills as well... But also will have developed as a person through that experience of having gone through undergraduate level education.

Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) points to societal change arising from more liberal values:

Now in Irish society... the referenda we've had, and the acceptance of rights and ways of living, and what's allowed and what's not allowed... And so the norm has changed. And it has changed because of more knowledge...and a recognition that there are different ways to live.

This illustrates how the values of higher education inform behaviour, both personal and political, and how in turn the prevailing values can – when combined with other factors – disrupt the status quo.

Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) explains that political engagement is promoted by higher education, but is linked to how the political issues in question resonate with the institutional values:

...as a university we have certain values that we would also espouse, and if students are going to engage in activities that align with that, then we will facilitate that – climate change for example, anti-racism, all of those kind of things... you could call that encouragement.

'...we don't have modules in how to be a good citizen. It's not delivered in that way, it is delivered through the values and behaviour of the people who are teaching. It's delivered through the values and behaviours of the whole university community and how we expect people to interact with one another.'

Róisín (U/Senior Management)



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This infers that university facilitates political involvement, insofar as the causes align with university values. Clearly, university values are fundamental to the activities and experiences of students and graduates. Hugh sees higher education as providing an opportunity for discussions, encouraging individuals to reflect on values and become engaged in society:

College is one of those places where you learn what you value and what you don't value, and you learn what you want to speak out about... a place where you are more likely to get yourself involved in various other kinds of social organisations, political organisations.

Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) also highlights how higher education benefits society, by developing in graduates a questioning attitude, without which the status quo would rarely be challenged:

I think it broadens horizons... I think society would be very poor without the opportunity for third level education. Why is that? It comes back to developing that questioning approach, challenging tradition, challenging particular viewpoints, challenging the way things have always been done... That's probably the biggest social benefit I guess, because it's only when people can start questioning what is, and the why's of 'what is'... then they become aware of the possibility of other ways of doing things...

A minority of respondents however doubt that values are formed at university. Jan (U/STEM Professor) for example, states that values are important, but:

I think values are critical, but I don't know that universities form those values.

Similar doubts arise among the Stakeholder Cohort. For example, Tanya (Representative Body) believes values are instilled throughout school education:

I think values are still very, very much part of education in Ireland. Where that value comes from, whether it's a religious ethos or whether it's a kind of moral ethical piece within the school, I think it's very much part of the school system still.

Sebastien (S/Non-Grad Parent) feels values are already formed before entering higher education, but that they may be modified based on life experience:

I'm not sure, because I think your values are formed when you are younger. And then, maybe you change your values all through life, I'm not sure, maybe they do change their values in college, when they learn more about the world.

Nestor (S/Policy) is convinced that, whether values are explicitly delivered or not, there is an influence from higher education that influences how people think and act:

An educated society seems to deliver things both in terms of the way it thinks around problems, the way it thinks around challenges and so on. Even the way in which people relate to each other, that, they just work better. There are many things that just work better in educated societies. Those are benefits that you might realise you have after the event.

A range of views emerged among both cohorts. Responses highlight a belief across respondents in both cohorts that higher education informs graduates' values. In turn, values inform graduates' career choices, and their ways of thinking and acting. With the exception of some STEM academics, respondents in the University Cohort express a conviction that higher education imparts values to students. The values identified by respondents included open-mindedness, tolerance, understanding cultural difference, cultural awareness, community engagement, good citizenship and a values-based desire for work that has purpose. Interestingly, these values are broadly in line with those described by Kezar (2005), with the possible exception of 'academic freedom,' which Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) alluded to as a valuable feature of the university. This issue will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

5.3.2 Values: Equality and gender

Atiyah (U/AHSS Professor) highlights gender equality as an aspect of university life that has radically changed in recent years. Speaking of university values, they explain:

...it's a classic liberalism really, but... what's been added on to that is 'respect each other regardless of race, class and gender'... that was always left out of classic liberalism because it was always assumed that you were upper class male.

The statement 'it was always assumed that you were upper class male' highlights the changed face of the Irish university campus compared with the recent past, when higher education was largely the preserve of males, from wealthy backgrounds. Gender equality, combined with mass participation in higher education, radically changed the tradition that university was for a privileged – and male – elite. This demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between the values of society and higher education.

TABLE 6 PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND AND OECD COUNTRIES, 1980-2010

	1980	1990	2000	2010
Ireland	40.4	45.3	54.1	53.9
OECD country average	41.4	48.4	52.9	54.8

As this table indicates, the proportion of female students has risen in line with the OECD country average, from 40.4% in 1980 to 53.9% in 2010. (Source: Clancy 2015:46)

Ciara (U/AHSS Professor) discusses how mass higher education is one contributing influence that changes the ways in which society imagines itself, such as changing norms around gender roles:

...different types of equality like gender equality, racial equality... These intersecting equity expectations are also latent... If professors can be women then the society is thinking of itself as being changed in some way from a society with few women professors. It's about the imagination of the society itself.

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Ciara acknowledges that attaining a professorship was not always possible for women, and society had to reimagine itself to accommodate changing expectations.

Reversing inequalities that prevailed for centuries requires active management. Whilst women have become professors in recent times, their numbers remain low. Although about half of university lecturers are women, fewer than one quarter of professors are women (O'Brien, 2020). To tackle gender inequality, 45 women-only professorships will be allocated over three years in areas such as engineering, computer science, and physics, where significant under-representation of women is evident (O'Brien, 2020). According to O'Brien (2020), 'Minister of State for Higher Education Mary Mitchell O'Connor said... the excellence of female academics and their contribution to research and education has not yet resulted in an 'appropriate level' of representation of women at the highest levels'. Gender equality is an aspect of public good that contributes to the flourishing of individuals and of society.

On the topic of values, several respondents report a belief that values acquired at university are linked to enthusiastic educators and the behaviour of university teachers and staff and, while there is not consensus on this, a majority of respondents believe that universities impart a range of values to graduates. While, a minority of respondents believe that values become embedded in a person's life before they reach higher education, all believe that the university experience informs or influences values.

The points raised here help to balance the prevailing narrative that higher education serves the economy above all. These arguments highlight that higher education contributes to the public good, enhancing society on several dimensions which tend to be overlooked due to the recent emphasis on the economic good. Such values-based dimensions include promotion of tolerance and cultural awareness, civic engagement, sustainability and a search for meaningful work, which is rooted in values of service and justice. Respondents in both cohorts highlight how higher education is not only influenced by society, but in its turn influences and contributes to society in important ways that enable individuals to flourish.

5.4 Mass higher education and social cohesion

Social cohesion is defined as 'the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper' (Stanley, 2003:5). Education at all levels is fundamental to national solidarity, and hence, social cohesion. Smith (1986:25) describes how education embodies the values deemed precious by the community, and encourages conformity to these values. If education at all levels engenders the values and norms that are the source of social cohesion, what is the particular contribution of mass higher education to this process? In recent years all universities have placed equality, diversity and inclusion high on their agendas, developing a range of policies and programmes to promote these values, which are key components of social cohesion. According to Stanley (2003:7), 'social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income... enabling people to have a sense that ...they are members of the same community'. The dimension of reducing disparities in income is addressed in the section on social mobility, however, to explore perceptions of the role played by universities in promoting social cohesion through building shared values and fostering cooperation, respondents were asked: 'Would you say mass higher education enhances social cohesion?' and to explore the aspect of diversity, 'How much would you think different social groups mix on campus?'

5.4.1 Mass higher education and social cohesion

Among University/Support the consensus was that the university campus fosters social cohesion. For example, Liam (U/Support) feels that social cohesion is promoted in university in various ways, from the courses offered, to student union activities and opportunities to engage with social issues:

The campus is an area where you would see that promoted in various ways. From student union campaigns to other kind of initiatives around the place. And then up to and including modules and programs, and masters programs that are specifically built on social issues – like for example Equality Studies.

Campus provides opportunities for people to meet and mix with students from different backgrounds. Similarly, Gerda (U/Support) describes positive interactions between students from outside Ireland and Irish people on campus:

...we learn to look out for and look after one another. I think university can be a place where people learn to do that. I've seen differences in ability and differences in race lead to genuine friendships. To my mind, that's what I've experienced, it smashes through barriers and builds positive social cohesion.

Gerda is assured that mixing on campus builds social cohesion. Similarly, Ellen (U/Support) states that universities are moving towards increasing diversity on campus, which is seen as beneficial in increasing understanding between different backgrounds:

I think there is awareness that diversity enriches the campus, and bringing people from different backgrounds together is good and helps them understand each other and where their perspectives are coming from.

Vince (U/Senior Management) endorses Ellen's view that diversity is purposely pursued, and they are confident that students mix on their campus:

They absolutely mix... People can commute here from a lot of places... So there's quite a social mix here. We think of it as a university with a social function... we don't want to be a homogenous university because the mix of people is also very valuable.

Vince describes the active effort to promote social mixing, but regrets that the large number of students who commute mitigate against after-hours socialising:

We actually want an international campus... So, they absolutely mix, and they meet people from different backgrounds, different races, different parts of the country. And that's great. But one caveat I would have is ... long distance commuters have to go when the bus goes.

Vince (U/Support) is committed to the concept of diversity on campus. Responses from Stakeholders also endorse the value of diversity; for example, Lorenzo (S/Media) believes mass higher education promotes social cohesion:

HE helps to address some of that polarisation and create a better sense of social cohesion... once you go to university, you are getting that sense of a broader education...critical thinking, creativity and so on... There's more chance of stronger social cohesion from that.

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Lorenzo identifies a connection between social cohesion and the values of higher education, such as tolerance and equality, which enhance it.

The values that they promote in third level colleges... they do highlight tolerance, equality, and I think that is beneficial for social cohesion. And possibly plays a role in restricting that kind of polarisation we are seeing in Europe. ...most countries across Europe, they don't have anywhere near the numbers we have going on to HE.

Lorenzo describes how high levels of higher education proliferate values of tolerance and equality and this has contributed to social cohesion in Ireland. In their view, higher education stands as a bulwark against social and political polarisation.

Van (S/Policy) makes a similar point. They believe that despite rising inequality, Ireland enjoys high levels of social cohesion, and this is largely an outcome of education:

We do have inequality, we do have significant problems... We have a relatively stable, coherent, nationalistic outlook in Ireland, and generally we get along as a country and as a nation, and that's a good thing. And education is a part of that. I think drives that, in a way that if we didn't have it, it would be a far more difficult place.

Similarly, Chantal (S/Representative body) believes campus life lets students mix and this enables them to see different perspectives:

You meet different people from different walks of life that you wouldn't possibly have that opportunity to do if you stayed in your own area... You meet so many different people with so many different perspectives and you grow as an individual in university, from the social side.

However, like Vince (U/Senior Management), Chantal recognises that those who cannot afford accommodation are obliged to commute long distances and that denies them the opportunity to get involved:

...it's much more difficult for commuter students to engage in extra-curricular activities, and engage in social activities, because they're hopping on a bus at 5pm or whatever.

Mixing on campus is seen as important for social cohesion, as well as for engagement, social and political. In their study of higher education in Ireland and England, Abrahams and Brooks (2018:112) found that higher education had a liberalising effect on students:

...students in both countries spoke of the liberalising and politicising effect of university... through a process of mixing with people from a variety of backgrounds...opening their minds to different issues...

Róisín (U/Senior Management) describes a difference between their university's goal and the reality:

We espouse a view of trying to promote diversity in our population, and encourage a mix that reflects the demographics. We are a national university, recruiting students everywhere, but... nationally – in the way the Statistics Office measure these things – the proportion of students coming from... lower economic bands, is poor across the country.

In general, Senior Management and Support staff endorse the idea of diversity on campus and see it as positively impacting on social cohesion, albeit with some challenges to overcome, such as the trend for students to commute to college for cost-saving reasons, and the tendency for higher education to attract more people from professional family backgrounds, which impinges on the social mix on campus.

By contrast, responses among the teaching academics tend to question whether social cohesion is an outcome, on the basis that a policy of diversity does not equate to 'enabling people to have a sense that ... they are members of the same community' (Stanley, 2003:7). Iris (U/AHSS Lecturer) observes that international students cluster in their cultural groups:

Yes, they tend to stick together... you've lots of different groups. And to some extent, it's normal, I'd say, in inverted commas... it's birds of a feather flock together, it's part of human nature to derive comfort from being with similar beings.

Imelda (S/Media) likewise considers their recent college experience, saying they did not observe high levels of mixing on campus, but suspects those from less well-off backgrounds try to mask this and blend in:

There wasn't a huge cultural or socio-economic mix... the pervasive sense is of a very middle-class population, it doesn't feel diverse. But it could be that the feeling of everybody being carefree and comfortable... maybe the children who are struggling are indistinguishable from the children that just have it – maybe that's the kind of cultural form that they adopt.

This seems to imply that students try to conform to the perceived values of the middle-class student population at university.

Maura (U/STEM Professor) states that Irish universities tend to attract students from the immediate locality so that in their view only one social background is present, and international and local students do not mix:

Very few from here go to Dublin, and even less from Dublin go to UCC or UL or NUIG... everybody is from the same background. And lots of international students... Very little mixing goes on. They stick together.

Ciara (U/AHSS Professor,) is also sceptical about diversity on campus. Similar to Vince (U/Senior Management) and others, they point out how high rents oblige less well-off students to live at home and commute to college, or earn money while in college:

A lot of people travel much further now and have a lot of anxiety around accommodation... It has also made students a lot more financially dependent on working, so they have far less leisure... Students are time-poor, they don't have time to enjoy the education and to avail of the wider benefits.

Ciara considers that apart from those challenges, not every student will be disposed to mixing or traveling, but if they are, then university provides the opportunity:

It depends on the individual student's level of maturity and their personality... We have this idea that they have to become these global cosmopolitan types. But how many people in the world really are? And I think universities provide the opportunity for those who want to.

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In summary, Stakeholders' views on higher education's role in promoting social cohesion ranged from negative views concerning impediments caused by structural issues of high rents and commuting, which oblige some students to commute long distances or work while going to college, to the detriment of their student experience. These perceptions were evident among the University Cohort also. More positive perceptions among the Stakeholder cohort related to the opportunity for students to meet others from diverse backgrounds, and to develop the sense of being members of a shared community, enhancing social cohesion. This view mirrored the University Cohort's Senior Management and Support respondents'.

On the topic of social cohesion, similar points emerged in both cohorts. Respondents highlight structural issues that reduce the impact of higher education on social cohesion, for example, long commutes that diminish the student experience, or in some cases a majority of students at certain universities are drawn from one geographic area, which curtails the experience of diversity and diminishes the chance of 'building shared values and communities of interpretation' in society (Stanley, 2003:7). For those students who can partake in the student experience, respondents perceive campus offers opportunities to meet people from diverse backgrounds (though not everyone avails of these).

In the University Cohort, two perspectives come to light. The first view, voiced by the majority in Senior Management and Support roles, states that universities in Ireland promote diversity, that the students mix well, and that this promotes social cohesion. The second view contends with this, and emerged mainly from the lecturers and professors in teaching roles. They state that the universities reflect the social mix of their respective geographical regions along the lines of urban/rural with a cohort of international students as well, but that mixing is an individual choice not greatly in evidence. This tension between perspectives permits insights into what perhaps might represent on one hand, reality as experienced by front-facing teaching staff, and on the other hand, an ideal promoted by non-teaching staff.

5.5 Conclusion: Outcomes of mass higher education and the public good

The points from both cohorts overlapped and described ways in which outcomes of mass participation in higher education contribute to the flourishing of individuals. This resonates with the conception of the public good defined by Leibowitz (2013:xxiii) as 'the flourishing of human beings as a valuable end, instead of seeing human beings as instruments of economic well-being'. The outcomes of mass higher education identified as contributing to the public good were:

- In view of the large numbers of graduates in Irish society, higher education wields significant influence on society, as a well-educated society behaves differently to one with low educational levels.
- AHSS respondents unanimously believed that universities' values transmit to students and influence how they contribute to society.
- Respondents explained how, what Dennis (U/Senior Management) terms 'a ripple effect' from graduates, has a significant positive influence on wider society, contributing to the public good.
- Respondents highlighted how the fundamental value of higher education was opening minds, without promoting a particular political leaning, teaching students *how* to think, not *what* to think.

- Following from this, the values identified by respondents included open-mindedness, tolerance, understanding cultural difference, cultural awareness, community engagement, good citizenship and a desire for meaningful work.
- Responses highlighted the role of dedicated academics as a vital conduit for the transmission of values.
- Responses pointed to direct benefits to the public good such as knowledge generation, and volunteering.
- Additionally, through creating a high level of expertise in a wide range of areas, expertise which benefits society on many levels, such as health, finance, politics and the environment, higher education contributes further to the public good.
- Based on their perceptions of liberal values of higher education that foster tolerance and equality and the opportunity for students to meet others from diverse backgrounds at university, the majority of Stakeholders considered that higher education promoted social cohesion. This view mirrored the University Cohort respondents in Senior Management and Support roles, who stated that universities in Ireland promote diversity, and that the students mix well, which fosters social cohesion. However, academics in teaching roles reported that Irish universities reflect the social mix of their respective geographical regions with a cohort of international students but that mixing was an individual choice, of which they saw little evidence. This means that social cohesion is a disputed outcome.
- Both cohorts raised concerns about structural issues of high rents and commuting, which oblige students to commute long distances or work while going to college, depriving many of the opportunity to engage and mix on campus.
- Responses indicated a view that higher education contributes to society through graduates on several dimensions. Respondents focused on intangible outcomes such as agency, autonomy, empowerment, personal effectiveness, critical thinking and confidence, all of which combine to enable graduates to engage meaningfully in their communities and workplaces. As Smolentseva (2018:185) points out, due to recent mass participation in higher education:

...the younger and middle generations will actively build their own lives in the workplace, family, politics, culture, and all other social dimensions. They will shape future job contents, labour market structures, family structures, political choice, and cultural tastes. They will address issues in climate change, migration, inequality, and automation, and make greater use of information and complex data, as well as other developments we cannot yet predict.

The points raised here help to counter-balance the prevailing narrative that higher education serves the economy above all. By fostering human flourishing in terms of personal attributes, promoting ethics through values, and engagement in society, higher education contributes to the public good (Leibowitz, 2013).

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The final theme considers higher education in light of career preparation, and the issues of equality of opportunity, and non-progression to higher education. Respondents were asked: 'How would you view the other 45% of school-leavers who do not progress to higher education?' Both cohorts regard the lack of a degree as a serious disadvantage in the labour market. For example, Samir (U/Senior Management) considers employers' view of higher education:

Higher ed. is preparing people to be adaptable, agile and resilient and also to apply those skills in any setting ...learning how to learn, learning how to time manage themselves and be disciplined. Those are actually the skills that the employers value.

Samir views the intangible outcomes of higher education primarily in terms of how they enhance employability.

Liam's (U/Support) response to the topic of non-progression is typical among respondents in both cohorts:

Not to go to college is to accept that you are going do something that is far less valued. Even if you have no specific job in mind there is a sense now that a third level degree now is like what your leaving cert was twenty years ago. Entry level jobs now need a third level qualification.

Respondents consider that, this being the reality, then all who have the interest and the ability should also have the opportunity. Jan (U/STEM Professor) stated:

I would like to see a situation where third level education is open to all who want to avail of it.

However, access is not in itself sufficient. Iris (U/AHSS Lecturer) explains:

Access to HE is hugely important, in my view. But it isn't unproblematic and I think a lot of the emphasis is on just getting people in... There's a lack of actual support for people once they're in there.

Stakeholders express similar views towards enabling all who have the interest and the ability, to access higher education. For example, Olga (S/Representative body) states that financial support is essential:

HE is not easy, it's tough for everybody, and I think most of us only got through it because we had a strong support externally... in order to ensure you have proper access, then it needs a complete reform of the support services like the grant scheme, the SUSI [Student Universal Support Ireland] grant.

Van (S/Policy) similarly believes everyone should have access and support and, in their view, higher education institutions have adapted to provide these, but lack of funding limits the social supports often needed by less privileged groups:

It's important that we redouble our efforts to make sure everyone possible can get into and get through and succeed in higher education. And I think that institutions have largely been responsive to that and have created the opportunity, but that the social supports have not kept track... The evidence that we see is that it's not so much the academic challenge but it's the having to work in Spar in the evenings and then go home and mind a child or a parent.

Róisín (U/Senior Management) acknowledges that social inequalities curtail access:

The inequity in the system is fundamental and starts from primary school. Well, it starts from birth, effectively...

No respondent opposes the idea of enabling access and providing the necessary supports for those who need them. Access and support are fundamental issues relating to higher education and are the focus of much research in Ireland. However, the particulars of access and support are outside the scope of this study.

Vince (U/Senior Management) highlights the 'second-chance' option for those over 23 years of age to access higher education:

There are pretty good second chance options and it has moved a lot in the last two generations.

The concept of second chances is explored further in the next section.

6.1 Non-traditional routes to higher education and lifelong learning

Because the outcomes of higher education are so highly valued, respondents express support for making the structures of higher education more flexible, so that not just school-leavers, but non-traditional students such as returning students or adults who left education early, can also avail of it. There appears to be a very receptive environment for more flexible pathways to higher education, among both cohorts. Respondents discuss recent developments such as micro-credentialing and lifelong learning. For example, Van (S/Policy) describes current structures and believes there should be more flexibility:

We are still very set in a very traditional chalk and talk environment. And that will need to change... by more flexible means of access and entry to HE... where you can go and do two months and then take three months off. That would allow people to engage more flexibly in higher education.

Nestor (S/Policy) similarly supports increased flexibility in the delivery of higher education:

One of the big things about Access, one of the ways you make it work for people, particularly with second chances, you give them something with plenty of exit strategies along the way. Because if you put four years in front of them, it's frightening; people lack confidence.

Chantal (S/Representative Body) sees a changing landscape also, saying '[i]t's much more a situation where we're in life-long learning now' but feels the structures are slow to accommodate change:

...but I don't think that's really spoken about enough either, in terms of going on to college, that, 'ok you can do it now, *or*, you can go and do some work or travel...and see if it's for you... and *then* if it's something that you want to do, go back to college and that's fine.

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Chantal would favour more flexibility both in the timing of entry and the possibility to change track. Stakeholder Nestor (Policy) also suggests that postponing higher education till adulthood would be beneficial:

It's nearly easier at one level to come at it when you're in your 40s and you can say 'now I regret that I missed this' and you'd like to get back at it. When they become 35 and they have to take a right turn or a left turn, because society changes or the economy is changing, they'll be better able to do it then as well.

Lorenzo (S/Media) similarly describes a possible alternative approach to facilitating participation in higher education, based on a right of access for all, and maximum flexibility for students:

What might work would be, if everyone had the right to go to university, not necessarily straight from school. If everyone could feel that this is something that they can do, when they need to or are in a position to do, then the taxpayer would be able to get the benefit from something they are in effect funding.

The current system facilitates second chances, and 'mature students,' meaning those aged 23 or over, can access higher education outside of the CAO points system. However, this delay stalls or even derails plans, as Francis (U/Support) points out. Francis explains how students who choose the wrong course at 18, are obliged to wait five years to re-enter higher education (unless they have private funds):

If someone leaves a course they don't think is suitable, and then decides they'd like to be care assistant, there should be some way for that student to come back to do that course before five years. Instead we say you're going to have to sit there another 2 or 3 years... And then some of them in that situation go to Australia, but they get caught because when they come back they are 'non EU' students because they weren't living here for 3 of the last 5 years.

Olga (S/Representative Body) also believes flexibility should be enhanced:

Higher education isn't the means to an end. Like education nowadays should never be seen as linear... It should be seen, a little bit more as a circle, in the sense you can come in and out, when it suits you.

Olga sees the degree as merely the entry ticket, leading to lifelong learning:

The degree loses its currency as you move on in your career because you have to continue investing in education and participating in lifelong learning and as you evolve with the career ladder your most recent may be management training, or strategic management training becomes more important. Obviously, it's the entry ticket, there's no doubt about that.

In this sense, entering higher education is framed as stepping onto the lifelong learning ladder, with many levels beyond the bachelor's degree.

Nestor (S/Policy-maker) explains how it has become the norm to reskill continuously:

Because the expectation may be that people would never stop. And even if it's minor qualifications and bits and pieces, and branching from one discipline to another as they go through their working lives.... People have to change track or the economy is changing track or opportunities present themselves. I think you'll see a lot more of that into the future as well.

In the University Cohort, Samir (Senior Management) likewise believes accessing higher education should be available over the life-course, rather than pressed on people straight after school:

So going into university should be the right thing for you to do at a point in time in your life, and that could be straight out of school, it could be one year after school, it could be after you've actually held a job somewhere else and then decide to go back in to either get training in that area, or it's a passion, or you have expertise and you're naturally gifted in certain areas.

This supports the ideas of Jorgensen (2019), who argues that more flexibility within higher education is important because universities change as societies change. Jorgensen believes that increasing technological change magnifies this role.

Accelerating technological change is just one factor drawing non-traditional students into higher education. Kitty (U/STEM Lecturer) believes that returning to education is inevitable because the workplace is changing constantly:

The need for lifelong learning is a real thing. I say that to my students, you're probably going to have to do something else, at some stage, maybe not now.

She puts this need for upskilling in the context of career progression:

Students here are working in the Pharma industry, and they want to move up the ladder but they know they don't have the knowledge to become a manager so they come back to study.

Dennis (U/Senior Management) advocates moving away from the linear progression system because, as life expectancy is now increasing, flexible access is needed:

We're all living longer lives, there should be those opportunities for post-secondary continuing education, because it ... brings different perspectives in and provides increased opportunities for people. But whether the very linear progression into a university course or an IoT course is the right fit for everybody, I would have my doubts.

Dennis advocates extending routes into higher education as this would not only benefit those who might then access it, but broader participation would bring in new perspectives. Similarly, Tara (U/Senior Management) believes it is time to move away from the rigid system of locking people into courses for years at a time:

Some will do it at different stages and times. I don't think we're agile enough to respond ... we have all these rules... We need to be courageous to be more responsive towards the learner. I don't see what's so magic about a three year or a four-year degree.

Tara describes an emerging alternative pathway to facilitate adults, which is called micro-credentialing:

A micro-credential is a digital badge they put on their Linkdn site, where you'd have an E-portfolio... as learners in the world today, learning skills and development, and attributes, that we now want to check in. And I can now assemble my digital badges, and then cash those in, to get some credit for that learning because I want to progress to do something...

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Samir (U/Senior Management) also discussed micro-credentialing as a flexible system which is learner-centered:

The micro-credentialing that HE is beginning to do, where you could just dip in and do a module of a course, I think is very interesting. I would see tertiary education is the better way to look at it.

Valimaa and Hoffman (2008:269) reflect on the phenomenon of the learning society and observe that 'lifelong learning becomes indispensable because there is a need to change workplaces and often professions and update knowledge during one's career'. The concepts of the 'knowledge society' and the 'learning society' both stress the role of knowledge production and lifelong learning of the labour force, because improving the educational level of the workforce positively impacts on GDP (Valimaa and Hoffman, 2008:279). In this sense, lifelong learning is framed firmly within the Economic Paradigm. However, Fleming (2006:110) argues that '[e]ducation is seen by the state as predominantly a matter of supporting the economy. But an education policy based solely on the needs of the market is deeply flawed'. This highlights Fleming's disagreement with an exclusive economic paradigm for higher education. Wolf (2018) recommends a higher education system available to people over the life-course, instead of creating pinch points straight after school. Based on the premise that '[e]ducation is about expanding souls' and that '[a]ll our citizens have a right of access' (Wolf, 2018), her ideal is a 'lifetime entitlement' to higher education and to trust people to choose how to spend their allocated funding. In this way, higher education would enable people access routes to self-development or to skills in accordance with their own needs that are not restricted to the imperatives of working life, but embrace the aspects of personal development, citizen formation and human flourishing, which in turn enriches society and contributes to the public good.

The topic of non-traditional routes to higher education indicates support among both cohorts for more flexibility in the structures for delivering degrees and the timing of entry to higher education. These ideas were mooted in the 1990s but now seem to be gaining traction in Ireland. Wickham (1998:88) describes the prevailing attitude to higher education then: 'education is something that happens to young people before they enter the labour market'. He advocates a situation where education would be lifelong, connected with other areas of life. The views of respondents in this study express broad agreement with this concept. In the late 1990s, Williamson and Coffield (1997:124) argued that '[t]he new responsibility of HEIs is to facilitate the lifelong learning of *all* citizens in the service of democracy... through this they will contribute to the development of the social, cultural, intellectual and economic life of modern society'. This indicates that by changing structures and increasing access for non-traditional students, higher education will enable still more people to flourish, further extending the outcomes of higher education which contribute to the public good.

From participants' responses, lifelong learning is perceived as an important opportunity that should be more widely facilitated in higher education. Lifelong learning is described as giving access to adults (aka 'Non-Traditional Students') to further their education, both to enable people 'to grow and to learn' (Malin, S/Employer), to look at 'what the thing is that they feel passionate about' (Imelda, S/Media), and to upskill or retrain for work. Lifelong learning is linked with flexible delivery of higher education over the life-course. There is broad consensus on this among the 'Stakeholder' cohort – whether drawn from the media, employers groups, representative bodies, or policy-makers, illustrating a respect for the benefits of higher education, and wishing to expand these benefits across society. There were many points of similar perspectives between the two cohorts, for example Chantal (U/Representative Body)'s point arguing for flexibility in the timing of entry to higher education also emerged in the University Cohort, where, among others, Samir (Senior Management) argues that going to higher education 'should be the right thing for

you to do at a point in time in your life, and that could be straight out of school' or it could be later in life. Dennis (Senior Management) also questioned 'whether the very linear progression into a university course or an IoT course is the right fit for everybody'.

6.2 Is social mobility an outcome of mass participation in higher education?

Social mobility, understood as the movement of individuals between different socio-economic positions (Giddens, 2009:463), is a contested outcome in both cohorts. Social mobility is seen as a key tool in the drive to eliminate socio-economic inequality. According to the OECD (2018:23) 'in addition to dampening well-being, a 'broken social elevator' can have serious societal and political consequences'. The OECD (2018) argues that a 'broken social elevator' reduces people's feeling that their voice counts, particularly among middle- and lower-income people'. Social mobility is linked to higher education, and is often assumed to be an outcome – a prime example of 'school-to-society' influence. However, this assumed link has been called into question. The literature identified a reduced emphasis on values of equity and social mobility in Denmark. The 2017 Danish study by Johansen, Knudsen, Kristoffersen, Steffen and Sund reports that in the forty years from 1978, the focus of values in higher education shifted from a stated value that 'education is a way of achieving a more equal society' to the present case where the 'notion of equality dwindled away to nothing' (Johansen et al, 2017:273). Elsewhere discourses espouse social mobility but mobility remains low, for example, in France Carpentier and Courtois (2020:8) state that 'despite the rhetoric and principles, France is characterised by low social mobility with a strong impact of parental education on children's HE trajectory (OECD 2014, 93)'. Similarly, in the UK, according to research by the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2013:12), despite policy discourse around higher education, '[t]here is evidence that increasing overall levels of education do not necessarily lead to increasing levels of overall social mobility'.

To explore the dimension of mass participation in terms of social mobility in Ireland, respondents were asked 'How does mass participation in higher education relate to social mobility?' Stakeholders are more likely to consider social mobility an outcome of mass higher education, however, the views of respondents in the University Cohort are almost evenly divided.

6.2.1 View 1: Doubt that social mobility is an outcome of mass higher education

Nestor (S/Policy-maker) indicates that the traditional meaning of social mobility in Ireland was to change class through education:

Up until recently, social mobility was shorthand for taking someone from a poor background and turning them into a middle-class worker.

The key phrase here is 'up until recently'. Nestor (S/Policy) believes social mobility is under threat in Ireland, although not to the same extent as in the UK or the US. In Nestor's view protecting social mobility is essential, because our social cohesion depends on it:

We already have, in my view, intergenerational lack of social mobility... You don't look very far away culturally or distance wise, to the UK or the United States, for societies where that lack of social mobility is utterly entrenched.

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This view is supported by the 2018 OECD report, *A Broken Social Elevator?*, which reports that:

...younger generations now face less favourable occupational upward mobility prospects than their parents. While two-thirds of people with low-earnings parents succeed to move to a higher status, for almost half among them, upward earnings mobility is limited to the neighbouring earnings group. As a result, in an 'average OECD country' it would take around four to five generations for children from the bottom earnings decile to attain the level of mean earnings (OECD, 2018:14).

Nestor (S/Policy) believes social cohesion is at stake, because it depends on social mobility. They acknowledge the importance of education in promoting both of these public goods, pointing to the achievements since expanding access to education in the 1950s:

One of the things that keeps us going, and protects social cohesion ultimately, is to have a good mix of social mobility. There's a lot of good stuff that we've done since Lemass that we run the risk of losing if we don't have that.

In Nestor's view, social mobility in Ireland is under threat and its survival depends on the continuance of accessible education.

Jan considers (U/STEM Professor) the current system *reproduces* class rather than helping social mobility:

It's a difficult cycle to break. The parents who have gone to university...are sending their children to university, and have a network... when the child is going looking for a job they can use their network as well... So, there's that whole networking piece that is so important in careers as well. And somebody from a DEIS background... more than likely wouldn't have access to a network.

Brendan (U/AHSS Professor) endorses Jan's view that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not have access to benefits necessary for career progression:

...professions like becoming a GP or something where you needed family money. In terms of the socio-economic picture, people who were reared in Ballymun would be less likely to have the kind of disposable capital that could set up a GP practice or a law firm.

This infers that mass participation in higher education can help to reproduce class rather than disrupt it. Iris (U/AHSS Lecturer) believes that widening access to higher education is vital, but, in itself, is no guarantee of equitable outcomes because establishing a career relies on more than university qualifications:

While widening participation is absolutely important, the way in which it's actually happening ... is problematic...there's so much more involved in ...getting into careers than having just that baseline qualification.... A lot of policy still seems to assume that higher education is a route to social mobility. We know that it absolutely isn't.

This view infers that promoting higher education as a means to social mobility may be over-simplifying the reality.

Furthermore, doubt about social mobility as an outcome is apparently increasing. According to Atiyah (U/AHSS Professor) parents and students who view university purely through the lens of economic benefit are becoming skeptical about its merits because, with mass participation, the once lauded 'graduate premium' is no longer assured. They state that people are:

...becoming more dubious about university. It's not exactly clear how university degrees help you in the labour market. You know, it helps you to be doctor or whatever, that's fine. But if people come out with a 2.2 in business, or a 2.2 in business and law, or Irish and maths, what happens to those people in the job market?

Atiyah's observations are somewhat at odds with Indecon (2019), which reported on the graduate premium. However, detailed in their findings is the fact that the graduate premium is concentrated to certain areas, in terms of the academic disciplines of graduates. Indecon (2019:18) states that '[r]esearch undertaken for the OECD suggests that despite an increase in the numbers of third-level graduates, the premium for higher education persists, particularly within certain subject areas'. The report made a case for higher education as an economic good with positive outcomes of taxes and consumption that benefit the exchequer. It also measured the impact of higher education on personal outcomes, and found over half of respondents believed higher education helped them access more secure employment, which would promote social mobility. Indecon's figures, based on quantitative data, give a good indication of economic outcomes. However, the present study aims to interrogate the context behind the quantitative findings of Indecon, and contribute to our overall understanding of the non-economic outcomes of mass participation in higher education.

On the other hand, in spite of apparent skepticism around social mobility being an outcome, respondents believe students would still aspire to higher education even without the prospect of increased income. For example, Imelda (S/Media) believes university's benefits extend beyond the economic outcomes, and that even if the 'graduate premium' is not guaranteed, people will still want higher education:

I don't think the guarantees are there [*to earn more*], but yes I think they would go, actually. I think they would go if there was a societal acceptance that this is a place to bed down for a couple of years.

In this view, higher education is uncoupled from the society-to-school mission of employability and economic good, and signals a lingering attachment to an earlier paradigm of university's mission, particularly that of Newman, with its focus on character development.

Ellen (U/Support) also believes students would continue to enter higher education if there was no expectation of a graduate premium:

So, would they come? Yes, I think they would. I think you might find a lower level participation amongst people who are coming from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds because they see it as an investment in...higher disposable salary, different lifestyle... they need to see that career progression... it would be more stratified, it would be more people who can afford to come.

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What this might mean in general is that, should the graduate premium cease to be perceived as an outcome, only social groups already in comfortable socio-economic situations would continue to avail of higher education. Unless, that is, other substantial outcomes become valued on a par with economic outcomes.

While a significant proportion of respondents maintain that social mobility is not a guaranteed outcome of higher education, Gabrielle (S/Student) argues that social mobility should not be the purpose of higher education:

My understanding of what social mobility is, it's people trying to get a better life. And I kind of feel... that education shouldn't be about getting a better life... that to me only exposes that there's inequality. It's not a solution for it.

In this view, promoting higher education as a panacea for social inequality is to mistake the purpose of higher education, while simultaneously neglecting the underlying reasons for social inequality. Gabrielle's view supports that of Chambers (2005), who cautions about the dangers of attributing any social outcomes to higher education: 'The more social outcomes are attributed solely to higher education, the more the public expects higher education alone, to deliver on those outcomes' (2005:11).

In Chambers' view, outcomes are never attributable to one reason alone, and the expectation that higher education should lead to social mobility is a perfect example; obviously, other factors need to be factored in also. As Clancy (2020:22) states, '[e]ducation does not operate in a vacuum; wider socio-economic forces set the parameters of its operation and mediate its impact'.

6.2.2 View 2: Mass higher education promotes social mobility

Interestingly, views varied *within* disciplines on this topic. Whereas STEM Professor Jan states social mobility is less an outcome of higher education than of networks that are generally unavailable to 'somebody from a DEIS background,' STEM academic Piet believes that barriers in accessing higher education are decreasing, so that eventually everyone will have access, saying 'I think we're moving into an era where everyone has an opportunity to do third level education'. Piet connects mass higher education with increased opportunities for social mobility saying: 'Higher education gives you more opportunity for wealth, more in a higher class'. For Piet, networks are not a consideration. This resonates with a 2015 study by Jerrim and Macmillan that studied the links between an individual's education level and their income, in relation to their parents' education level, and found that the link between social mobility (based on income) and higher education differs between countries (2015:526). Using cross-country data from the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), Jerrim and Macmillan (2005:507) found that based on income, social mobility differs between countries so that in a range of countries including Germany, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries, a child's income was linked to their education, whereas for France, Japan and the UK, their parents' education was of major importance.

These findings support the views expressed by Stakeholder Van (Policy), who states the graduate premium is significant in Ireland, as earnings are not directly related to parental education. Van refers to research based on graduates' earnings, indicating higher education promotes social mobility *for the less well-off*.

Talking about earnings... the only proxy that we have ...when you track students ...regardless of social background, seven years post-graduation, their earning outcomes were largely similar, which would suggest to me that if you can get into and get through higher education, someone who came from a well-heeled South Dublin background, and someone who came from a tough area of Athlone or Longford or wherever, once they got into and through HE, seven years post-graduation, their earnings outcomes were similar...

Using income as a proxy for social mobility is somewhat problematic, since for example a plumber might earn many times more than a call-centre operative, though the latter is deemed white collar and the former blue collar. Notwithstanding the ambiguous means of measuring social mobility, Van argues that, in Ireland, all graduates have similar earnings over time, regardless of college or course taken.

Public perceptions on this issue concur with Van's. According to the Indecon (2019:48) study, 75% of respondents said Irish universities had either a very positive or positive impact on facilitating social mobility. Similarly, the 2019 study by Scanlon, Jenkinson, Leahy, Powell and Byrne, whose interviews with parents of DEIS school students in Dublin, Cork and Co. Kerry highlighted a belief 'that education had become *more* important over time' and an awareness that 'the next generation are predicted to be less well off than their parents, making education even more a priority, not simply for upward mobility but even to maintain the same standards of living' (Scanlon et al, 2019:18). Non-Graduate Parents in the present study believe higher education promotes social mobility, for example, when asked how mass participation in higher education relates to social mobility, Erin (S/Non-Grad Parent) highlights the supports in place to assist those from disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of access:

It is still possible to improve your lot in life but it's not easy, the costs are a huge factor. But supports are in place for... students from disadvantaged areas to actually progress into HE and to get that fuller, broader education of the whole person.

Erin not only highlights the supports that assist people access higher education, but also identifies another outcome of higher education that promotes social mobility, involving the 'broader education of the whole person'. Gabrielle (U/S/Student) explains this 'broader education' in terms of social standing and cultural capital:

...you can achieve quite a lot to maintain your status... and take yourself to the next level... gaining cultural capital... that is relevant to your peers, and maybe to the class that you *want* to enter.

Clearly, social mobility relies on more than income or a higher education qualification, but also on the intangible outcomes of higher education, such as cultural capital.

As income is not a reliable proxy for social mobility, earnings are not the ultimate adjudicator on this issue. It is essential to consider other significant outcomes of higher education. Indecon (2019) points out that universities prepare a cohort of people who become significant in the arts, both artists and arts promoters. These are areas not usually associated with high earnings, therefore this aspect of higher education's contribution does not lend itself to the same measurement. Nevertheless, the arts doubtlessly contribute to the social and intellectual life of the country. It follows then, that earnings *per se* may be an inaccurate measure of the contribution of higher education in terms of life satisfaction and social mobility, as earnings do not take

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account of graduates who may be employed in areas that may be satisfying and personally rewarding, but not financially so. This approach to employability resonates with the employer's view, expressed by Malin, that today's young people are motivated by *meaningful* work rather than promotion:

They want to start adding value straight from the start. And it's an interesting thing... Millennials and Gen Zs working in companies for purpose.

This indicates a shift towards self-fulfillment and a desire among graduates to reach their potential, rather than ambition to maximise earnings. In their (2020) qualitative study of four French universities, involving academic staff, senior management and operational staff, Carpentier and Courtois identified an alternative approach to employability which was less concerned with earnings, than meaningful work. They found that, while employability is acknowledged as an important feature of higher education's mission, 'What matters... is not individual salaries but rather, the capacity to empower students to find meaningful work – including in the creative industries if that is what the student chooses.' (Carpentier and Courtois, 2020:23). What this might mean, in general, is that other measures of social mobility could be considered more meaningful than blunt measures of income. It is fair to posit that not everyone is motivated by material gain, and as the data has indicated, many people value meaningful work rather than financial gain.

6.2.3 View 3: Mass higher education and geographic mobility

A further aspect of mobility is that of facilitating international movement and fostering an international perspective. This variation on mobility as an outcome of higher education emerged in the University Cohort, though not among the Stakeholder Cohort. For example, Tara's (U/Senior Management) vision of higher education is concerned with citizenship and connections with society, both local and global:

The university is critical in what I call global citizenship... connections with research, connections with employability, connections with sustainability, inter and transdisciplinarity, global reach.

Samir (U/Senior Management) describes the objective of higher education as increasing one's learning about the world:

HE should in and of itself be internationally aware, and the curriculum and everything we teach here should have that flavour. Otherwise we're doing people a disservice. If they get educated in Ireland and then suddenly they're transported to South America or anywhere, and can't function, you've done them a disservice.

Piet (U/STEM Professor) describes an international worldview arising from university education, and this promotes mobility and interaction with other cultures, making life richer:

One thing about being in the university, or having a degree, is that it gives you a passport to go other places. Without that passport it definitely will affect your mobility... if you're not as mobile your life just isn't as rich because you're not interacting with other cultures as much.

Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) also identifies geographical mobility as a benefit of higher education:

Those with third level are definitely better off – not necessarily financially better off... They are better off in the social sense. And that's not just about climbing up the classes, it's also

about freedom to move, physically, go to New York and work there for example, because you have a qualification that equates you with a certain level of ability, so that allows you to travel. So, it puts you in a different place to someone who doesn't have that.

This aspect of higher education is interesting in that, in Ireland emigration is a feature of many demographic categories, skilled and unskilled. Yet, whether undertaken for career advancement or for lack of employment opportunities, those with higher education qualifications are better placed to succeed in migration.

Clancy (2015:204-5) illustrates how in the Irish context, for Level 9/10 graduates 'the proportion securing employment in Ireland reached its lowest level (53%) in 2009, down from 65% in 2007'. That coincides with The Great Recession², which began in 2009. Interestingly, in 2007, at a time of full employment in Ireland, 4% of Level 8 graduates and 9% of Level 9/10 graduates were in employment overseas, rising to 12% and 15% respectively in 2013. By 2012, 10% of graduates secured employment overseas and 'Level 8 graduates from 2013 were less likely to secure employment at home and more likely to secure employment abroad...' (Clancy, 2015:204). This demonstrates a corresponding relationship between movement and the vicissitudes of the national economy.

The views of the University Cohort highlight the most recent paradigm of higher education, that of Internationalisation. This shift has its roots in the establishment of the Erasmus Programme in 1987 and the Bologna Process in 1999, which facilitated growing mobility among students and faculty. The Hunt Report (2011) established internationalisation as a fourth mission of higher education, in addition to teaching, research and engagement (Clancy, 2015:3). The intention of this paradigm was to develop global citizens and attract international talent to Irish HEIs (Clarke, Yang and Harmon, 2018). The late 20th century saw higher education harnessed as an aid for economic growth, and the most recent paradigm, internationalisation, is additional to all earlier forms. The nature of university evolves over time, and rather than replacing earlier paradigms, each mission is overlaid upon the preceding missions.

Interestingly, the theme of geographic mobility did not emerge among the Stakeholder cohort, even though the great majority of respondents are graduates. It seems this latest paradigm has not yet gained traction in the public mind. Or, it could mean that because the Stakeholder Cohort is comprised of people who found meaningful work in Ireland, these individuals did not need to avail of the 'graduate passport'.

In summary, responses indicate a lack of consensus on higher education's influence on social mobility, both within disciplines and between cohorts. Both cohorts raise similar points in terms of increasing access, for example Piet (U/STEM Academic) and Erin (S/Non-grad Parent). Despite several quantitative studies reporting that higher education leads to a graduate premium (Indecon, 2019; OECD, 2013; OECD, 2018), this is nonetheless contested by many respondents, with opinion split almost equally in the University Cohort. Some respondents point to reasons of class reproduction, or lack of networks among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Those who consider social mobility to be an outcome, view it in terms of intangible benefits that persist even if income levels are not high, such as self-development, or the 'graduate passport'. Similarly, among the Stakeholder Cohort, a significant minority of respondents do not believe higher education leads to social mobility in terms of income, but they highlight the benefits of other non-instrumental outcomes, such as cultural capital or careers in the arts and access to work that is personally rewarding.

2 The term 'Great Recession' is used in the ESRI 2012 report entitled *The Irish Labour Market and the Great Recession* by Barrett and McGuinness, and refers to the economic recession in Ireland from 2008-2014.

6 CAREER PREPARATION AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

This schism on social mobility is reflected in the literature. The OECD (2018) reports that higher income is linked to particular subject areas. Of course, quantitative measures of income may overlook other factors. One such factor is that not all graduates are motivated by financial rewards, and many careers, for example social work and nursing, may not lead to high incomes but are pursued for reasons of personal satisfaction in 'making a difference'. Another factor is that non-economic outcomes of higher education include developing talent in sports or the arts, gaining geographic freedom, cultural capital, increasing social standing, or reaching one's potential. Other studies have raised concerns about job-market saturation, for example Marginson (2018) and argues that '[a]t a given time there are only so many ...status-generating professional positions... The zero-sum character of positional competition kicks in'. This argument posits that opportunities are finite, and the 'graduate premium' may reduce even for high-status professions. In light of this, can arguments still be made for benefits of mass higher education to the individual and to society, even if economic benefits are not guaranteed? This question must be weighed against the intangible outcomes of higher education to society and to individuals, which prevail whether or not the graduate premium persists. Other outcomes, with their roots in earlier paradigms of higher education, have been somewhat obscured by the economic mission of higher education – but that does not mean they have been obliterated.

6.3 Conclusion: Career progression and equality of opportunity

Both cohorts regarded the lack of a degree as a serious disadvantage in the labour market. Many respondents considered that, given this fact, then all who have the interest and the ability should also have the opportunity, not only in terms of access, but also adequate supports. Respondents believed universities have successfully expanded access, but that social supports have not sufficiently improved.

Because the outcomes of higher education are perceived to be so important for individuals and society, respondents advocated increased flexibility in how it is delivered, the better to accommodate adults later in the life-course to avail of higher education. Suggested approaches for more flexibility included micro-credentialing, degree programmes with exit points to cater for non-traditional students with work and family commitments, and life-long learning for personal development and career progression.

Social mobility was a contested outcome, but the responses clearly highlighted that there are other valuable non-economic outcomes that are often overlooked, such as geographic mobility, cultural capital and access to meaningful work.

An interesting contrast emerged between the finding that indicated non-progression to higher education leads to serious disadvantages in the labour market, and respondents' views on social mobility. Respondents tended to think of social mobility in terms of a 'graduate premium' and many respondents refuted the belief that this is guaranteed. There was a tension between the two positions, of higher education as an essential portal to valued careers, against scepticism that high-paying careers are a guaranteed outcome. What this might indicate is the sought-after outcome is less about a graduate premium, but more related to valued work.

7 MASS PARTICIPATION, CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

In light of the discussion on university's values informing graduates' ways of thinking and acting, and influencing society, questions arise as to how these values inform political engagement. This section examines how the non-economic outcomes of higher education influence society in the political context.

7.1 Mass participation and populism

Respondents were asked their views on the following quote from Professor Michael Murphy, President of the European Universities Association, in a video tweeted on 11 April 2019, @euatweets:

One matter that fascinates me is that we're watching the polarisation of society across Europe at the moment, and we've seen extreme parties coming to power, at a time when Europe has never been more educated. So, we have some questions to ask in the university sector as to whether we have been as effective as we should have been in shaping those citizens for Europe, and whether we are doing enough as universities to retain connectivity with our graduates and alumni to make sure that they continue to live the values by which universities live. That's a particularly interesting challenge at this particular point in time.

In today's political arena, social media has become an integral means of communication; in this case, Twitter is employed to voice publicly a concern about populism. The Tweet can be interpreted as meaning that higher education retains a role in shaping citizens, which draws on the Newman Paradigm. It signals a commitment on the part of universities to promote core values to the student body. Values stated by universities vary slightly but generally include freedom of expression, equality, diversity and social responsibility. The societal outcome of proliferating such values is an interesting enquiry, especially given the large number of graduates in society (the CSO's *Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2019* states 35% of those in the 25-64 age-range have attained a Level 8 Degree or higher – although it does not distinguish between degrees from different types of HEIs). Higher education's relationship with graduates' values and political behaviour and in particular, rising populism, are explored below, informed by respondents' views on this Tweet.

7.1.1 View 1: Polarisation and populist politics – Is there a role for mass higher education?

AHSS respondents identify populism as being rooted in social inequality. They separate the two aspects of social inequality and higher education, in that higher education operates in a context of inequality and cannot single-handedly restrain it. For example, Iris (U/AHSS Lecturer) doesn't consider it the remit of higher education to fix society. They reason that social inequalities are rooted in societal structures that are beyond the scope of education:

Education I don't think can fix society. Society needs to be fixed. Inequality on a structural level needs to be addressed and then so many things would work better, I think that needs to be the focus.

7 MASS PARTICIPATION, CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Francis (U/Support) also makes the point that there are expectations of higher education in areas that are beyond its scope:

Higher education is an incubator for certain things... there are times when we give higher education a bad name, and we say higher education should be dealing with that better or higher education isn't doing that well enough, when actually it isn't anything to do with higher education at all.

These and other responses indicate that social polarisation is not perceived to be overtly linked to higher education. In the earlier theme on equality of opportunity, respondents were in agreement that everyone should have access and support, and believed that higher education institutions endeavour to provide these, subject to funding restraints. This implies that in terms of promoting equality of opportunity, higher education is faithful to its values and strives to confront social inequality and polarisation of society.

7.1.2 View 2: The university as forum for discussion and debate on issues such as populism

Respondents consider the role of university values in informing graduates' political behaviour, and give their views on the value of freedom of speech in countering populism. Among University/Senior Management, Samir sees a role for higher education in addressing populism by enabling discussion and critical analysis:

I'm not sure if higher ed can confront it, but it can give a safe space to discuss it... to look at those ideas, turn them around, critically analyse them, in a respectful manner.

Róisín (Senior Management) points out that higher education can contribute by enabling voters to identify the fallacies of some political movements:

I agree with the sentiment, I'm not sure how higher education does address it, given the populist agenda is not based around evidence or fact... we can address it in an intellectual sense, and to point out ...the fallacies within it.

Róisín states that intervention is complicated because higher education deals in reason, whereas populism emerges from emotions. Similarly, University/STEM academic Olivia's view is that university provides a forum for discussion:

Higher education has a strong role to play, because we are supposed to be about the freedom of speech, and about the ability to air these types of things... being able to make reference points, facts, rather than generalisations and statements. Because now I think the sound bites are taking over and if it sounds good it'll be repeated, even if it's factually incorrect. So, there is a role for HE in that regard.

Olivia highlights how higher education trains people to look for evidence and this, combined with university's value of freedom of speech, has much to contribute in enabling discussions around populism.

This is a somewhat moot point in contemporary Ireland however. As discussed under the theme on the Purpose of University, higher education is valued for its role in providing a forum for discussion, and for contributing to public debate. AHSS Lecturer Hugh points out that an important purpose of university is 'having a forum for those kinds of discussions'. Freedom of Speech is a value long associated with higher

education, however, this value is apparently losing traction. For example, a newspaper report in October 2020 disclosed that Richard Dawkins had been invited to speak at Trinity College but ‘the College Historical Society at Trinity College Dublin – aka the Hist – announced that it was cancelling his invitation to address it next year’ (Quinn, 2020). The reason for cancelling was given by the Historical Society’s spokesperson, Bríd O’Donnell, that she had been ‘unaware of Richard Dawkins’s opinions on Islam and sexual assault’ and that the members of the Trinity society ‘value our members’ comfort above all else’ (Quinn, 2020). This exemplifies a recent trend – not only in Ireland – where opinions that are felt to be politically uncomfortable at a given time are silenced, rather than aired and debated. More dialogue may be required to uphold the longstanding value of freedom of speech, both within and without higher education.

7.1.3 Mass higher education linked to low levels of populism in Ireland

Stakeholder Pablo (Representative Body) observes that the rise of populism in Europe is of concern to academia and civil society, but considers it less of a problem in Ireland:

The increase of populism and right-wing ideology is really terrifying... particularly trade union members, living in Europe... academia also, on the mainland. So, you’d wonder what’s driving it because we don’t have that level here.

Lorenzo (S/Media) believes the reason that political polarisation has not featured widely in Ireland is due to the high rates of higher education:

Maybe one of the reasons which we’re not being riven by such divisions is perhaps the fact that ... we have so many people who are well educated and understand politics, and understand society... polarisation is a danger when people feel they ...have been marginalised in many ways. In Ireland so many people have access to higher education that I do think it pushes back against that sense of marginalisation.

Lorenzo states that higher education benefits society by raising awareness around political processes:

I see the potential benefits it gives you in terms of... people understanding all the language around politics.

This view concurs with Kitty (U/STEM Lecturer) who sees political extremism as arising from lack of education, as education affects how people interpret the world:

If you don’t have a good education, your ability just to interpret the world around you is really damaged. Look at Brexit – if you don’t have an education, you don’t understand the background to the British Empire and the Second World War and all those kind of things, you can’t navigate your way through the world really.

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In many cases respondents, such as Kitty, Lorenzo (S/Media) and Pablo (S/Representative Body), argue that higher education has achieved much in countering the trend of populism in Ireland. This infers that engagement and enhanced political stability are outcome of mass participation in higher education in Ireland, which contribute to the public good.

A minority of respondents were less confident that populism has been controlled in Ireland. Jan (U/STEM Professor) points out that Ireland is not immune to populism:

We saw it in Oughterard³ about immigrants coming into a small town – so it is possible to whip up fears in a so-called educated community as well... where democratic values and values of human decency, aren't inculcated already.

Jan makes the point that political behaviour is linked to values, which resonates with Professor Murphy's message on Twitter when he questions whether graduates 'continue to live the values by which universities live'.

Other respondents question why political formation should be the preserve of higher education. For example, Sebastien (S/Non-Grad Parent) feels leaving the development of political awareness till higher education is unwise, because secondary-school students can vote, and may not progress to higher education:

Maybe schools should involve students in debates like that, and make younger people aware of the issues, after all, they can vote at 18, and a lot of them are still in school at that point. So, waiting till they're at university – if they go to university – that's a bit late, isn't it?

This view highlights a sense that political education is necessary earlier in the education cycle. Seen from this perspective, perhaps the extreme politics currently emerging in Europe to which Murphy (2019) refers, may be less a symptom of a failure to promote the values of diversity and inclusion, but an outcome of inadequate education among some populations. It becomes increasingly evident that the non-instrumental outcomes of mass participation in higher education contribute to the public good in ways that are as significant as the economic outcomes, such as enhanced political stability.

In summary, the views of both cohorts on the Tweet from Murphy on extreme politics are closely aligned. In both cohorts, views vary widely: some respondents believe populism is rooted in structural inequalities that are beyond the scope of higher education to address. Many respondents express the view that higher education has a role in confronting extreme politics, stating reasons of the university value of freedom of speech, which enables views to be aired, and the importance of education in promoting an understanding of society. Others believe that populism has not taken hold in Ireland to the extent it has elsewhere, directly due to the high numbers of graduates in Irish society. This view is based on a perception that mass higher education enables access that pushes back against marginalisation, allied to the fact that a high proportion of the population has been educated to understand politics, and understand society. In this way, higher education has a societal impact by enabling more discerning political participation.

3 'Far-right campaigners are campaigning against a rumoured 250-person direct provision centre' in Oughterard (O'Connell, 2019).

7.2 Mass participation and political engagement

This section explores the role of higher education in contributing to the political arena in Ireland, comparing the views of the University and Stakeholder cohorts on this issue. There are significant areas of overlap between cohorts, such as that mass higher education fosters political awareness, and promotes good citizenship. University Cohort respondents identify political awareness as an intangible outcome of mass higher education. However, among the Stakeholders Cohort some divergence of opinion emerged as to the contribution to political engagement of mass higher education, 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 that dominates higher education today suppresses any potential challenge to social structures from students.

7.2.1 View 1: Higher education enhances political engagement and good citizenship

Among University/Senior Management, the view on higher education and good citizenship ranges from a position that regardless of educational attainment, Irish people engage with politics, to the view that higher education develops political awareness, and enhances cognitive skills, critical thinking and political awareness.

University respondents broadly believe that higher education enhances political participation, but there is also acknowledgement that in the Irish context, non-graduates are not alienated from the political process. For example, Dennis (U/Senior Management) states that Irish people tend to be politically informed. They give as an example the reaction of colleagues from the US to discussions in the taxi:

American academics... were astounded that the taxi-drivers... that may never have gone to college, actually had very informed opinions about Brexit or things like that, and I think it's part of the Irish character... people are interested in ideas, and interested in the wider world.

Arguably, being interested and informed may be a feature of the population, however, respondents argue that higher education raises standards in many ways. For example, Vince (U/Senior Management) takes it as self-evident that the university experience will develop political awareness:

Isn't that part of the point of university life? To become politically aware, and to understand the power they have by using their voice, and they use their voice.

Another benefit of higher education identified is the standard of discourse. For example, Atiyah's (U/AHSS Professor) view is that higher education is a positive force in the democratic process, because it raises the quality of discourse and discernment:

In Ireland if the unions and the employers are arguing about something, they need to have some evidence. It's not ok to just make stuff up... in the last five or ten years you can see what happens when people *can* just make stuff up. So, I would say that higher education... is feeding in... to the democratic process, in that overall level of discussion goes up.

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Ciara (U/AHSS Professor) observes that students engaged in political movements, such as Repeal the 8th and Marriage Equality, and that engagement extends across all disciplines:

I could see that in the two referenda, how involved students became. So, I do think it's good for democracy to have more higher education because it does give students skills of being able to explain things to each other. To look for evidence, to listen to each other... Not just in the arts and humanities and social sciences but also in the sciences in general.

Ciara states that not only have students engaged with political issues but the skills acquired in university have raised the standards of discourse. These skills of communication and critical thinking enabled students engage in political affairs in a meaningful way, which subsequently had a significant impact on Ireland's social and political landscape. Demonstrations arranged by student unions exhibited a high level of political engagement amongst the student body in the run up to the referenda.

Hugh (U/AHSS Lecturer) believes on-campus extra-curricular activities enable students to get involved in causes, and that participation is encouraged by the university:

...these societies and opportunities to get involved in causes that you might feel passionately about... and they facilitate freedom. And, certainly, you'd get emails saying 'there's a march in town so please don't penalise your students for not being in class today'. So, it is encouraged in that way.

Hugh points out how graduates have frequently become political leaders, and alumni who became leaders are in evidence on campus:

You walk along corridors and you see the auditors of societies going way back, and they've become political leaders in one sphere or another... you could say it's part of what the university *is*.

University/STEM academics describe how higher education develops students' social conscience, and that fuels political engagement. For example, Piet (U/STEM Professor) points out how higher education raises understanding of political issues, such as sustainability, and the student voice is significant:

I'd say the political engagement might be less in the university ... I would say on energy, carbon, planet, there is a bigger social conscience in the university, because I think people, maybe science-minded people, can understand it a bit more and they realise the full gravity of it. And so, I would say that the Green side of things has a bigger voice in the university. I'd say that may be tipping the balance on the political side.

Piet adds that Green issues have displaced left-wing politics in academia:

And that left-wing side, I don't see that much anymore. You might have seen it in unions and things like that but I would say there has been a big shift from left wing politics to you know environmental considerations on the political side.

Kitty (U/STEM Lecturer) however thinks the level of political engagement on campus has recently risen. Kitty states:

I've noticed a bit of a rise in it recently. For a long time now there was virtually no political engagement. But I think Ireland has suddenly started to change very quickly. It has become part of the university scene a bit more now.

Respondents in University/Support view higher education as affording students the opportunity to explore politics. For example, Francis points out that university provides the opportunity to get acquainted with differing political views, across the spectrum:

I think for me, left wing, right wing, college should be the place where you get to think about that and really explore what it is and what it isn't, in a very academic way... whether it's a socialist view or a right-wing view.

Francis' view supports the argument of Harris (2012) that higher education plays an important role in bringing people with different perspectives together and facilitating an encounter with difference. Harris argues that a campus can constitute a 'micro public' in which students can forge new solidarities, and come to terms with diversity. Francis sees the students' unions as a practice ground for future political careers:

USI is another great example of political movement so people get into USI you find that a lot of the time they are on their way of getting into the political movement when they try and get up to the top of that, it's very politicised, in most cases.

Ellen (U/Support) likewise states universities have produced most contemporary Irish politicians:

If you look at our political representatives... the vast majority of them are college grads. So they have that ability to think, articulate, form policy and strategies, and I suppose lead. So I think there is definitely an overall political gain.

Ellen believes graduates bring highly developed skillsets into public service.

There is broad consensus among the University Cohort that political engagement is enhanced in university. This finding supports the view of Abrahams and Brooks (2018) who explored the link between higher education and political engagement in both Ireland and England. They reported that 'a HE degree remains a good predictor of propensity to engage in political activity' (Abrahams and Brooks, 2018:111).

Stakeholders' responses similarly express the view that participation in higher education can encourage students to become more politically aware, and engaged. For example, Chantal (S/Representative Body) who is evidently active in the political arena, explains how students are urged to register to vote in college:

...have registered 96,000 students to vote over the past number of years because...the majority of undergrads who are coming in from LC wouldn't have... registered to vote.

Chantal – similar to Ciara in the University/AHSS sub-group – points to the social justice campaigns as evidence of the success of this mobilisation at college:

The social justice campaigns around Repeal and around Marriage Equality... people were most definitely politically engaged in terms of those two social justice campaigns... so they are politically engaged now, but coming into college maybe not so much.

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Chantal's comments resonate with Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) who argue that higher education plays an important role in developing political participation through bringing enough people of similar views together, which facilitates the formation of political networks. Chantal believes that political engagement is enhanced for graduates, and in turn, enable graduates to influence their communities:

You can engage more in society because you understand how it works more, because universities in themselves are their own little society but if you can figure out the workings of that, you can then put it forward... into country-wide society...

Chantal's view supports Abrahams and Brooks' (2018:113) finding that 'students... saw themselves as an educated group and as such a resource for society and their communities'.

Gabrielle (S/Student) reports campus is a site of political engagement:

University is a great place to start counter-cultural movements, and that's fantastic... There's loads of interesting ideas that are born in this time of life where you're cut off from all the old ideas that existed in the local community.

These responses support Marginson's (2011:419) argument that higher education has been a medium for transformation in many ways over recent decades, launching such societal phenomena as the civil rights movement, the student power and grass-roots democracy of the 1960s-70s, LGBT rights, feminism, the anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s, pro-ecology and environmental protection activism, and the anti-globalisation protest of the 1990s-2000s. In each case, the movements initiated in and by higher education subsequently proliferated into wider society.

7.2.2 View 2: Doubt that higher education leads to increased political engagement

The majority view among both cohorts is that mass higher education promotes political awareness, and to a large extent enables political engagement. However, a minority of respondents diverged from these views. For example, according to Barry (S/Community Development), higher education's role is to encourage people to think, but that does not mean they will engage with politics:

If it's enabling people to think and have multiple perspectives presented to them... university absolutely does enrich and encourage your political perspectives. Doesn't necessarily mean you'll engage or act on any of that.

Barry's view that political awareness increases, without necessarily leading to engagement, is an interesting distinction. This is borne out by other respondents who report that political engagement is not very pronounced today in universities. For example, Imelda (S/Media) thinks political engagement is too tame, considering the gravity of the issues at stake today. They observe political activity on campus in areas such as:

...protests about fees, and endless environmental protests, so there was political engagement. It felt safe. It felt like a kind of nurtured engagement, it wasn't very raw. It's hard to see how come there isn't more political activity... you'd expect a little bit more.

Imelda's query is somewhat answered by Van (S/Policy) who believes higher education should produce good citizens, who are politically aware rather than politicised:

I think there's an onus on HEIs to educate people to be good citizens, and that would be to engage in the political process, and to be involved in it. Not politicised, but people who would be more politically aware, be able to discern good and bad information flows and make decisions and be engaged.

Liam (U/Support) believes that universities reproduce the status quo:

We are producing people who will want to preserve the status quo. Certain programs will produce people who will belong to IBEC, and certain programs will produce people who will belong to SIPTU. They're both politically engaged. But at very different levels.

The fact that a large number of people emerge from higher education yet subscribe to opposite ends of the political spectrum is testimony to the role of values – whether acquired during their careers in higher education, or elsewhere – in informing political behaviour. It also evidences the influence of higher education in developing politically aware, engaged citizens.

Lorenzo (S/Media), like Imelda, finds it surprising that student politics is not more radical given the context of their lives:

With high rent, the model of capitalism having very evident flaws, I don't see that conversation taking place... on campus. During the economic downturn ...I expected students to be much more radicalised, and I expected a big lurch to the left and people to be on the streets protesting. But it didn't really happen. And what I found was that students were just really focused on graduating and getting a job in the workplace, that pressure to succeed.

Lorenzo attributes the lack of activism to pressure on students to succeed. Lorenzo believes students accept today's imperfect social structures, and that is why they are keener to compete for their place in the world and less interested in trying to change it. Melissa's (S/Student) view endorses Lorenzo's explanation. Melissa feels that the demands of their chosen course at university, which they hope will further their career goals, leave no time for other activities:

So, the deal is pretty much: you teach, I get a degree and get a job. It takes me all my time to do that much!

This view highlights an outcome of the economic mission of higher education, in that framing university as a route to employment somewhat dilutes the emphasis on other important aspects of the university experience, such as perhaps, citizen formation.

To summarise, opinions differ as to the contribution of mass higher education to political engagement. Among the Stakeholder Cohort views range from a majority view that higher education promotes political engagement, to the contrary view that the economic mission that dominates higher education today has stifled any challenge to social structures from students. Instead, it is argued, students have accepted the economic view of society and merely focus on competing for their place in the world rather than trying to change it. As one University respondent points out, higher education can serve to reproduce the status quo.

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Respondents in the University Cohort believe that mass higher education provides an opportunity to explore politics across the spectrum, and in doing so, helps to promote political awareness, and indeed, has developed many of today's serving politicians. University Cohort respondents state that higher education not only prepares good citizens who have developed cognitive and communication skills, but also have heightened awareness of social issues, particularly environmental issues. Their views about political engagement demonstrate a prevailing adherence to and a continuing need for the Newman Paradigm of citizen formation.

There is interesting dissonance between those in the University Cohort on the topic of political engagement. University/Senior Management respondents point to the benefits of higher education in terms of fostering free thinking, engaged citizens and evolution of thought, but point out that non-graduates are equally engaged with the political arena in Ireland. University/AHSS academics unanimously report high levels of engagement among students due to the acquisition of skills such as critical thinking and communication, as evidence they point to students' mobilisation around the two referenda in 2015 and 2018. University/STEM academics perceived engagement among their students as being selective and issue-centered. Respondents from the University/Support sub-group state that students are exposed to politics on campus and are free to explore different ideologies in safety, stating that many politicians launched their careers by becoming active in college. The literature on this topic also reveals conflicting views; Indecon (2019) report just 30% agreed they were encouraged to partake in politics, whereas Abrahams and Brooks (2018) report that students stated 'their education meant that they were informed and critical, which provided fertile ground for the development of liberal beliefs and the potential to be politically active and challenge the establishment'.

7.3 Conclusion: Mass higher education and political engagement

The discussion on higher education and populism highlighted that the economic mission of higher education has not obscured the earlier mission of citizen formation. According to Coate and MacLabhrann (2008:28), '[i]n vigorating the civic function of higher education is an acknowledgement that higher education is about more than preparing students for the labour market – it is also about preparing them to be responsible citizens'. In the context of resisting populism, preparing citizens who are politically aware and equipped to engage is an important outcome of mass participation higher education, which although difficult to quantify, contributes to the public good.

Opinions differed as to the contribution of mass higher education to developing 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 that dominates higher education today has stifled any challenge to social structures from students. However, respondents highlighted the high levels of student mobilisation on recent social equality referenda as testimony to political engagement, as well as highlighting the fact that many political careers began with students becoming politically engaged in college.

8 CONSTRAINTS ON ATTAINMENT OF PUBLIC GOOD OUTCOMES

Issues emerged concerning inadequate funding, which has deleterious effects on how higher education is experienced and delivered. Society makes demands on higher education to provide mass participation, produce 'employable' graduates, and navigate the various challenges that this entails. This illustrates the 'society-to-school' perspective of this study. However, in tandem with these demands, the required resources have not been put in place. This dilemma surfaced repeatedly among responses. For example, Atiyah (U/AHSS Professor) discusses mass participation, and states that the increased numbers of students have not been accompanied by an increase in funding:

The numbers have increased and the resources haven't followed the full numbers.

This lack of resources results in consequences for staff and for students. Iris (U/AHSS) describes how mass participation has affected class sizes and resulted in low levels of interaction between students and academic staff:

The undergraduates generally don't get enough attention. They are in huge lectures. They're in huge number groups. And I think they're often shocked when they come into higher education by the lack of individual attention that they get.

Stakeholders similarly identify under-funding as an issue. Olga (S/Representative Body) reflects that the policy to widen participation was undermined by lack of funding:

So, the government policy was, well let's try and put most people into higher education... now we've 65% going through it. And yet we've a funding crisis in higher education.

Clearly, the policy to extend participation has been successful, insofar as the numbers of students are high, with ever more diverse backgrounds represented. Indecon (2019) points to the fact that 15% of those who accessed higher education in 2017 were drawn from disadvantaged backgrounds or had disabilities. Van (S/Policy) endorses the view that widening participation means that the student profile is changing:

We've a very complex cohort of students who are now coming into HE with all kinds of challenges. When you broaden out and you massify higher education, and you have more students with disabilities for example coming in and they need to be supported.

In spite of the increasingly complex student body, Chantal (S/Representative Body) identifies problems relating to under-funding:

Class sizes are massive... because of the reduction in funding that's being provided so class sizes have had to grow ...but the staff hasn't been able to grow alongside that because of the funding indications... Student services calling out because they can't support students. There's counselling waiting lists for 6 to 8 weeks...

Higher education operates in the context of constrained funding, with years of restricted recruitment. The results have been over-stretched student support services, large classes and inadequate staffing, which diminish which the student experience.

Secondly, in order to compensate for insufficient state funding, universities have been obliged to generate revenue through other channels, for example by recruiting increasing numbers of international students.

8 CONSTRAINTS ON ATTAINMENT OF PUBLIC GOOD OUTCOMES

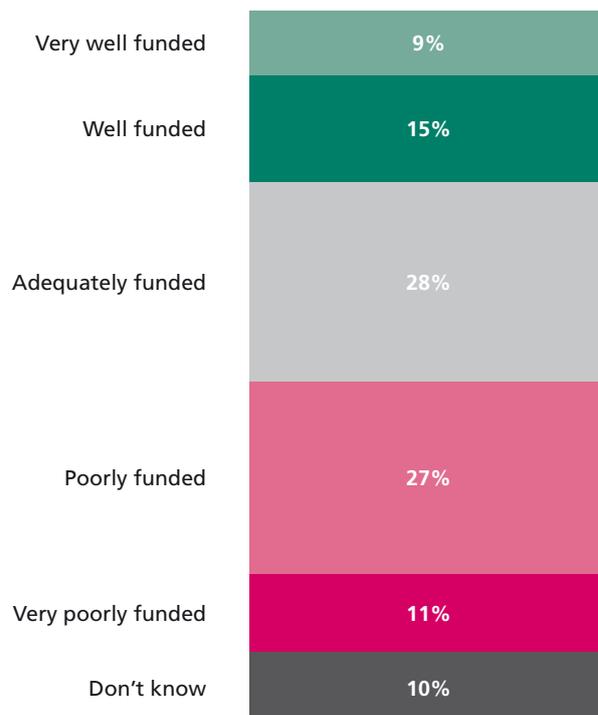
This issue has dove-tailed with the Internationalisation Paradigm, where diversity on campus is encouraged for purposes of broadening the student experience. It also serves to provide much needed income from higher fees charged to international students. In its turn, competition for international students and the much-needed income from their fees, has brought about an increased emphasis on a system of ranking between competing universities. Ranking, according to some respondents, rewards publications and research, ahead of teaching quality. The issues of funding, research and ranking are discussed in the coming sections.

The two cohorts overlap on this topic, in that respondents perceive higher education currently operates under considerable constraints, particularly around funding and stretched resources, which diminish the student experience and oblige universities to compete for alternative sources of income. These perceptions, identified by respondents, are relevant to the discussions below on funding, research, and ranking.

8.1 Funding

A report from Amárach Research (2015) found respondents 'do not see that there is a crisis – those who are in College may bemoan the shortage of resources but they don't directly link it to a funding gap'. Four years later, the HEA (2019) reported that over half of their respondents believed higher education to be adequately funded or better.

TABLE 7 PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING (SOURCE: HEA 2018C)



While the public seem unaware of any ongoing problem, other voices have campaigned for government to champion the cause of higher education. Clancy (2015:297) observed that in 2009, Irish HEIs were rated 'the fifth most efficient in a 19-country comparison' and while they boost revenues from other sources, this cannot compensate for the major reduction in state support for higher education.

In 2016, the Cassells Report proposed three options for funding higher education:

1. abolishing the student contribution and creating a state-funded system which would include funding for part-time students;
2. continuing the current student contribution charge in tandem with increased state investment;
3. a loan system.

Each of these options entail increased state investment. However, the Cassells Report (DES, 2016) as well as some respondents, highlights the benefit employers derive from higher education and recommend a contribution from this sector:

Employers are major beneficiaries of the outcomes of higher education, particularly given the high proportion of graduates in the Irish workforce. The Expert Group strongly recommends the introduction of a structured contribution from employers as a core element of future funding for higher education (DES, 2016:8).

Years passed and no decision was made to implement any of these options. As pointed out by Nestor (S/Policy), not making a decision eventually becomes a decision:

As a policy-maker, even a non-decision is a decision. So, you sit back for eight or ten years and say 'we're not going to fund this, yet'. This means you're either going to let it wither on the vine, or let other agendas, whether it's your international students, or commercial funding or whatever, take over. And then you accidentally end up with something, but you've actually caused it by your own decision-inertia.

This description highlights how state reluctance to address the issue has practically become the way Ireland deals with funding higher education. By neglecting to form any policy, inertia has become the policy. HEIs found alternative income streams but continued to struggle with dwindling resources and ever-increasing numbers of students.

In 2019, Crimmins, Boland and Hazelkorn conducted an online survey to which 123 'people in senior positions in Irish higher education and stakeholder groups' of the sector responded. According to Crimmins et al (2019:13) there was 'overwhelming agreement on the inadequacy of funding for higher education and the funding of research'.

8.1.1 Who should pay for higher education?

This present qualitative study can add some depth to the findings of Crimmins et al (2019) and the HEA (2018c), as respondents offer explanations for their beliefs and attitudes. Respondents in both cohorts are acutely aware of the funding crisis, and relate their views on its causes and possible remedies. For example, Tara (U/Senior Management) believes Irish higher education is under-funded because it is under-appreciated.

8 CONSTRAINTS ON ATTAINMENT OF PUBLIC GOOD OUTCOMES



‘...we have this sense that education should be free – but it’s not free.’

Dennis, (U/Senior Management)

I think there’s a deficit, and it may well be that that’s why we’re not getting votes for higher education. There’s not a deeper understanding of the importance of it, and maybe taking it for granted.

Respondents were asked their views on how higher education should be funded, and their answers gave insights into how this has become such a vexed question. Both cohorts’ responses ranged from complete state-funding, to state-funding just for infrastructure, to students’ paying with an option for state loans where required or increased SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland)⁴ support, and a suggestion that employers contribute towards the cost, although there were strong opposing opinions on that option. There follows a discussion of the spectrum of views:

VIEW 1 FREE PROVISION (STATE-FUNDING)

The first suggestion was mooted by Tara (U/Senior Management) who believes that if the state would finance infrastructure, the university can manage the rest:

Give us the money for the capital infrastructure (like buildings and infrastructure) to enable us to do the things we want to do, we’ll get the rest. So, at the current level of funding, I believe that maybe €3,000 or €4,000 a year for students.

Róisín (U/Senior Management) would like education to be free, but explains how the economic narrative dictates that students will benefit and therefore should pay:

The narrative absolutely is that you are going to benefit so you should pay. But the counter argument is, they do, because... they pay more tax because they’re earning more.

Stakeholders strongly support state-funding, for example Rebekah (S/Non-Grad Parent) points out that funding students makes good business sense for the state, because as graduates they will be self-funding citizens:

If they do well and get the jobs they want and buy houses, well, that means more people can pay their way, not rely on the state to pay for them. They more than likely won’t be on social welfare. [They will] buy their own homes and pay their property tax and their bin charges...

Karen (S/Advocacy) strongly believes higher education should be state-funded:

I think it should be part of what government pays for. I think it’s nearly a human right, if you want education you should get it.

⁴ Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) is Ireland’s national awarding authority for all further and higher education grants. SUSI offers funding to eligible students, from school leavers to mature students returning to education, in approved full time third level courses. SUSI administers funding in line with the legislation as set out in the Student Support Act 2011, the Student Support Scheme and Student Support Regulations.

Wendy (S/Representative Body) believes the state should pay because higher education benefits society as much as the individual:

The state should be paying it because at the end of the day its society is benefitting. While an individual also has a gain from it, it shouldn't be a full associated cost for the individual, because the state are benefiting.

Chantal (S/Representative Body) also argues that the outcomes of higher education benefit wider society and therefore it should be free:

It should be through general taxation, ie... the return on that investment is massive, and that's very clear from the Indecon report. And that only takes in seven universities, rather than all the institutes of technology and all the other learning environments that there are.

Chantal believes it should be funded on a par with second level, but acknowledges the obstacles presented by the tax payer, and the political will:

...there's fear amongst Irish people in terms of increased taxation... we would always call for more investment in terms of higher education and the targeted funding approaches that have happened in terms of second level... But it requires the political will and the decision to do it.

Similarly, Hugh (U/AHSS) highlights that if higher education was valued on a par with secondary education, then it would be free. Reinstating fees would, they feel, lead back to a situation where only the privileged few could access university; therefore, the cost should be borne by society:

I think society needs to recognise the value of people getting a third level education, and then, fund it. We fund second level... I think society should bear the cost.

Iris (U/AHSS) also believes it should be free:

Who should pay? ...For me education is a right, an entitlement, for everybody. So, these very basic barriers around money – and sometimes it is just around money – they need to be completely removed.

Iris argues that higher education is a right and therefore barriers around funding it should be removed.

Everything should be completely free in higher education, and of course that's slightly utopian.

Iris is apologetic for advocating free higher education, because the idea is so at odds with contemporary rhetoric that it sounds unrealistic and impossible. Yet, as Hugh (U/AHSS) pointed out – this was once the stance taken with secondary education.

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VIEW 2 STUDENT SHOULD PAY/STUDENT LOANS

Some respondents considered that students should pay fees. For example, in the Stakeholder Cohort, Olga (S/Employer) states that where the family can afford it, they should pay fees:

Students and families who can afford to pay it, should pay it. Because what's actually happening is, the tax payer is having to pay it, and more people through their taxes are funding people to go to college, who can actually afford to go.

Samir (U/Senior Management) believes students should finance their own education through a student loan system, because that enables everyone to access higher education:

...everybody can go into HE because the state is essentially paying for it upfront. You have a student loan... to pay back to the state, but you only do so when you reach a career point that you can afford to pay for it... I wouldn't be adverse [sic] to student loans... I know right now the political parties, nobody wants to be the government that brought in student loans.

Vince (U/Senior Management) likewise tends towards a loan scheme, and points out that the national economy depends on there being an educated workforce, for continued prosperity:

The government can see that the whole national economy depends on having an educated population ...The Cassells Report recommended a loan scheme... it may be the logical thing to do, because it allows everyone to go to university, and they pay, but they pay when they have the benefit, not in advance of the benefit.

Dennis (U/Senior Management) believes students should contribute because what is free is not valued:

If you as the individual aren't making some contribution either in kind or in funding... Do you appreciate that which you are availing of? I don't think so.

Among University/Support, Noah favours a loan system so that students understand the value, and the cost, of higher education:

There's a balance to be struck here... whether it's paid for, and then students pay back, down the road, I don't have a problem with that. Because I think we have to put a value on what it is, and what it's costing.

Dissonance emerged among University/STEM academics on this theme. Kitty and Piet believe that employers should pay, whereas Jan and Maura strongly support student loans. For example, Jan argues that everyone should get a chance at higher education, and should pay back the cost over time:

Everybody...should be funded to get the chance... I think a fair student loan system that over your lifetime you're paying a very small proportion back, to pay it back. So I should be taxed a bit more than somebody who didn't go to university.

Maura (U/STEM Professor) points out that having to pay is a good thing because it makes people think about why they want higher education and also, having to pay, they believe, leads to accountability:

I would support the idea of a student loan here...people should have to think about why they want to go to college... Also, the parents demand the standards.

Each of the funding options in the Cassells Report (DES, 2016) have some support, the largest being for the fully state-funded option, but none of the options is universally supported.

VIEW 3 OPPOSITION TO STUDENT LOANS

Student loans met opposition in both cohorts. For example, Iris (U/AHSS) opposes the option of student loans on the basis it would deter people from lower socio-economic groups who are generally debt-averse:

Pushing the fees – even if you institute loans – it fundamentally puts off those from lower socio-economic groups who are more debt averse and can't take on loans.

Van (S/Policy) opposes the student loan option based on their observations of the UK:

Student fees, student loans, that did not turn out well in the UK in that for mature entrants and for non-traditional students the numbers fell like a stone... student loans will restrict people and will limit people's access and opportunities into higher education.

Similarly, Stakeholder Barry (S/Community Development) opposes student loans, reasoning that by engaging with higher education, students are preparing themselves to be 'more productive...for our society' and should not be penalised by accruing debts:

I don't think students should have to leave college with huge debt. I think that's absolutely unacceptable; if having HE creates more productive people for our society.

Yet, Barry does not think it should be free but suggest other ways for students to contribute:

Things shouldn't simply be free. I think people should have to contribute. And I don't necessarily mean by paying fees... work for two years as a teacher in a school in the local area... it is a complete cycle of activity, one thing doesn't happen without the other.

VIEW 4 SUPPORTS FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

At present, disadvantaged students receive state support, and this often makes the difference between going to higher education, or not. For example, Malin (S/Employer) explains how they went to college only because of state support:

I was at the time where it was free, you just had to pay the registration fee, and I got a full grant. So... if that didn't exist I wouldn't have been able to go to college.

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Róisín (U/Senior Management) takes issue with the meagre grants allowed at present:

If we're trying to equalise opportunity, then the one thing we actually have to make sure is that a student who can't afford, is given sufficient money in grant, [which is] a joke, in terms of the amount that the government consider you can live on.

Chantal (S/Representative Body) describes the current student supports:

The highest possible SUSI grant that you can get is €657 [a month], and that's the special rate ... so not a huge amount of people get that. But it still doesn't even cover your accommodation before you look at food... books or travel costs... So, it is becoming more like a system that, we're going back in time instead of supporting people to get education.

Pablo (S/Representative Group) describes the inadequate student assistance is a barrier to marginalised groups' progressing to higher education:

The gap has grown bigger, it's harder and harder to cover all those expenses... It's building that higher barrier to disadvantaged kids... People talk about the fees. But the fees are the least of the problem really, because the SUSI grant would cover the fees. But it's all the other expenses.

Responses indicate that student financial supports are inadequate and represent an obstacle to participation among disadvantaged groups. In light of the discussion on Career Progression and Equality of Opportunity (Theme 3), this has serious implications.

VIEW 5 EMPLOYERS SHOULD CONTRIBUTE

In 2016, the Cassells Report recommended a contribution from employers (DES, 2016:7). Nestor (S/Policy) points out that employers are now obliged to contribute:

For the first time, we've seen an Employer Contribution coming into play. It was announced in the last two budgets, so there's the National Training Fund, some of which has been going on further education and apprenticeships areas...

Dennis (U/Senior Management) envisages a three-way split to fund higher education, which would encompass some state support, and contributions from both employers and students – with student loans where necessary:

I think there is a benefit in looking at the three-way model... [elsewhere] they're prepared to take out those loans. Whereas here, the whole notion of student loans has become really fraught because we have this sense that education should be free – but it's not free.

He particularly stresses that employers should be brought in on the conversation too:

Why can't the onus be on the employers then to provide that training, whatever gap in terms of skills within their organisations and fund it, or have third level institutions deliver it. Obviously, something has to be done differently. But nobody's having this conversation about how do we meet these gaps differently.

Ciara (U/AHSS Professor) has a similar view. They see the state as the main funder of education, which means that the tax-payer is paying for it, but the main beneficiaries are the employers, by having the state pay for employee training:

The fact is that the state still pays for the majority. The block grant has been reduced. But it's still more than 50 percent. So, the state still is the primary payer. The taxpayer is the ordinary working person who sort of believes that they want to live in the kind of country that has higher education.

She questions the logic of having the tax-payer, or indeed individual students, pay for training which ultimately saves employers money:

Now, why is that? Before, the employer used to train the worker. And now they give out that higher education is not training these workers for them for free. Of course it's not for free... If the government doesn't want to pay for it then you have to find some way of inveigling the students themselves to pay for it, or their families... I mean if it's the workplace that wants to benefit from those workers skills, why don't they train the workers?

Ciara's argument is that employers' requirements are a major consideration within higher education, but this is not reflected in what they contribute to the cost of its provision.

Piet (U/STEM Professor) favours having employers contribute. They describe the cost of providing STEM degrees and believes industry should share some of the cost of training their future employees:

A student in bio-chemistry pays €3,000. €4,000 from the state, that's €7,000. On the full economic costing, it was costing us €14,000 for that student... because laboratory science costs a lot of money to do... now, this area is doing fantastic economically because of the bio-pharma industry, because of ICT industry... all those people came from the university.... So maybe the industry should pay some as well.

Malin (S/Employer) also supports some reciprocal agreement between higher education and business, as businesses benefit greatly:

Businesses are constantly going to universities as a feeder for talent, then how does that relationship work on the funding perspective? If you take the example of the big four accountancy companies... They take in hundreds of students every single year. Hundreds of graduates, about 450 or 500 or something along those lines, each. So, for those, do you say ok we allow you to come on campus... but actually... for us to continue partnering together you need to pay x amount of fees to support. Because, we have evolved to a point now where there is an expectation from employers that universities are going to give us a pool of people who we can employ.

STEM Lecturer Kitty also questions why professional training is now the province of higher education. Kitty contends that professional education should not be the responsibility of higher education, preferring the former system of on-the-job training:

Why are we all teaching things that professions could do?

8 CONSTRAINTS ON ATTAINMENT OF PUBLIC GOOD OUTCOMES

Lorenzo's view offers a possible answer to Kitty's question. Lorenzo (S/Media) describes how recruiting graduates benefits employers by providing a skilled employee who is 'ready to slot into the organisation'. From employers' point of view, this is better than having to train an apprentice, which takes time and investment:

...the former practice, where the training process took longer. Whereas the practice now is to recruit a graduate, who has developed the core competencies in college, and the training specific to the employment will take far less time. So from the employer's point of view they gain from all the skills graduates attain in college and quickly have an employee ready to slot into the organisation.

Lorenzo (S/Media) believes higher education is positioned as a pull factor for foreign direct investment, saying '[i]f you have a very well-educated workforce it's an attractive proposition for FDI'. This raises the possibility of a conflict between maintaining Ireland's attractiveness to foreign investors, and hesitation about impeding employment creation by increasing costs to employers.

Respondents make a strong argument for having the business sector contribute to higher education. However, other respondents express resistance to this method of funding.

VIEW 6 CONCERNS ABOUT EMPLOYERS' INFLUENCE

Several respondents express misgivings about employers paying for higher education.

The first reason is illustrated by Van (S/Policy) who highlights the vital role of higher education in sustaining national economic wellbeing:

I'd rather have an educated, informed society... we have to have that, because otherwise we are uncompetitive internationally... and then if our economy is in trouble, what have we got to sell? Other than our skills and our knowledge. So, I see the two as interlinked.

Van emphasises the dependence of Ireland's economy on foreign direct investment, as the lack of alternative natural resources means that higher education, through providing a resource – skills and knowledge – 'to sell' internationally, is a vital resource. This presents a tension between having skills 'to sell,' and a possible risk of jeopardising investment by obliging the corporate sector to contribute to higher education.

A second reason for resisting the idea of employers paying for higher education is described by Nestor (S/Policy). Nestor highlights that employers now contribute a small proportion to the National Training Fund, which in relation to the overall cost, is very small:

...in what's effectively a two billion Euro sector, the human capital issue [National Training Fund] is going to account for about €60 million a year spending, so it's going to be a tiny tiny proportion.... Remember too though, '**who pays the piper, calls the tune**' and I'm not sure that's what you necessarily want a university or institute of technology doing.

Nestor voices concerns that by having employers contribute to the cost, they will have an expectation to influence higher education institutions about which courses are – or are not – offered. This concern was

echoed in the University Cohort. Hugh (U/AHSS) expresses reservations about having employers fund higher education, because that would increase their influence around how and what courses of study are offered:

Whoever bears the cost is going to dictate how it's structured and what it should do...

Dennis (U/Senior Management) points out that employers already exert major influence over higher education:

They are doing that anyway. So, this comes back to the institutions being able to know their worth... and negotiate with employers.

Employers explicitly do have an interest in higher education. In 2018, when Trinity College Dublin had just lost its status as the only Irish university in the QS World University Rankings Top 100, IBEC's Director of Policy, Fergal O'Brien urged government to inject funds into higher education, because of concerns that '[w]e have a real crisis in terms of funding for higher education and we have no plan to fix it' (Burke-Kennedy, 2018). The result of falling rankings and loss of reputation signaled to IBEC that 'the country's economic future is at risk if more investment is not provided for third level' (Burke-Kennedy, 2018).

Pablo (S/Representative Group) responds that, should business interests provide funding for areas that benefit industry, the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences may be deprioritised:

You'll have the private sector investing highly in what they are interested in... but it's more the STEM subjects, whereas Arts and Humanities, they're not interested in those, so it's up to the government to make sure that the wide range of choices available, remain available.

The perception of a deprioritising of Arts and Humanities is supported by Hazelkorn, Ryan, Gibson & Ward's 2013 report, which states that 'arts and humanities research is considered only a marginal player in the country's strategy for social and economic recovery' (2013:8). However, this stance towards Arts and Humanities neglects the intangible benefits to the public good. The report states 'This model underestimates the wider contribution and value of arts and humanities research which comes about in more dispersed and interactive ways through different transactions which create public benefit' (Hazelkorn et al, 2013:9). Pablo's (U/Representative Group) concern is that, much of what makes universities worthwhile, such as the transferable skills described in earlier sections, is precisely that which cannot be measured by Key Performance Indicators. The Cassells Report (DES, 2016:16) recognised this issue and sought to reinstate the value of *all* disciplines by fore-fronting the essential interrelation between disciplines, stating that there exists '...a tendency to draw a sharp line between the economy and society, and between the world of man-made things and the world of ideas and values'.

The Cassells Report (DES, 2016:16) instead advocates a view of society that embraces all dimensions of flourishing, not only economic benefits:

...integrated view of society, economy and ecology... higher education has value because it greatly adds to understanding of, and hence the flourishing of, our integrated social, institutional, cultural and economic life... Our idea of the public good is one that sees individual flourishing, achieved through higher education and other activities, as contributing to public life and the public good.

8 CONSTRAINTS ON ATTAINMENT OF PUBLIC GOOD OUTCOMES

VIEW 7 CONCERNS ABOUT STUDENTS SELF-FUNDING

Other respondents take an opposing view. For example, Ellen (U/Support) strongly *opposes* having students pay for higher level. Ellen points out that higher education is a benefit not just to the individual, but to society; it produces future leaders, and the state benefits politically as well as economically from having more graduates:

If you've got that sense of contribution to society, to the economy, to politics, to life and community... education in as far as it can be, needs to be funded because the state is benefitting from it, not just economically but socially and politically.

At present, students are paying a contribution of €3,000 a year towards fees and, according to Ellen (U/Support), paying a fee causes students to regard higher education in a transactional light:

I think when you charge fees... someone then is buying a product off you, and that's quite often how they see it 'I'm paying you £9,000 a year, for four years, and after I've paid all that you will give me this degree' and I think that changes the whole nature of the relationship.



Some respondents suggested employers should contribute to the cost of higher education, whereas others fear that such a tactic would increase employers' influence and diminish academic autonomy.

Ellen tends towards state-funded higher education, because when students pay for their education it becomes a consumer item and the make-up of the student body changes.

In summary, responses indicated a lack of consensus in both cohorts, with tension between fully state-funded provision, student loans, funding from employers, and a mix of state-funded infrastructure with partial student contribution. Some respondents suggested employers should contribute to the cost of higher education, whereas others fear that such a tactic would increase employers' influence and diminish academic autonomy. Some believed students should pay, others were strongly opposed to this for a number of reasons: (a) higher education is a public good that benefits not just graduates but society at large, (b) when students pay or avail of loans, then higher education becomes less diverse as many socio-economic groups are debt-averse, and (c) paying can often lead to a consumer mindset, whereby a student feels they are buying a service rather than receiving an education.

8.1.2 Discussion: Who should pay for higher education?

Clearly, the Great Recession placed pressure on the state finances, and hard choices were made. These choices were focused on quantifiable economic benefits, and overlooked the important dimension of non-economic outcomes of higher education, such as 'the world of ideas and values' and the flourishing of social and cultural life, all of which contribute to the public good in unquantifiable ways.

Among the respondents in this study, nobody disputed the wisdom of investing in higher education, even at a time of intense competition for resources by other vital services. The logic justifying increased investment is articulated by Hugh Brady, former President of University College Dublin, emphasising the economic good of universities' outcomes:

It is not a choice between investment in Ireland's universities and investment in its hospitals, schools or social services. These are false choices. It is investment in Ireland's universities today that will ultimately drive the economy that will deliver the taxes to pay for vital public services and infrastructure over future decades (Brady, 2019).

Studies in the UK have found the increasing emphasis on higher education's private benefits have served to justify calls for students to self-fund. According to Mountford-Zimdars, Jones, Sullivan and Heath (2013), the decades between 1983 and 2010 saw a shift in the UK higher education system from an academically selective, elitist system without financial barriers, to a mass system with upfront tuition fees. This was attended by a change in the perceived balance between public and private benefits, from an emphasis on societal rewards, to an almost exclusive emphasis on private returns (Marginson 2007; Calhoun 2006). Mountford-Zimdars et al (2013:795) state that 'support for tuition fees came from the political right as well as from the political left. Higher education was increasingly regarded as having significant private benefits and economic returns in addition to public benefits' (Dearing, 1997:90). Narratives of private returns place the onus on the individual to be an independent investor in her career. Responses highlight how employers used to train their workers but now expect that training to be provided by higher education, at no cost to them. This indicates that the emphasis on the economic mission, apparently designed to reduce state spending, changed perceptions of higher education so that the economic mission eclipsed higher education's contribution to the public good. As respondents in both cohorts point out, society benefits greatly from having a large cohort of the population willing to invest their time, talents and energy in higher education, therefore funding strategies should take into account their contribution to the public good. As Olga (S/Representative Body) put it, society benefits from the multi-faceted functions carried out by Irish HEIs:

HEIs are being tasked to do a huge amount, and it's not just the teaching and learning of undergraduate and postgraduate students. They have to be good pillars of the communities in their own right. They have to be strong researchers. They have to be collaborative, they've to be strong in Europe, they've to be strong internationally... A strong HE system benefits us all, economically and socially, and are we willing to pay for that?

This raises the question that when higher education contributes so greatly to the public good, why is there such reluctance about paying for it.

Some of the consequences for Irish higher education of policy drift and under-funding are described by the community of scientific academics in their 'Open Letter to the Government' in May 2020:

...today core public funding per third level student is 40% of what it was a decade ago, and yet every year the sector has been asked to take more and more students, with a further 35,000 students expected over the next ten years (Irish Scientists, 2020).

8 CONSTRAINTS ON ATTAINMENT OF PUBLIC GOOD OUTCOMES

They describe how society currently benefits from the previous endeavours of higher education, and point out how this became evident in the recent COVID-19 crisis:

...in the midst of the global COVID-19 crisis Ireland's earlier investment in scientific research is paying dividends. We have a corps of competent scientists to inform COVID-19 policy and decision-making... The public can today see directly why having world-class scientists matters (Irish Scientists, 2020).

The letter outlining the consequences of prolonged under-funding for teaching and research, received over 1,500 signatories within Irish higher education. The cabinet sworn into office in June 2020 now includes a Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, which may signal a re-ordering of priorities on the part of government in regard to the matters raised in the May 2020 open letter.

In summary, speaking before the COVID-19 crisis, respondents' views illustrate how contested an issue funding had become. This evident lack of consensus on any model of funding indicates a possible reason for the state's inaction on any of the recommendations of The Cassells Report. Among the University Cohort opinions vary between state-funding, students' self-funding with state loans where needed, and state support for disadvantaged groups. Some advocate industry funding while others believe that having industry pay would further marginalise disciplines without a direct bearing on economic activity. The Stakeholder Cohort raise a similar range of views, with stronger support among this cohort for a fully state-funded model; they also raise the issue around employers contributing, and highlight higher education's role in attracting foreign direct investment and its attendant job creation. Respondents argue that state-funded higher education is justified because the state and wider society benefit from having graduates who, it is argued, contribute to society at a higher level. As the Cassells Report put it, '[t]he availability and quality of graduates has been instrumental in enabling health, education, public administration and other services to grow in line with demand and, in many instances, to improve qualitatively' (DES, 2016:15).

8.2 Rankings and research in Irish universities

The issues of rankings and research are closely related to funding. Crimmins et al (2019) describe the links between these three strands. They report that of 343 senior personnel in Irish higher education and stakeholders '75% of respondents consider that the system of higher education and research is seriously underfunded'. Until the Great Recession, all Irish universities enjoyed investment, and corresponding positions in the world rankings. This has changed dramatically since 2010, with no Irish university now in the World Top 100. This section explores the ways in which research has been impacted by lack of funding, as well as respondents' views on university rankings.

The issues of research and rankings are not obvious features of higher education to many of the Stakeholder Cohort, such as parents and students. Data on these topics is confined to a few stakeholders, and of course, those in the University Cohort. Research, ranking and funding in higher education are intertwined. As discussed in the last section, the system has been under-funded for some time. Van (S/Policy) points out, seeking extra resources for higher education at this time clashes with other vital social demands:

We have this at the same time as a housing crisis, and all the other economic challenges that are coming, so making the argument for higher education and for increased resources is tricky.

A consequence of state under-funding is that universities must diversify activities to earn revenue and fill the shortfall. Van (S/Policy) described the pressure on HEIs to recruit students, especially to fill courses that are more niche, because 'they have to try and fill all the places on the program otherwise their economic model starts to fall apart'. They explain how this pressure generates competition and leads institutions to burnish their reputations:

You would see a slight market response from institutions and they would advertise and compete. But it's also about prestige too, which is important in the international rankings. I think it's to have a presence out there, more likely it's competing for limited enough numbers of students for very particular programs that are hard to fill and on the back of that, a certain amount of brand-building as well.

There is clearly an onus on each university to build a reputation, and bolster their position in the rankings, which in turn promotes student recruitment in years to come.

Van (S/Policy) describes how research outputs bolster the sought-after rankings, but under-funding restricts the ability to do well, for example heavy teaching loads prevent academics pursuing research:

...it will affect research output, it will affect the rankings in a significant way but it won't be spotted for about ten years. So, there is a conversation about research funding as well and certainly, the problem we have is the research funding is also constrained, the allocations ...haven't changed over the last decade either.

Research is an area that offers potential for attracting considerable income. Yet, there is a sense from respondents that Irish HEIs may not fully capitalising on all opportunities. As Ireland becomes the only English-speaking country in the EU following Brexit, the UK's substantial EU funding may become more available to other applicants. According to Brady (2019), the Russell Group of universities in the UK won 'almost 70% of competitive research funding in the UK and approximately the same % of UK funding from the EU'. Brady points out that '[b]efore the crash, UCD and TCD were ranked in the world top 100 – going toe-to-toe with the Russell Group universities on the international stage'.

Nestor (S/Policy) expresses frustration around the constraints on Irish universities' capacity for research. They believe research in higher education could be a source of much greater funding, and that substantial revenue could be harvested from international sources such as Horizon Europe if Irish universities had access to suitably talented researchers – which Nestor suggested they do not:

The Horizon Europe is going to be a massive increase over Horizon 2020 in terms of available money. In a situation where the biggest net gainers from the Horizon program are leaving, the British gained far more money than they put in. So we want the Irish universities to mop up some of that. They don't have to mop up a lot just some of that in terms of research capacity. But are they going to be able? I don't believe they will, and it's not their fault.

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Nestor alludes to the competitive disadvantage imposed on Irish universities through inability to attract high-powered researchers from abroad, who could secure research funding.

Nestor (S/Policy) expresses frustration at the lack of recognition for the potential revenue at stake, which is on a par with the IDA recruiting industry yet is overlooked and denied the necessary investment:

One of the values of research is that if you can bring in funding from abroad, to pay people good money, to work in research jobs in Galway and Limerick and Cork and places like that, in and of itself you've achieved something pretty good... But if somebody did that with an IDA factory, they'd be lauded to the hills... But... our colleagues in power on the pay-side are not willing to.

The issue of research funding leads back to the argument put to government by the scientific community, who demonstrated during the Covid-19 crisis that research is not only a valuable income stream, but also contributes immensely to the public good. As Walsh put it, 'higher education performs a multiplicity of valuable functions... its intrinsic value to individuals and society cannot be measured in economic terms' (2018:493).

The focus on institutional rankings leads to a stronger emphasis on the Economic Paradigm, to the detriment of the earlier paradigms such as Newman's character formation and citizenship development. Hazelkorn, Ryan, Gibson and Ward (2013) highlight problems of ranking based on crude measurements, such as publications and citations. Their study found that the present model diminishes recognition for teaching and contributions to the public good, and disadvantages Arts, Humanities and Social Science:

Measuring the quantity and impact of research through peer-reviewed journal articles and citation impact factors... misses the real story of ...the way researchers demonstrate the ...relevance of their research... Its impact can be felt through teaching (the number one purpose for university-based research), improvements to productivity and the quality of life, increased employment, informed public debate, policy change and social innovation (Hazelkorn et al, 2013:9).

Hazelkorn et al (2013) enumerate their perception of the purpose and outcomes of research and benefitting teaching, quality of life, employment, debate, policy and social innovation.

Barry (S/Community Development) states that the current priority in HEIs is research, and they question the motives behind this in recent times:

I think the driving force underpinning higher education at the moment is actually the research agenda, which is not about students, it's not about the learning process... it's about post-grad, higher level research agendas for which universities can be rated internationally and can then gain funding from various agencies, and contribute to academic profiles. I'm not saying those things aren't valuable, but I think the balance has been lost.

Rather than pursuing research for the benefit of teaching and policy as outlined by Hazelkorn et al (2013), it is Barry's view that research is now undertaken to benefit rankings.

Rankings systems differ. The recently established Times Higher Education (THE) World Impact Rankings measure universities against the UN's seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, SDG 3 measures universities on good health and wellbeing, which includes research on diseases, support for healthcare systems as well as the health of staff and students, for example through provision of mental health support or sports facilities. Further SDGs include gender equality, innovation, sustainable cities and responsible consumption and production. In general, however, rankings systems reward institutions for research excellence and impact through publications and citations, as well as teaching quality.

Some University respondents are critical of the recent preoccupation with rankings, for example University/AHSS academic Iris describes how ranking and measuring can have detrimental effects on student support:

Workloads have increased so massively that there is so little time left to do anything. And, unfortunately, almost inevitably what tends to go then is the softer stuff that is perceived as expendable in some way. You see it – the student support stuff for some people flies out the window because it's not necessarily measured. It's that old chestnut, you know, what is measured is valued.

Iris describes how ranking mitigates against activities which are not measured, such as student care, and this runs contrary to the values of dedicated academics:

So, I think the actual values of individual academics as a whole... are altruistic in nature, or very outward looking, but the system massively constrains our ability and our desire in that regard, because everything is so performative, so constraining.

Dennis (U/Senior Management) believes that over-emphasis on quantifiable outcomes of higher education misses the point. They state the existing bodies championing the cause of extra funding are locked into narratives of access on one hand, and rankings on the other, with purely quantitative figures to back up their claims, which causes the purpose of university to be lost sight of:

...constantly talking about reputation, rankings, student recruitment, and so on. It's always the quantitative benefits... And this comes back to the issue about 'what is the role of the university?' Ultimately, there is a role, a responsibility that the institution has to the individual student... unlocking their personal, academic and professional, potential. But, that somehow gets lost.

An outcome of this intense pressure for funding has been a reprioritisation of values. Van (S/Policy) explains that:

...if it's not contributing to the rankings, it's not important. Or if it's not contributing to the bottom line it's not important.

Having a diverse, international body of researchers on campus enhances international reputation. Maura (U/STEM Professor) considers rankings to be a crude instrument to attract international students, which is easily manipulated:

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It's an absolutely false standard, and unfortunately everybody has bought into it... Chinese students... want to get into a high-ranking university... that'll look good on their CV. But, it's like a hotel ranking. What do you get the 5 stars for? So, you get a star for the number of international students you have, so you try to bring in more international students, like if you have a 24-hour bar in a hotel you get one star. It's the same with the universities.

Maura highlights what they deem a vicious circle, whereby having international researchers on campus – often funded by the Irish tax-payer – enhances the university's ranking, which in turn boosts its popularity among international students, who will bring in fees revenue:

We have foreign students, and I've no issue – Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis, Egyptians coming in doing PhDs and Post-docs. That's a lot of money from the Irish tax-payers, they get their PhDs funded from the SFI or the IRC. And there's no value to that, long-term.

Maura's views support Marginson's (2018:429) argument that rankings have ensnared all universities in a trap, because status competition conditions the commodification of education, restricting the flow of public benefits:

the larger enemy of the public good and public sphere is not the economic market but the status hierarchy. ...global rankings have caught all universities, all over the world, in the same status-incentive trap.

Interestingly, the study by Clarke, Yang and Harmon (2018:83) acknowledged that 'some faculty view international students as problematic' and that 'the need to justify international activities will become essential in an era of high student demand'. The Internationalisation Paradigm is situated within the Economic Paradigm in that it enables universities to generate revenue, but in doing so, it is attended by a ranking system, where institutions compete in the scramble for market share. This aspect attracts some criticism, albeit a response to a funding crisis. Academia promoted mobility prior to rankings systems, and graduates value their degrees as 'academic passports'. This is indisputably a great benefit of university, which promotes human flourishing, engagement, and a range of values such as diversity, tolerance and openness, and thereby contributes to the public good.

In summary, the issues of research and ranking raised concerns among respondents that Ireland may not be well positioned to harvest substantial EU funding for which rival UK HEIs may no longer be eligible to compete, post-Brexit. Another aspect was the impact of increased teaching loads which reduce the capacity for research among academics. Many respondents perceived a preoccupation with international rankings, which was seen by some academics as flawed, and by some stakeholders as a necessity rooted in the economic imperative to recruit students. These findings resonate with Sugrue et al (2019), who state that universities today increasingly forefront measurement in their quest for competitive advantage in a global market, but reliance on such an economic rationale which stems from the logic of accountability, 'runs the considerable risk that the moral and social commitments of making higher education a public good are compromised' (2019:65).

8.3 Conclusion: Funding, research and ranking

While this study is not an investigation into financial matters or issues of governance, respondents' views have been included since issues of core funding, research prioritisation and capacity and research rankings are so prominent in dialogue about the role and wellbeing of Irish universities into the future. Responses in this section reflected the perceived constraints under which higher education in Ireland is currently obliged to operate. Respondents deliberated on ways to deal with the situation of inadequate funding, with differing suggestions as to how to address the shortfall in state supports. Recent decades have witnessed an increased emphasis on the private benefits of higher education, which has in many places, including the UK, been accompanied by an increase in the fees students are expected to pay. In this way, the economic narrative has promoted a perception of this 'private good' dimension of higher education, associated with increased earnings. Emphasis on private benefits also represents a philosophical shift between notions of private good, versus public good, where private good is exclusive, competed for, and by extension, not available equally to all, as compared to public good which benefits all (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2020:9). Furthermore, this emphasis on the economic mission can cause earlier paradigms of societal benefit to recede from public narratives. However, this study finds that consideration of the public good has not been lost, as evidenced by a majority of responses across cohorts reporting that state-funded higher education is justified because the state and society at large benefit from having graduates who are fully formed citizens, engaged and willing to contribute to society at a higher level.

Discussions on research shed light on concerns that Ireland is not best positioned to benefit from the substantial EU funding for which rival UK HEIs are no longer eligible to compete, post-Brexit. The reasons described relate to issues of funding. 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. The emphasis on rankings as a means to attract international students was viewed by some respondents as a vicious circle, necessitated by reduced state funding. Of more concern, however, is a widely held view that the economic imperative of generating revenue has caused a perceptible shift in emphasis regarding the core values of the university.

The emphasis on rankings as a means to attract international students was viewed by some respondents as a vicious circle, necessitated by reduced state funding.



9 CONCLUSIONS

The context for this study is contemporary Irish higher education, particularly universities, operating between competing realities of public underfunding and ever-increasing student demand. Loud narratives exist on the economic mission of higher education and individual private good.

Against this backdrop, there is a lack of research on the non-instrumental outcomes of Irish universities and their influence on society and the public good. This study sought to make a contribution to filling that gap, by examining the perceptions of targeted participants.

The literature reviewed in earlier pages described a steadily increasing international emphasis on the contribution of higher education to the economic good. This emphasis permeates public narratives and policy discourses in Ireland as well as in other countries, and may also influence the focus of academic research undertaken into higher education, precisely because higher education is now regarded as an essential prerequisite for financial success. The economic mission presents higher education as a resource in the service of society. The conceptual view of this study sought to turn the gaze around, to explore the ways in which mass higher education influences society. This approach allows us to see the over-layering of successive paradigms in Irish higher education, with each new mission not superseding but coexisting with its predecessors.

This study enabled comparisons between the views of different categories of respondents, and compared those from staff within universities themselves with those in civil society in roles closely linked to higher education. In the majority of themes, there was a large degree of overlapping views between cohorts and this seems to indicate that the views of those working in universities are in harmony with those in civil society on many issues of relevance to the study. Respondents from both cohorts stated large numbers of graduates in society increases the quality of life for everyone, as the values of higher education transmit to graduates to inform behaviour, personal, societal and political.

This study also compared views between university personnel in different academic discipline areas, and highlighted differing viewpoints that came across from academics in areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS), as well as those in university senior management and their colleagues in professional support roles. While samples are not large enough to be representative of the Irish university sector at large, they are indicative of varying viewpoints.

The study adopted qualitative research methods to investigate respondents' perceptions of mass higher education's *non-economic* contributions to the public good, along such dimensions as value formation and the 'school-to-society' influence of large numbers of graduates in Irish society, in terms of personal, societal and political outcomes. To situate the study in context for each respondent, exploration of the topic commenced by asking about respondents' perceptions of the purpose of university, and about students' motivations for aspiring to higher education. Other areas explored included perceptions of equality of opportunity, lifelong learning and access routes for non-traditional students, as well as the constraints in which higher education in Ireland currently operates.

The study revealed that a major aspect of mass higher education's perceived contribution to the public good in Ireland relates to the values acquired by graduates through university higher education. The findings were that values are transmitted implicitly, rather than directly taught, for example, in line with their values related to equality and tolerance, universities promote acceptance of other worldviews, as against promoting a particular worldview. Notwithstanding the implicit nature of this process, the findings strongly linked the development of positive graduate values with inspiring lecturers, as well as a value-internalisation process that occurs during students' exposure to many different experiences throughout the college career. In their recent work *Leading Higher Education As and For Public Good*, Solbrekke and Sugrue (2020), state their view that the academic community is responsible for engaging students in broad intellectual, cultural, moral and political issues, and that, 'it is necessary to hold ourselves to account for our stewardship of these moral values'. They suggest that the means to achieve this is '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). It became clear from respondents' views in this study that academic staff have a vital role to play in transmitting university values however many respondents identified constraints imposed by measurement of academic activity through rankings. One respondent suggested that 'what is measured is valued...the student support staff for some people flies out the window because it's not necessarily measured'.

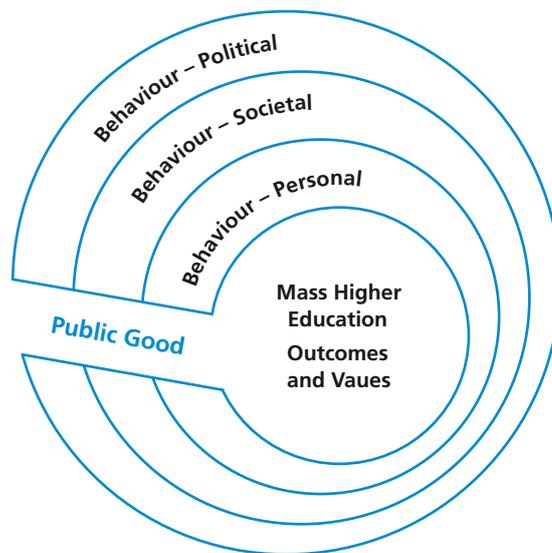
Su-Ming Khoo argues that '[t]o say that higher education is a public good is to suggest that it should be evaluated in terms of its ethical and political roles in fostering a legitimate, sustainable and democratic society' (Khoo, 2016). Similarly, Kezar (2005:27) argues that higher education is for societal good, fostering higher-order thinking and wisdom, and preparing students for life rather than just for a career. Values underpinning these objectives are 'equality, service, truth, justice, community, academic freedom, and autonomy'. Respondents in this study highlighted non-economic outcomes of mass higher education that contribute to the public good on several registers. The first of these is the individual level, whereby graduates' capacities are developed in terms of cognitive reasoning, personal development, empowerment, agency, autonomy, confidence, allied to values of active citizenship and professional responsibility. Respondents described how 'a ripple effect' from graduates positively influences their communities and wider society, contributing to the public good. As examples of these outcomes, respondents mention improved health outcomes, more community engagement in educated populations, as well as knowledge generation, expertise and volunteering.

Most respondents felt that values acquired during higher education assist with social cohesion, defined here as 'the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper' (Stanley, 2003:5). Respondents linked social cohesion with values of tolerance and respect for equality and diversity which are associated with exposure to such issues on university campuses. Respondents also pointed out that social cohesion is helped by the fact that many of the subjects taught in universities promote understanding of social issues and social justice. The following comment was typical of most of the views expressed 'We have a relatively stable, coherent, nationalistic outlook in Ireland, and generally we get along as a country' and this was attributable to education (Van, U/Policy).

The following onion diagram illustrates the dynamics of this process, whereby the ripple effect from an individual's higher education extends outwards into their communities, workplaces and wider society, and contributes to the public good. The onion diagram is adapted from Hofstede's (2001) model of the 'Cultural Onion,' which succinctly illustrates different components in a system.

9 CONCLUSIONS

MODEL 1 ONION DIAGRAM ILLUSTRATING HOW 'THE RIPPLE EFFECT' OPERATES TO BRING THE OUTCOMES AND VALUES OF MASS HIGHER EDUCATION TO BEAR ON BEHAVIOURS INFLUENCING BOTH THE PRIVATE SPHERE AND THE PUBLIC GOOD



The study explored the theme of Citizenship and Political Engagement as a non-economic outcome, unpacking the influence of mass higher education on the political sphere. This began with respondents' reactions to a Tweet from the European Universities Association President on populism and the role of universities in societies where populism is increasing. Responses from both cohorts indicated a role for mass higher education in opposing extreme politics through enhancing political understanding and critical thinking, pointing to the university value of freedom of speech, and the fact that university provides a forum for discussion, enabling issues to be debated. Some respondents believed that populism has not taken hold in Ireland to the extent it has elsewhere, and attributed this to the high numbers of graduates in Irish society. This view is based on a perception the development of politically-aware citizens who are equipped to engage in society and politics, is an important outcome of mass higher education, and that this contributes to the public good. Respondents stated that mass higher education enables students to explore politics across the spectrum, and many Irish politicians had started their careers in this way.

Representations of higher education in Ireland as predominately a private good that confers economic benefits on graduates, lose sight of its larger influence on the public good. Solbrekke and Sugrue (2020:4) refer to 'the largely taken-for-granted purpose of higher education, namely to contribute to public good'. This qualitative research study demonstrates that instead of prioritising service to society only as an engine of economic development, public narratives and policy discourses about higher education in Ireland must take account of a wider range of non-economic outcomes. These may be more intangible but this research shows that individuals within and outside of Irish universities believe that they exist and they serve the public good, defined by Leibowitz (2013) as fostering the flourishing of human beings, who are politically engaged with society and ethically informed.

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APPENDIX 1 DEFINITIONS

(i) Economic Good

The role of universities in the aspect of Economic Good is a recent phenomenon which emerged in Ireland during the 1990s. With levels of manufacturing activity decreasing, and in the context of modernisation, the European Union promoted knowledge-based economic development. Ireland embraced this paradigm, with the aim of catching up on overseas competitors. Consequently, higher education became a point of focus for national economic development during the 1990s (Walsh, 2018:345). A phase of mass participation at higher education began which generated a new narrative of higher education as a route to economic benefits for individuals. Some twenty years later, the IUA (2019) reported that the economic outcome of this shift culminated in greatly increased benefits for the economy each year, stating 'The Irish economy benefitted by €8.9 billion last year from Ireland's seven universities' (Irish Universities Association, 2019). Demonstrably, higher education in Ireland contributed to the economic good, both in terms of the exchequer – through taxation and consumption – and the individual graduate. Indecon (2019) estimated the graduate premium in Ireland to be €106,000 over a graduate's career. With these levels of financial benefits, the paradigm of the Economic Good has become a considerable pull factor for students accessing higher education.

(ii) Mass Participation/Massification

According to the Cassells Report (DES, 2016:14) Ireland's participation rate among the 18-20 age-group has risen to 58%, which is a dramatic expansion in participation from just 20% in 1980. Clancy and Marginson (2018) state that in 1971 just nineteen countries had reached 15 per cent participation in higher education. In 1973, Berkeley sociologist Martin Trow predicted that all industrial countries would move towards mass participation systems. In 2013 there were 112 systems internationally with enrolment levels of 15 per cent or more, and 56 higher education systems with an enrolment of 50 per cent (World Bank Group, 2016).

(iii) Public Good

The term 'public good' is used in many different contexts. According to Solbrekke and Sugrue (2020:11), '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'. This definition takes account of the intangible, but no less valuable, outcomes with which higher education is traditionally associated. Similarly, Leibowitz (2013:xxiii) defines the term 'public good' as 'the flourishing of human beings as a valuable end, instead of seeing human beings as instruments of economic well-being'. The conceptual perspective of this study most closely aligns with the conceptions of the public good expressed by Leibowitz (2013), namely, higher education and its role in fostering the flourishing of human beings, who are politically engaged with society, and ethically informed.

(iv) School-to-Society

Brint (2013) argues that higher education is generally framed in terms of a 'society-to-school' relationship with higher education viewed as underlabourer responding to the requirements of society (Brint, 2013). This view neglects to consider the impact on society of mass participation systems of higher education, on almost any level other than economic good. The impact on society of mass participation higher education is the subject of this study, and is denoted by the term 'school-to-society' (Brint, 2013:278).

(v) Higher Education

Much of the literature on higher education discussed in this study does not distinguish between the different models, for example, the Institute of Technologies, Technological Universities, private colleges and universities. For the purpose of this study, research data among academics focused on the seven Irish universities (UCD, NUIG, UCC, Maynooth University, University of Limerick, TCD, and DCU). The recently formed Technological University Dublin is omitted, not only because it is newly established and its current graduates enrolled in Institutes of Technology, but also because it emerged from a background of vocational education and training; it was established on the recommendation of the Hunt Report (2011), which was clear that it should be a different style of university.

(vi) Values

The Oxford English Dictionary defines values as 'principles, standards of behaviour, or one's judgment of what's important in life'. According to Professor Caroline Parker of Glasgow Caledonian University, it is this 'judgement of what's important in life' that provides the opportunity to bring us together, so that in an organisational context, people are happier, healthier and more productive when the institution's values are congruent with their personal values (Parker, 2019).

APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Thank you for taking part in my research by sharing your views and experiences.

Now that so many young people go to university, my study explores how the outcomes of this 'mass participation' might influence Irish society.

Questions are clustered into themes, i.e.

- Public Perceptions of Higher Education
- Students' reasons for aspiring to Higher Education
- Society, culture and values
- Politics/democratic values and mass higher education
- Funding

Locating Questions: place of work, occupation/position.

Can I ask a personal question? When you were at school, did you *want* to go to university?

Public perceptions of higher education

1. **What, would you say, is university for?**
2. **If you think about outcomes of university education in Ireland today**, what comes to mind?
3. What outcomes of university education would you say are valued?
4. A recent report described the influence of higher education as benefiting society. How would you describe the role of higher education in Ireland in terms of social benefit?
5. Would you consider higher ed. promotes social mobility?
6. If so, would you say this is a social benefit, or an individual benefit?
7. Some researchers claim there has been a shift from universities as places of scholarly research & learning, to offering opportunities for commercial gain and individual career enhancement. Can you tell me, what you think about this claim?
8. Would you say having 55% of post-secondary students progressing to higher level, might bring about any changes in society? If so, in what way?
9. How would you view the other 45% who do not attend HE?

Students' reasons for aspiring to higher education

10. In terms of motivation for striving towards gaining a place in college, what would you think are the TWO dominant drivers for the student deciding to do a degree?
11. Would you say particular courses tend to attract students with different motivations? (ie would certain courses attract more career-minded students, than others?)
12. Do you think the extra 3 or 4 years of education at university, transform students in any way, apart from imparting skills for the workplace?
If so, how – and is this something students recognise?
13. Does a student's degree course have a bearing on their social/political engagement?

Society, culture and values

14. Social benefits sometimes attributed to higher education include lower crime rates, increased quality of life, enjoyment of human rights and political stability. How would you describe the role of universities in securing these outcomes?
15. Education is presumed by some to engender a common culture and value system. Would you say mass higher education enhances social cohesion?
Probe: How much would you think different social groups mix on campus?
16. Has society become more complex than it was a generation ago?
If so, would you think this complexity makes higher ed more necessary?
17. Do you think technology is changing higher education?
18. What would you consider to be typical graduate attributes in university?
19. Would the values instilled in students during their university careers vary according to the course pursued?
20. In terms of institutional values, in your opinion, what would be the foremost values universities in Ireland aspire to? (*does university form engaged citizens?*)
21. How, would you say, do universities shape students' values to line up with the college's value system?
22. Would you think college values actually transmit through graduates into wider society?

APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

If appropriate, in light of the foregoing:

23. Would you say the role of higher education in forming attitudes and worldviews is acknowledged by society?

Political engagement and higher education

24. Would you say political engagement is something generally encouraged in university?
25. The president of the European Universities Association, Professor Michael Murphy recently spoke about the 'polarisation of society across Europe' [and] 'extreme parties coming to power, at a time when Europe has never been more educated.' Do you find it surprising that this apparent polarisation occurs at a time of high participation higher education?
26. Would you consider this an area of responsibility for universities to respond to?
27. One school of thought claims that universities promote the democratic process. Another school of thought is that *expanded* higher education drives the less educated out of politics (in that HE produces new forms of expertise and authority, new political discourses).
Which end of this spectrum would you consider closer to the truth?

Funding

28. It seems that meritocracy is no longer defensible – those who access HE often do so thanks to social advantages such as parental education or private schooling. Recently, much of the education budget is targeted at equalising access (eg DEIS schools, HEAR scheme etc).
What do you think about this 'positive discrimination,' which aims to include marginalised groups?
Is it working?
29. Funding became scarce in the recession, and led to discourses around what students should pay. Who, would you consider, should bear the cost of university?
30. Prior to the recession, the state provided a block grant to HEIs which was allocated to teaching and research at the HEI's discretion, but now everything is measured (eg publications, citations, and student/teacher ratio). Do you think this kind of oversight is a helpful for higher education provision?
31. Would you consider contemporary higher education in Ireland primarily as an economic driver or a place to develop responsible citizens? private good, or public good?
32. Where is the balance, would you say, between economic good and public good?
33. Is there anything else you would like to add? Other voices I should capture?



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