

Symposium: ‘Societal Impact of our Universities’

Expanding Educational Opportunity: The Mission of the Queen’s Colleges and their Successors Since 1845

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1. INTRODUCTION

This brief overview will focus on one theme that has been central to mission of the original Queen’s Colleges and the modern-day successors (Queen’s University Belfast, University College Cork, and the National University of Ireland Galway/University of Galway) – that of expanding educational opportunities – as illustrated through three seminal periods in their history.

2. EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: CATHOLICS AND PRESBYTERIANS

Expanding educational opportunity was central to the origins of the Queen’s Colleges, in terms of providing adequate access to university education in Ireland for an expanding Catholic middle class and non-conforming Protestants (mostly Ulster-based Presbyterians). At the time of the establishment of the colleges in 1845, there were growing political demands in Ireland for the repeal of the Union. The incumbent British Conservative government of Sir Robert Peel sought to deflect support for Repeal by granting significant concessions to Catholics. One of these was the demand to provide university education for Catholics on a par with that available to Protestants for the previous 250 years since the establishment of the University of Dublin (Trinity College) in 1592. From 1793 onwards, with the repeal of many remaining ‘penal laws’ under that year’s Catholic Relief Act, Catholics were admitted as students to TCD but still debarred from appointment as scholars, fellows or office holders, which remained the exclusive preserve of members of the Established Church.¹

The existence of TCD as ‘the only institution of its kind in Ireland for two and a half centuries’ set Ireland noticeably apart from the pattern of tertiary education provision in western Europe.² By contrast Scotland at the time boasted four universities (St Andrews, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen) of a similar vintage to Trinity. The geographical imbalance, including the absence of an Ulster-based university, was of particular concern to Presbyterians for the training of their clergy. TCD’s discrimination in favour of the Established Church was equally problematic for Presbyterians, who gravitated towards Scotland, although even the relatively inexpensive education available there was beyond the means of many aspiring students from Ulster.³

Peel had to balance Irish Catholic demands with the realities of British politics at that time which would not countenance the endorsement of denominational Catholic universities. The idea of the non-denominational Queen’s Colleges offered a compromise. These were acceptable to some more moderate Catholic bishops (including Crolley of Armagh who had hopes for the location of the Ulster College in the ecclesiastical capital) but not to harder-line clerical opinion or influential Catholic nationalist political leaders (most notably the nationalist

¹ Donal McCartney, *UCD, a national idea: the history of University College Dublin* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), p. 1.

² T.W. Moody and J.C. Beckett (eds) *Queen’s Belfast, 1845-1949: the history of a university* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), vol. 1, p. xxxv.

³ Moody & Beckett, *Queen’s Belfast*, p. xli.

leader Daniel O’Connell), by whom they were seen as a second-class provision and were derided as the ‘Godless colleges’.⁴ Finding a solution to the issue in the context of 1845 was negated by the onset of the famine and the unsatisfactory compromise of 1845 would remain unresolved for over half a century.

Ongoing Catholic dissatisfaction with the Queen’s Colleges, which were condemned outright by the Catholic hierarchy at the influential synod of Thurles in 1850, led to the establishment of Cardinal John Henry Newman’s Catholic University in Dublin in 1854 to make specific provision for Catholics in a denominational university.⁵ The complexity of the variety of institutions offering higher education deepened in the following decade with the foundation of the Presbyterian Magee College in Derry in 1865, funded from a bequest of £20,000 from the will of Martha Magee who died in 1846.⁶ This, along with the establishment of the Assembly College (now Union Theological College) in Belfast in 1853, which trained Presbyterian clergy who could also take courses at the neighbouring QCB, satisfied Presbyterian higher education needs. This diffusion of tertiary education provision eventually led to a new format for the award of degrees and provided some measure of standardisation and co-ordination with the establishment of the Royal University of Ireland (RUI) in 1879 as an examining and degree awarding body catering for all of these different institutions.⁷

3. EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: WOMEN

A significant departure associated with the RUI was the availability of its awards to women. The opening of RUI opportunities to women reflected the changes at secondary level education. The pioneering work of Margaret Byers and Anne Jellicoe, in promoting academic education for girls through their foundations respectively of Victoria College in Belfast in 1859 and Dublin’s Alexandra College in 1866, was enhanced by the introduction in 1878 of the competitive intermediate education exams which increased significantly post-primary education opportunities for boys and girls.⁸

This took place in the context of the emergence of the first wave of feminism, characterised in Ireland by the rise of female political activism in campaigns to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, grant the parliamentary franchise to (some) women, and improve married women’s legal rights to their property.⁹ While women could sit for the RUI exams and degrees they were still not admitted fully as students in the various Queen’s Colleges or to the Catholic University or Trinity.

The existence of the RUI purely as a degree awarding body was unsustainable in the long-term and Catholic demands for provision on a par with TCD continued. Eventually the 1903 Robertson Commission (Royal Commission on University Education) gave rise in 1908 to a new Irish Universities Act which settled the so-called Irish University question with the award of independent university status to the Belfast college (henceforth to be known as the Queen’s University of Belfast) and the creation of the federal National University of Ireland (NUI) structure for the two remaining Queen’s Colleges in Galway and Cork, with the addition of University College Dublin (UCD). UCD had emerged in 1882 as part of the reorganisation of Newman’s short-lived Catholic University.¹⁰ This was the point at which women were admitted fully as students (having already achieved such status in TCD in 1904).¹¹

4. EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: EXPANSION IN LATER TWENTIETH CENTURY

While seminal events in the universities’ histories described above opened education to certain groups in Irish society, university education throughout the island still remained the preserve of the more affluent middle and upper classes until after the Second World War. Arguably the most significant expansion of educational opportunities within the NUI colleges and QUB, in terms of numbers attending, was that which followed the introduction of largely free post-primary education in the latter half of the twentieth century.

⁴ Alvin Jackson, *Ireland, 1798-1998* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 52-3.

⁵ McCartney, *UCD*, pp 2-5.

⁶ Frances Clarke, ‘Magee, Martha Maria (d. 1846)’, in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* <https://www.dib.ie/biography/magee-martha-maria-a5336> (accessed 28 Apr. 2022).

⁷ Moody & Beckett, *Queen’s Belfast*, pp 286-9.

⁸ Judith Harford, *The opening of university education to women in Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), chapters 2 & 3.

⁹ Rosemary Cullen Owens, *A social history of women in Ireland, 1870-1970* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005), pp 1-20.

¹⁰ McCartney, *UCU*, pp 17-24.

¹¹ Harford, *Opening of university education to women in Ireland*, pp 143 and 150-1.

In Northern Ireland the Stormont education minister Colonel Samuel Hall-Thompson's Education Act of 1947 extended the British 11+ system of Rab Butler's 1944 English and Welsh Education Act, and the 1945 Scottish equivalent, to the north. This introduced the principle of academic selection based on merit, with the consequence of leading to greater demand for university provision by the 1960s. The post-war northern education reforms had a particularly significant impact on the Catholic minority and was a factor in the rise of an educated Catholic middle-class which would coalesce in the demands for greater civil rights during the 1960s.¹²

Leslie Clarkson's history of Queen's in the latter half of the twentieth century shows how student numbers had doubled between the end of the war and the mid-1960s, and trebled by the 1970s; rising from 2,162 (1945) to 4,376 (1963) and 6,336 (1975).¹³ Meanwhile, south of the border, successive education ministers in the Republic of Ireland – most notably Patrick Hillery, George Colley and Donogh O'Malley – pioneered a series of reforms in the 1960s, capped by O'Malley's introduction of free secondary education in 1967, which expanded the numbers attending post-primary schools, which had a noticeable impact on the university sector by the 1970s.¹⁴

5. EPILOGUE: CHALLENGES FACING UNIVERSITIES TODAY IN EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is a central plank of corporate and education strategies of all universities on the island of Ireland today. Ensuring as wide of access as possible to university education to all sectors of the community is central to their collective efforts to fulfil the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #4 of providing a quality education to all.

Efforts to open the prospect of university education to groups in society which have not traditionally accessed it are, for socio-economic reasons or disabilities, are being addressed in the Republic through the HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) and DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) schemes and individual institutional access academies.¹⁵

Economic underdevelopment and the lasting legacy of the Troubles have retarded educational opportunities in Northern Ireland for many communities, not just in regard to progressing to tertiary education but even in completing post-primary education successfully. Underfunding of the sector, which includes a cap on the number of local students which can be recruited, in addition to alienation of young people due to political uncertainty, has created an additional challenge of retaining school leavers within the province.¹⁶

In order to address these Queen's has developed a number of schemes designed to assist students through their second-level progression and subsequent transfer to university. Through the university's Widening Participation Programme, Junior and Senior Academy schemes build relationships with school students from the beginning of the post-primary cycle, while the Pathway Opportunities Programme offers a reduced entry tariff for students from lower income backgrounds.¹⁷ A long running access programme, run in conjunction with various Further Education Colleges, is aimed at students returning to complete their post-primary equivalent education, many of whom are older and whose ability to complete the full post-primary cycle by age 18 or 19 had been disrupted.¹⁸ Enabling students to achieve a university place is only the start of a process and significant retention challenges remain in supporting them to complete their degree programmes successfully, which are being met through mentoring, personal tutoring and regular student progression reviews.

While Ireland is a very different place since the establishment of the original Queen's Colleges and in many ways the colleges (now universities) have changed markedly over two centuries, a common thread remains which links

¹² Graham Walker, 'The 1947 Education Act – a landmark in Northern Ireland's history', QPOL blog, 7 Aug. 2017 <http://qppl.qub.ac.uk/1947-education-act/> (accessed 28 Apr. 2022).

¹³ L.A. Clarkson, *A university in troubled times: Queen's Belfast, 1945-2000* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), appendix 1, p. 201.

¹⁴ John Walsh, *The politics of expansion: the transformation of educational policy in the Republic of Ireland, 1957-72* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ <https://accesscollege.ie/> ; <https://www.nuigalway.ie/accesscentre> (accessed 25 April 2022).

¹⁶ PivotalPPF, *Should I stay or should I go? Reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work* (6 Dec. 2021) <https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/Stay-or-go-final.pdf> ; Prof Ian Greer, 'Higher Education funding challenges will create inequality and constrain NI economy', remarks to Confederation of British Industry's 'An audience with Northern Ireland's political leaders' (28 Apr. 2022).

¹⁷ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/sgc/wpu/> (accessed 28 Apr. 2022).

¹⁸ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Study/Undergraduate/routes-to-university/> (accessed 28 Apr. 2022).

the original purpose of the colleges to the activities of the present-day descendants, that of seeking to expand educational opportunities to groups within society who have previously been excluded.

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