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A case study on differentiation in the mission and role of higher education institutions in Ireland

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Ludovic Adrian Godefroy Highman

Trinity College,
University of Dublin

2015

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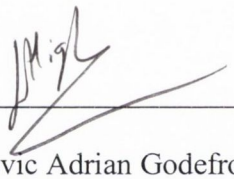
Signed: 

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Summary

Higher education has evolved considerably since the early twentieth century. The concept of a system of higher education only emerged after World War II, with the growing understanding that universities are embedded within a system. Indeed, much has changed since the days when universities would consider themselves as "singular entities with various loose linkages (to knowledge, to academia, to the government, to the nation, to the globe) without any single of these references viewed as clearly dominant" (Teichler, 2008, p.356).

Since then the structure of systems has been constantly refined and studied. Trow (1973) proposed a linear model of development from "elite" higher education catering for less than five per cent of the population, to "mass" (16-50 per cent) and then "universal" (over 50 per cent) higher education. With the emergence of systems of higher education, various organisational models have been proposed in an attempt to offer a useful framework for further comparative work. Kyvik's (2004) typology, which bases itself on the work of P. Scott (1995), distinguishes between "university dominated systems", where only university and university-level specialised colleges are considered to be the only higher education institutions and "dual systems" of higher education. The latter catered for both a university sector and a non-university sector that were considered separate and accordingly treated differently, with the university sector clearly dominating. From this emerged the "binary system", that has been characterised as a more "formalized version of a dual system" (Kyvik, 2004, p.394) and some higher education systems have developed into "unified systems", leading to a situation where both traditional academic studies and vocational programmes are offered within universities, which is currently the situation in the United Kingdom following the upgrade of the polytechnics to university status in 1992.

The binary model has become the most common structure of higher education system in Europe and has been used to characterise the Irish higher education system, with what might at first appear to be a clearly delineated system with on the one hand seven universities and on the other fourteen institutes of technology. While the findings demonstrate that there are still, generally speaking, significant differences between institutions on both side of the divide, there is a limited amount of convergence appearing at "the margins" (senior policy

officer 2, HEA), between those larger institutes of technology and the post-1989 universities. The findings point towards a limited amount of "academic drift", (Neave, 1979, p.155) because for example the duplication of programmes one finds in the Humanities in the institute sector reveals a completely different delivery and approach to the Humanities than is found in the university sector. However, some "institutional drift" is visible between the larger institutes of technology and some universities, blurring the binary divide between those institutions concerned. Kyvik (2004, p.406) discusses whether the binary system will become the dominant and final structure of higher education in Western Europe or whether instead it should be more accurately understood as yet another stage in the developmental process of higher education systems towards a unified university system.

This study will aim to examine and analyse the current higher education system in place in Ireland, and whether it matches Kyvik's definition of a binary system, and whether the Irish higher education system is converging or not towards a unified model of the likes in place in Spain and the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, one of the reasons for the breakdown of the divide was because the universities and the polytechnics had developed a strongly competitive relationship, ultimately undermining the binary system. Clear "institutional" and "academic" drift (Neave, 1979, p.155) of the polytechnics, combined with the stronger vocational focus of the universities led to the destruction of the binary system and the establishment of a unified system with marked status differences between higher education institutions. Posited within the larger globalisation debate, the issue of converging or diverging higher education systems and the institutions within is of particular concern, following the launch of the European Commission's modernisation agenda for higher education systems and institutions (2003), whose discourse on greater differentiation, diversity, rationalisation, concentration and better governance is constructed as the only way to achieve "an exalted modernized economic state" (Mazza, Quattrone & Riccaboni, 2008, p.17). These concepts are part of globalisation's meta-myth, which should be conceptualised as a collection of rationalized myths characterizing the world polity (Thomas, Mayer, Ramirez & Boli, 1987; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and whose dissemination is guaranteed by "institutional carriers" (Vaira, 2004, p.488) such as the European Commission. This study analyses the influence such a discourse has, or is perceived to have, in Irish higher education policy-making and therefore how it is interpreted at national and institutional levels, focusing specifically on differentiation in mission and role between higher education institutions.

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List of abbreviations

AIRO: All-Island Research Observatory

AIT: Athlone Institute of Technology

BA: Bachelor of Arts

BBS: Bachelor of Business Studies

BComm: Bachelor of Commerce

BERA: British Education Research Association

CAO: Central Applications Office

CATS: Colleges of Advanced Technology

CIT: Cork Institute of Technology

CNA: Council for National Awards

CNAA: Council for National Academic Awards

CSR: Country Specific Recommendation

CURIF: Coordination des Universités de Recherche Intensive Françaises (Coordination of French Research Intensive Universities)

DCU: Dublin City University

DES: Department of Education and Skills

DG: Directorate-General

DIT: Dublin Institute of Technology

EC: European Commission

ECF: Employment Control Framework

ECJ: European Court of Justice

ECOFIN: Economic and Financial Affairs Council

ECTS: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

EHEA: European Higher Education Area

EIT: European Institute of Technology

EQF: European Qualifications Framework

ERC: European Research Council

EU: European Union

EUA: European University Association

FP7: Seventh Framework Programme

GMIT: Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

HE: Higher Education

HEA: Higher Education Authority

HEI: Higher Education Institution

IADT: Institute of Art, Design and Technology

IAU: International Association of Universities

IDEX: Initiatives d'Excellence (Initiatives for Excellence)

IFUT: Irish Federation of University Teachers

IMF: International Monetary Fund

IoT: Institute of Technology

IOTI: Institutes of Technology Ireland

IRCHSS: Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences

IRCSET: Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology

IUA: Irish Universities Association

IUT: Institut Universitaire de Technologie (University Institute of Technology)

LERU: League of European Research Universities

LIT: Limerick Institute of Technology

LLM: Master of Laws

MIT: Massachusetts Institute of Technology

MPhil: Master of Philosophy

NCAD: National College of Art and Design

NCEA: National Council for Educational Awards

NFQ: National Framework of Qualifications

NIHE: National Institute for Higher Education

NIHED: National Institute for Higher Education, Dublin

NIHEL: National Institute for Higher Education, Limerick

NUI: National University of Ireland

NUIG: National University of Ireland Galway

NUIM: National University of Ireland, Maynooth

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OMC: Open Method of Coordination

PhD: Doctorate in Philosophy

PRTLI: Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions

QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland

QS: Quacquarelli Symonds

RAE: Research Assessment Exercise

REF: Research Excellence Framework

RTC: Regional Technical College

SFI: Science Foundation Ireland

STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

TCD: Trinity College Dublin

TFEU: Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

THE: Times Higher Education

TSSG: Telecommunications Software and Systems Group

TU: Technological University

TUI: Teachers' Union of Ireland

UCC: University College Cork

UCD: University College Dublin

UCG: University College Galway (see NUIG)

UK: United Kingdom

UL: University of Limerick

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

USA: United States of America

WIT: Waterford Institute of Technology

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

> Over the past twenty-five years, higher education system structures in several countries have tended to blur divides that had become over-simplified or simplistic. In some cases they have been abolished altogether, *to be replaced by more sophisticated and integrated systems* that are a better fit for purpose. In others *the binary divide had been reinforced*, but often with far stronger delineation than has been applied to the Irish system. What is common among the systems is a search for more mission clarity and diversity. The Panel believes that mission diversity can be achieved and mission drift stemmed more efficiently through the funding mechanism and the requirement for an institution to demonstrate that it can deliver the outputs from teaching, research engagement and other activity that it has contracted to deliver (emphasis added, HEA, August 2012, p.13).

As this quotation suggests, higher education (HE) in several countries is more than ever at a crossroads, at both macro (system structure) and micro-levels (institutional). Several European Union (EU) Member States have already embarked on major reforms pertaining to organisational and structural issues (Germany, 2005-2007; Finland, 2010; France, 2008; Ireland, 2011). This quotation reflects Kyvik's discussion on whether binary systems, that are the most common structure of HE found in Europe will become the dominant form of HE found in Europe or whether it is just a stage in the process of convergence towards a unified system of the likes in Spain and the United Kingdom (UK) (2004, p.406), based on Neave's (1983) argument that all HE systems display a dynamic towards integration, even though national policies are geared towards the preservation of a strong binary divide. A striking feature is the sheer number of reforms happening across Europe, as well as the use of common priorities and policies within European countries' reform agendas. The system level will be the primary angle for an in-depth study of documentary evidence on differentiation and its implications for the organisation of the Irish HE system. However, the institutional level cannot be disassociated from the system level, of which it is an inherent part. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are the building blocks of a HE system and therefore this study will examine the perspectives of both policy-makers and institutional representatives.

This thesis sets out to offer a national perspective to those complex changes occurring at the macro-level in European HE systems. I will focus on a single-case study (Yin, 2009, p.47) of the Irish HE system and the proposed 'modernisation' agenda for its HE. The single-case study is a research tool that allows for an in-depth investigation that will "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, international relations and the maturation of industries" (Yin, 2009, p.3). The real-life phenomenon under investigation is differentiation in the role and mission of universities and institutes of technology (IoTs), excluding private colleges, since the adoption of the Lisbon Agenda in March 2000. The Lisbon European Council set a broad yet ambitious target for the Union to become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth" (http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm) with important ramifications for HE systems and institutions.

There are two types of differentiation central to this study. Horizontal differentiation is concerned with how HEIs differentiate between themselves in terms of what they do. Vertical differentiation goes further and benchmarks those activities a HEI has chosen to offer against other HEIs catering for the same target audience, ultimately leading to increased competition and rankings that promote a hierarchy of HEIs (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, p.7). Horizontal differentiation suggests for example that some institutions be highly research intensive, while others will need to be almost completely focused on teaching (Hunt et al., 2011, p.70). Within research oriented institutions, it may also lead to differentiating between basic and applied research missions. The mission of HEIs will be influenced by a variety of factors including their regional role, history, original remit and their engagement with external actors such as

policy-makers: all of these factors will shape the type of activity they engage in, whether research or teaching oriented. However, a certain amount of vertical differentiation may also occur, in order to evaluate which institutions have the adequate profile to be considered highly research intensive and those who are not.

The case study is the most appropriate research strategy capable of capturing and explaining the complex causal links in real-life events (Yin, 2009, pp.13-15). Context is paramount if this research is to reflect the global, European, national and local realities that shape Irish HE. Decisions in HE are made at several, often competing levels, thus making the case study a warranted strategy of enquiry since, according to Schramm:

> The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result (1971, p.6).

According to Harpur roughly 90 per cent of Irish HEIs' income derives from exchequer funding (Harpur, 2010, p.58). Hence the perspective of the government on how a HE system should be structured cannot be ignored. However, this percentage has declined significantly since 2008, with a reduction in state funding per student by a staggering 30 per cent from 2008 to 2013, to the point where institutions such as Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD) claim that Exchequer funding now only accounts for about 50 per cent of their annual revenue of about 500 million euro, excluding research income (Donnelly, 2013). Nonetheless, 39 Irish HEIs are currently in receipt of public funding of over 1.5 billion euro annually and cater for some 200,000 students (HEA, April 2013, p.5; policy officer 1, DES).

The binary divide was legally constituted with the Institutes of Technology Act 2006. The following two tables (1.1 and 1.2) provide a brief overview of the Irish binary system of HE

in terms of key figures, with its seven universities and six affiliated colleges that are an integral part of the university sector as well as the fourteen IoTs that constitute the IoT sector. It should be noted that the Royal College of Surgeons is not a publicly funded institution.

Institution Name	Under-graduate students	Post-graduate students	Total overall student enrolment (Incl. flexible learning)	Core academic staff	Core support staff	Total Staff, including Contract Research & Specialist Staff	Total income (€000)
Dublin City University	7,186	3,013	10,954	472	404	1,209	139,161
National University of Ireland Galway	12,921	3,558	16,479	732	818	2,003	230,545
National University of Ireland Maynooth	6,469	1,853	9,485	260	287	749	96,903
Trinity College Dublin	11,492	4,776	16,486	680	1,072	2,819	276,746
University College Cork	13,400	3,817	17, 366	701	1, 013	2,507	286,615
University College Dublin	16,597	7,003	23, 600	944	1,140	2,978	362,154
University of Limerick	8,847	2,256	11,890	498	521	1,436	161,924
Universities Total:	**76,912**	**26,276**	**106,260**	**4,287**	**5,255**	**13,701**	**1,554,048**
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick	2,511	469	2,980	127	128	264	37,454
Saint Patrick's College, Drumcondra	1,838	756	2,594	136	75	214	30,975
Mater Dei Institute of Education	591	135	726	27	16	43	5,083
National College of Art and Design	976	169	1,145	68	71	140	14,546
Royal College of Surgeons	2,043	1,267	3,476	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Saint Angela's College, Sligo	572	292	900	56	55	110	10,373
Colleges Total:	**8,531**	**3,088**	**11,821**	**414**	**344**	**772**	**98,431**
Athlone IT	4,439	446	4,885	248	175	509	47,393
Cork IT	8,771	418	9,189	578	286	963	98,879
Dublin IT	13,023	2,381	15,459	1,020	721	1,888	191,375
Dun Laoghaire IADT	2,061	144	2,205	117	71	202	22,613
Dundalk IT	4,496	164	4,660	268	152	498	50,375
Galway-Mayo IT	6,323	167	6,523	352	269	647	63,590
IT Blanchardstown	2,398	47	2,525	115	74	210	21,065
IT Carlow	4,701	168	4,869	194	125	359	36,500

IT Sligo	4,209	133	5,275	262	158	461	45,575
IT Tallaght	3,994	144	4,754	190	114	335	38,067
IT Tralee	2,642	69	2,711	201	105	319	36,177
Letterkenny IT	2,833	136	2,969	179	132	335	35,033
Limerick IT	4,816	168	4,984	293	146	494	50,011
Waterford IT	7,283	791	8,074	501	255	890	85,990
IoTs Total:	**73,004**	**5,376**	**80,097**	**4,571**	**2,827**	**8,214**	**837,775**

Table 1.1: The Irish HE system: universities, colleges and IoTs (HEA, December 2013)

	Under-graduate students	**Post-graduate students**	**Total overall student enrolment (Incl. flexible learning)**	**Core academic staff**	**Core support staff**	**Total Staff, including Contract Research & Specialist Staff**	**Total income (€000)**
Universities Total:	76,912	26,276	106,260	4,287	5,255	13,701	1,554,048
Colleges Total:	8,531	3,088	11,821	414	344	772	98,431
IoTs Total:	73,004	5,376	80,097	4,571	2,827	8,214	837,775

Table 1.2: The Irish HE system: universities colleges and IoTs (HEA, December 2013)

Two early reports from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), one entitled **"A Council for National Awards and a College of Higher Education at Limerick"** (1969), the first ever report issued by the HEA and the other **"Higher Education in Dublin: A study of some emerging needs"** (1979) provide a window into government thinking in the early days of the binary divide in Ireland. It is generally recognised that the binary system was developed from the mid-1960s in the UK as an attempt to promote diversity through the setting up of two parallel sectors of HE, following Anthony Crosland's landmark speech given at Woolwich in 1965 (Taylor, 2003, p.267). Soon after the setting up of binary systems, "academic" and "institutional drift" were identified by scholars (Burgess, 1972; Neave 1979) and Irish policy-makers (HEA, 1979, p.39). Neave (1979) distinguishes between four types of drift that manifest themselves at different *loci*, including "policy drift" at the level of the central administration, "institutional drift" at the level of the individual establishment, "academic drift" at the Department/Faculty level and finally "drift in curricular emphasis" which manifests itself in the curriculum (p.155). These types of drift have implications for the

stability of the binary divide because all of them lead to HEIs in the non-university sector to resemble to some extent and at some level universities thereby diminishing the state of diversity within a HE system. Interviewees generally referred to "mission drift" in the Irish context and one of the aims of this thesis is to discover if this constitutes, "policy", "academic", "institutional drift" and/or "drift in curricular emphasis".

According to Trow, a central characteristic of mass HE, as opposed to elite education, is its relatively open admissions policy, with as a result a much more heterogeneous student body (2004, p.242). To British academics, this may seem to be a fitting description of the role played by the polytechnics and indeed their creation did indicate a move toward mass HE and the establishment of a binary system. However, Neave remarked that there was more in common between these two types of HEIs than some may care admit:

> The British move toward mass higher education extended elite criteria to the non-elite sector of polytechnics and colleges of education, thus giving rise to a far greater degree of homogeneity in patterns of access between the different sectors – university and non-university – than had ever existed. In short, mass higher education in Britain was elite higher education written a little larger (Neave, 1985, p.350).

The objectives and priorities that can be extracted from reports are crucial to our understanding of the current Irish binary HE system. Participants from the Irish public sector in the Department of Education and Skills (DES), Enterprise Ireland, Forfás, the HEA, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) expressed similar concerns to those policy-makers in the 1970s. Maintaining the binary system transpires to have been as much a priority then as it is now. Several policy documents recently issued support to this statement including the **"National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030"**, hereafter referred to as Hunt Report (Hunt et al., 2011, pp.96-98), the **"Criteria for Designation to Technological University Status"** (June 2011, pp.2-3) and a letter from the Minister for Education and Skills to the Chair of the HEA (May 2013)

regarding the report on **"system reconfiguration, inter-institutional collaboration and system governance in Irish higher education"**, hereafter referred to as report on "system reconfiguration" (2013, p.9).

However, in a document published by the HEA **"Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape"**, it is stated that, as identified in the Hunt Report, there is a "need to move beyond a simplistic binary notion of a HE system, towards a system of coherent, diverse, and well-coordinated HEIs, capable of meeting the social and economic needs of the country" (HEA, February 2012, p.5). What exactly this "move" entails is hard to predict.

The binary divide is the core structure of the Irish HE system, enabling diversity to be preserved at sectoral level. I will be reporting and analysing the perceptions of academics, HE administrators, lobby group representatives, civil servants, policy analysts and policy-makers on sectoral diversity and mission differentiation between the two broad university and vocational sectors, but also on differentiation and diversity within each sector. I will seek to bring to the fore another aspect of mission differentiation that many interviewees were keen to add to their perspective of the binary divide, that of differentiation between HEIs within both the university and IoT sectors.

Research Questions

The first research question explored how differentiation has manifested itself in the Irish HE sector since 2000. The second research question examined whether the traditional binary structure of the Irish HE system has been reinforced or diluted in the early twenty-first century. The third research question analysed whether HE policies have tended to encourage

sharper differentiation in the role and functions of HEIs. Finally, the fourth research question explored the extent which national HE policies and institutional strategies are influenced by EU policy approaches promoting the 'modernisation' of HE.

1. **How has differentiation manifested itself in the HE sector in Ireland since 2000?**

2. **Has the traditional binary structure of the Irish HE system been reinforced or diluted in the early twenty-first century?**

3. **Have national HE policies tended to promote greater differentiation in the role and functions of HEIs?**

4. **To what extent are HE policies and institutional strategies informed by EU policy approaches for the 'modernisation' of HE?**

Personal background and rationale for study

My interest in HE stems from the diversity of my own student academic career. Having enrolled in Law and Political Science at undergraduate level (*Licence* and *Maîtrise*) in France, International Relations at Master's level (MPhil) in the UK, and studied at Master's (LLM) level (and now at PhD level) in Ireland, I have experienced several learning styles within a varied set of HEIs, each with their own distinctive institutional profile, mission and teaching methods. I believe that having experienced the entire three-cycle degree system (undergraduate/graduate/doctoral), each of which was spent in a different European HE system, has allowed me to experience first-hand contrasting HE cultures by getting a sense of

their relative size and structure (binary versus unified, hierarchical versus uniform), competing ideologies (e.g., funding), priorities and/or issues (accountability, admissions, autonomy, grading, mergers). This put me in a favourable position to establish points of comparison, while also increasing my awareness about how European agendas were being implemented, such as the two-year Continental model of a Master course that is still uncommon in the UK and Ireland. I have therefore been in direct contact with both converging, and diverging, currents in HE policy-making within the three HE systems I studied in. This sharpened my interest as to why neighbouring countries, all of whom are members of a larger regional Union, have such differing HE traditions, with varying requirements in terms of duration, admissions and structure. Having also participated in the Erasmus programme in the course of my undergraduate degree, I have also been exposed to issues every exchange student faces such as the recognition of study periods and the use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), all of which are tools towards creating a stronger EHEA with converging HE systems, as argued by Thrift, 2008, p.17.

The first purpose of this research is to understand the historical context and nature of the Irish binary HE system as classified as such in the literature by Clancy (1989), Kyvik (2004), Harpur (2010) and Walsh (2014) and the extent to which the binary divide is being affected by recent policy changes such as the drive for greater diversity of mission and the establishing of TUs as official government policy (Quinn, 2013, p.3). This study will analyse stakeholders' perceptions on the accuracy of the binary divide in characterising the system structure of Irish HE. This will also mean taking into account interviewees' perceptions on the extent of "policy", "institutional", "academic drift" and "drift in curricular emphasis" that has occurred between the two sectors and whether the binary model has been eroded as a

result of any identified 'drift' or whether instead national policy changes resulted in significant differentiation at sectoral or institutional level. Another purpose of this research is to verify the extent of EU influence in Irish policy-making in the HE arena and its impact on national policies.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter is divided into five parts. In the first part, I will introduce the relevant concepts and definitions (I) with regard to HE that will provide a firm grounding and understanding of structural system level issues. A historical perspective will position HE issues within competing ideologies around the concept of a university (II) that emerged in the nineteenth century on what a university, and a university education, should seek to accomplish for both individuals and society. A focus on HE systems and their classification into various organisational models (Kyvik, 2004) will provide for an understanding of the evolution of HE systems from "elite" to "mass" to "universal" (Trow, 1973) (III). With this in mind, my attention will then be devoted to present the multiple understandings of differentiation, the focus of my research, and in particular horizontal and vertical differentiation, which are the cement and mortar in the reconfiguration of modern HE systems (IV). I will then present the contemporary European context surrounding the development of HE. The involvement of the EU in HE will be examined, in particular the incremental level of European policy-making in this arena since 2000, a controversial departure from its initial limited focus on vocational education (V). Part VI will be devoted to presenting HE reform in Ireland and contextualising it within the larger European and international debate.

Part I: Concepts

I shall explore various concepts central to the HE lexicon, starting from a broad holistic approach of the sector as a whole before narrowing it down to the components of the system, their relationship to one another and to the whole. Since "HE system" seems to imply that

there exists a "macro-structure of higher education" (Teichler, 2004, p.3), I will focus on explaining this concept, and its alternative expressions in subsequent decades, in particular those used by the OECD.

The "type" or "model" a HE system belongs to is of crucial importance to understand at what stage in the evolution of HE systems it belongs, according to the evolution theory of HE systems as developed by P. Scott (1995) and Kyvik (2004). Using the typology defined by P. Scott (1995) and further refined by Kyvik (2004) provides us with a useful framework for comparison and for understanding the evolution some HE systems have undergone to move from one model to another, whether they were or still are "university-dominated", "dual", "binary", "unified" or "stratified" (Kyvik, 2004). Following this, I will examine the role played by HEIs within these 'HE systems' and that of EU strategies tailored towards developing a knowledge-based economy in influencing organic developments within higher education systems. I shall from then on introduce the concepts of diversity, differentiation (both horizontal and vertical), dedifferentiation and stratification as they are central to HE systems' structure and classification according to various organisational models. These internal processes are crucial in shaping a HE system and can quickly become popular policy trends in the eyes of governments and some university leaders eager to rationalise a growing system in times of continuous expanding enrolment and limited public resources. Even in the case where resources have suddenly increased, as in France or Germany, this sudden unexpected source of income is streamlined towards a group of selected HEIs, thus reinforcing differentiation even in times of significantly increased public funding.

2.1 Understanding the macro-structure of higher education

As discussed by Teichler, referring to HE as a "system" is a relatively recent concept, occurring post-1945, whereby:

> The idea of a higher education system emerged only after World War II: an understanding according to which universities are embedded into a system; the view, that the various persons and institutions which are considered as belonging to a higher education system have much together, are interrelated, are positioned within a larger orbit, and possibly treated as an entity by actors and social entities outside this system (2008, p.356).

Indeed until then, and arguably in some cases even today, individuals working in HE or HEIs themselves would consider themselves as "singular entities with various loose linkages (to knowledge, to academia, to the government, to the nation, to the globe) without any single of these references viewed as clearly dominant" (Teichler, 2008, p.356). This is no longer true, or at least to much less of an extent, since as Bleiklie pointed out, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, one can observe a "development whereby higher education institutions become part of formally defined higher education systems" (2005, p.32). It is these HE systems that are the subject of my enquiry since they harbour HEIs and represent an outlet for government policies pertaining to HE. Looking from different perspectives enables a study of the system as a whole, taking into consideration system structure issues that require top down approaches as well as the system-level implications of HEIs' strategies. A system includes the individual HEIs, whose existence and relationships with one another form, in a bottom up fashion, the constellation known as 'HE system'. In this sense, both structural and institutional levels are closely intertwined.

2.1.1 "University" versus "higher" versus "tertiary" higher education systems

In order to prevent confusion, it is worth noting that the terms describing the post-war systems have changed over time and depending on the user. First came a "university" system, used exclusively to encompass only traditional universities while disregarding any other type

of institution that offered post-secondary education. This terminology can be found in most OECD publications of the 1960s. The term "system" then spread to include not only universities but other HEIs. Policy documents would then refer to "higher" education systems which implied a certain level of commonality between these different institutions with universities nonetheless at the "apex of the system (except for France)" (Teichler, 2008, p.356). From the 1980s onwards, the OECD began to systematically replace the term "higher" with "tertiary". However, although it might be more appropriate to refer to a "tertiary" HE system from the perspective of an international organisation, the majority of OECD members preferred to continue to define their system as a "higher" education system (Teichler, 2008, p.356). This could be because by using the term "tertiary education" one suggests that "learning at this stage has so much in common across institutions, as far as external expectations and internal dynamics are concerned, that the structural borderlines between 'higher' and other 'tertiary' education got blurred and lost relevance" (Teichler, 2004, p.3). For some countries keen on maintaining a binary or stratified system, this may not be desirable, and maintaining a distinction may seem more important to them than recognising that learning has much in common at the higher level (post-secondary). However, even the OECD distinguishes between a "tertiary-type A" education and a "tertiary-type B" one. The former is more theory-based and designed to provide access to either further advanced research programmes or professions with high skills requirements, principally but not exclusively offered by universities. The "tertiary-type B" sub-division refers to an education focused on practical, technical or occupational skills directly relevant to the labour market and is generally of a shorter length than "tertiary-type A" programmes (OECD, Glossary of Statistical Terms). This seems to indicate that subdivisions are a necessity and that there is still a visible boundary between a vocational type of HE and/or training and a more general, less utilitarian type of HE. With regard to the Irish HE system, this would

mean placing the sub-degree programmes offered by DIT and the IoTs into "tertiary-type B", while the full-time degree programmes offered by both the fourteen IoTs, and the seven Irish universities would fall under the "tertiary-type A" category (OECD, 2004, p.6).

Other terms gained popularity in the last decades of the twentieth century, including "post-secondary" and "third-level" adding to potential confusion as to what was being referred to (Teichler, 2004, p.3). For these reasons, and because the purpose of this thesis is to discover how and why differentiation is occurring in Ireland, in contrast to signs indicating a convergence or blurriness of missions between all HEIs (Burgess, 1972; Neave, 2008; Witte, Van der Wende & Huisman, 2008), I shall refer to "HE systems" throughout this thesis.

Part II: Historical context

What is a university? Finding a definition that encompasses the beliefs and interests of every stakeholder while matching with the reality of what is being taught, researched and how this is being conducted is by no means easy. From a tight community of scholars and students in the Medieval Ages to the idea of a "multiversity" (Kerr, 2001) best represented by the large American university that harbours a whole series of communities and a full range of activities held together by little except for a common name and a common governing board, much has changed. Provocatively, Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, compared the modern university to a series of schools and departments held together by nothing more than a central heating system (Collini, 2012, p.41).

2.2 Aims of the medieval university

The concerns voiced and recorded in university charters (Naples and Copenhagen university charters in Kivinen & Poikus, 2006, pp.196-197) underline the importance for a state to be able to capitalise on a reliable source of qualified manpower. For a local ruler to retain and constitute a pool of talent necessary for the administration of the kingdom, he or she needed a university, and even if they themselves took the initiative to create a college it was preferable to have it recognised by either the Pope or the Emperor (Kivinen & Poikus, 2006, p.198). From the beginning, the training of public servants was one of the main functions of universities. This statement can be "deduced from the fact that the curriculum has always been formed to meet public needs to a great extent" (Kivinen & Poikus, 2006, p.201) implying that what universities have taught was always moulded by the needs of their society.

2.3 The birth of the modern scientific university

Humboldt's visionary nine pages memorandum of 1810 was designed for a different kind of university than before, one with a strong scientific mission and at the service of the state but enjoying autonomy to pursue its academic mission. Humboldt's memorandum stressed the fact that a university that limited itself to blindly follow the short term objectives dictated by the State would not only represent a failure to the State but also as a university (Elton, 2008, p.225). In any case, as argued by Iñiguez, Humboldt's university: "created the template for contemporary Western European universities" (Iñiguez, 2009) by gathering all disciplines and structuring them into schools and departments according to area of knowledge within one single institution, or *Alma Mater* (Ridder-Symoens, 2006, p.375).

University reform reached a whole new level in Berlin with the creation of a university based on an entirely new ideology in 1810 (Kerr, 2001, p.8). Humboldt managed to convince the King of Prussia to establish a university built on the liberal ideas of the philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, despite the King's inclination to follow the French model inherited from the Revolution that gave prominence to vocational schools and the transmission of practical knowledge which "served the common good" (Rüegg, 2011, p.10). According to Schleiermacher, the purpose of the university was to go further than passing on recognised and directly applicable knowledge, a mission that should be entrusted to (secondary) schools, but instead to transfer the skills and research methods needed to discover new knowledge through independent enquiry. This pursuit of scholarship (*Wissenshaft*) was central and had to be distinguished from the kind of scholarship that was being pursued at other levels of education:

> The university, in contrast with school, should treat scholarship always in terms of not yet completely solved problems, whether or not in research or teaching, pure or applied, while school is concerned essentially with agreed and accepted knowledge (Elton, 2008, p.225).

In the words of Schleiermacher, the function of the university was to "stimulate the idea of science in the minds of the students, to encourage them to take account of the fundamental laws of the science in all their thinking" (as cited in Rüegg, 2004, p.5). A more holistic approach to education encouraging independent enquiry, as well as character development and self-cultivation (*Bildung*), was to be instilled in the new type of university. This multidisciplinary institution was to bear the name of two brothers, whose faces appear side by side on the university crest, thus embracing and integrating equally both the Sciences and the Humanities, since Alexander was an explorer and naturalist, while Wilhelm was a philosopher and educator (Barkhoff, 2012, p.5).

Humboldt's vision of a university was based on three core principles. Three principles needed to be bound together in this new type of institution according to Humboldt. Firstly, the unity of research and teaching, or at least an indirect link between the two (Elton, 2008, p.226), implied a more collaborative relationship between student and staff, paramount to the effective transmission of knowledge and methods to seek it. Effectively, this meant that both research and teaching were to be carried on within the same institution. Humboldt's university emphasised the role of Science as an essential attribute of the modern research university. Secondly, the freedom of teaching should be guaranteed. Last but not least, the principle of academic self-governance was central (Carpenter & McMullen, 2011, p.73). Nonetheless, the foundation concepts behind the University of Berlin discussed above gave this university a valid claim to be, at least in Continental Europe, the "mother of all modern universities" (Humboldt University of Berlin website, *Short History*).

2.4 Cardinal Newman's definition of the university

> A University is, according to the usual designation, an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill (Newman, 2009, pp.144-145).

The recurrent question of what constitutes a university was perhaps initially most comprehensively answered by John Henry Cardinal Newman, in his collection of inaugural lectures for the Catholic University of Ireland, of which he was to be the first Rector (1854-1859). In "The Idea of a University" (1852), he presented his vision of what this institution should represent and strive to create:

> What an empire is in political history, such is a University in the sphere of philosophy and research. It is, as I have said, the high protecting power of all knowledge and science, of fact and principle, of inquiry and discovery, of experiment and speculation; it maps out the territory of the intellect, and sees that the boundaries of each province are religiously respected, and that there is neither encroachment nor surrender on any side. It acts as umpire between truth and truth, and, taking into account the nature and

> importance of each, assigns to all their due order of precedence. It maintains no one department of thought exclusively, however ample and noble; and it sacrifices none. It is deferential and loyal, according to their respective weight, to the claims of literature, of physical research, of history, of metaphysics, of theological science. It is impartial towards them all, and promotes each in its own place and for its own object (Newman, 2009, p.459).

He believed that the university was a forum for the sharing and testing of ideas through the channel of personal relationships. According to this ideal type, a university education should seek to be of benefit not only to the individual but also to the society he belongs to:

> A University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste... at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age... It is the education which gives [a person] a clear conscious view of his [or her] own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches [the individual] to disentangle a skein of thought and to discard what is irrelevant (Newman, 2009, pp.177-178).

His focus on "liberal knowledge" as opposed to "useful knowledge" which he was convinced was a good "deal of trash" (Kerr, 2001, p.2) reflected his Oxford roots and the classical elite conception of the university. This opinion clashes with utilitarian views, then and later, of what a university education should encompass.

2.5 Contemporary ideas of the University

According to Rüegg (1992, p.xix-xx) European universities have performed various roles in economies and societies throughout their remarkably long history. Generalising from this history, it has been argued that three of the most important functions at the heart of universities' activities include research and teaching, elite selection and education and support for the local development of culture and society (Mazza, Quattrone & Riccaboni, 2008, p.2). These authors go on to insist that what is often considered nowadays to be one of the problems with universities, in particular their propensity towards internal differentiation and fragmentation, is on the contrary what permitted their persistence. According to them,

"making, or attempting to make, universities as homogeneous as possible and assuming that there is a homogenous model which could serve as a benchmark, would mean the end of this institution" (Mazza et al., 2008, p.2). It is this fragmentation within universities which enables them to capture the outside light and reflect it in new ways, translating it into valuable information for our societies. Within this context, universities are a tool to understand the outside world. The "house of diversity" within HEIs is what permits these venerable institutions to cultivate those "features, skills and capabilities which allow the possibility of intercepting new and emerging trends in various realms of society and the economy" (Mazza et al., 2008, p.2). The persistence and expansion of universities is due to this difficulty for the individual institution to act as a unified body. By conceptualising universities as *genius loci* they strengthen their argument that the university is first of all a place of encounters. Its main feature would then be to act as a "space (and a physical one) where the encounter of different interests, agendas, social backgrounds and the like can happen" (Mazza et al., 2008, p.2).

The authors illustrate this by demonstrating that this is one of the main features of the University of Oxford. The latter sets the scene, through college dinners for instance, and provides a favourable environment conducive to "serendipitous encounters" (Mazza, et al., 2008, p.2) that will materialize into thriving research projects. The result of these encounters, be it knowledge creation, education, policy advice and so on is in a way instrumental but certainly not central to the persistence of the institution. However, this vision of university is not shared by policy-makers, who seem to favour a culture of reward and incentives based on research performance, which is regularly assessed, for instance through the former Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK, replaced in 2014 with the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

Rüegg once claimed that "the university is a European institution; indeed, it is the European institution *par excellence*" and the "only European institution that has preserved its fundamental patterns and its basic social role and functions over the course of history" (1992, pp.xix-xx) although the amount of internal change the university had to absorb due to the external environment had a significant impact on its mission at various points in time. This particular longevity in itself makes this institution worthy of study, but what makes it perhaps even more interesting to examine is how its "fundamental pattern" and "basic social role and functions" have been put to the test in the twenty-first century, after nine centuries of preserved traditions and way of doing things. Indeed, the last two decades have seen major changes in the HE landscape, with HEIs bending to a variety of pressures, both public and private, with ambitious shared objectives crystallising in the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations at the very end of the twentieth century, and the Lisbon Agenda agreed upon in 2000, setting the ambitious goal for Europe to become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" (Lisbon European Council, 23-24 March, 2000). All these regional and transnational agreements have affected HE in an unprecedented way.

Universities are facing a new era; that of the knowledge-based economy. The EC has taken the view that HEIs must yet once more adapt and is pushing forward its modernisation agenda, in a sustained attempt to induce member states to redesign their HE systems in a similar and harmonised way.

Part III: Understanding higher education systems

2.6 Classifying higher education systems: five organisational models

P. Scott (1995) and Kyvik (2004) developed a taxonomy of HE systems that includes five categories. These are the "university dominated systems", the "dual systems", the "binary systems", the "unified systems" and the "stratified systems", all of which but the last are found in Western Europe. Remarkably, according to these authors, France remained unclassifiable, although Regini (2008) would argue that the French HE system has been binary ever since Napoleon established the prestigious *Grandes Ecoles*, the latter being vocationally-oriented institutes of higher technical education (*Ecole Polytechnique*, *Ecole Centrale*, *Ecole des Mines*). They offer a more practical curriculum than the general universities and extremely rigorous selection procedures, thereby guaranteeing them a higher status than the universities (Regini, 2011, p.14), which do not have any specific entrance requirements other than achieving a Pass grade in the French Baccalaureate.

A more in-depth analysis of this classification of HE systems is necessary at this stage. Kyvik's typology of HE systems, largely inspired from the one previously developed by P. Scott (1995) gives a strong grounding upon which one can anchor the heterogeneous Western European HE systems. For the sake of offering an overview and analysis of structural changes on which to build his argument according to which the various Western European countries are converging towards a common structural model (either towards a "binary system" or a "unified" albeit hierarchical system as found in the UK) for the organisation of their HE systems he presents and discusses the five main organisational models. Kyvik (2004) is aware that this classification of HE systems into five organisational models is a simplification of the "heterogeneous patterns of these systems" (p.395) but classifications of the sort do permit us to appreciate more fully the diversity of HE systems found in Western Europe. This initial diversity, at the system level, is essential to take into account since he is

examining to what extent the various countries, with originally such diverse HE systems, are actually converging towards a common structural model.

2.6.1 From university-dominated systems to dual systems of higher education

In "university-dominated systems", universities or university-level specialised colleges were the only institutions regarded as HEIs (in contrast to institutions offering short-cycle vocational programmes). They were the norm throughout Western Europe until the early 1960s and from there on, HE systems gradually evolved due to various external factors such as growing student numbers and repeated calls from industry for a supply of well qualified workers. These environmental changes affected HE systems and effectively shaped them in a way that would take into account the various demands from students and employers first and foremost by recognizing short-cycle vocational programmes (nursing, teacher training...) as HE. A more vocational sector needed to be set up and structured, one that would increase graduates' employability:

> Vocationalism emphasises preparing students with the skills they need for work, particularly generic or employability skills. It is based on a notion of the human actor as one who instrumentally invests in education that will develop their human capital and position them in employment markets (Wheelahan, 2012, p.43).

The official recognition of these institutions as HEIs led to the development of "dual systems" that catered for both a university sector and a non-university sector that were considered separate and accordingly treated differently. In the mid-1960s, amidst the planning of its future HE landscape, Ireland already had what Clancy (1989) refers to as an embryonic "binary structure". However, the system was characterised by a clear domination of the university sector. The non-university sector was only a minor partner in the HE equation, not least because quantitatively the technological colleges in Dublin catered for less

than five per cent of full-time registered students attending state-aided institutions in 1965/1966. Institutions were also subject to different public and private (religious) regulations, depending on whose authority they were placed, whether the Department of Education, or the Churches in the case of the former eight colleges of education (Clancy, 1989, p.112). For these reasons Kyvik (2004) would categorise the Irish HE system at this stage as presenting the characteristics of a "dual system" (p.394). It was the non-university sector that was to expand the most dramatically in the 1970s, as five regional technical colleges (RTCs) established in 1970 and another four were established between 1971 and 1977. They were under direct control of the DES. Their mission, purpose and role were entirely dependent on meeting perceived vocational priorities (Clancy, 1989, p.118). The vocational emphasis in HE policy was by no means restricted to the development of the RTC system. It was also the driving force behind the creation of the two NIHEs and has certainly influenced course provision in the university colleges. In this sense, it pervaded the Irish HE system as a whole throughout the late 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s (Clancy, 1989, p.118).

2.6.2 Binary systems

This constellation of different types of HEIs evolved and was further institutionalised from the mid-sixties in the UK with what Kyvik describes as a more "formalized version of a dual system" (Kyvik, 2004, p.394); namely the "binary system". Remarkably, Finland was the only Western European HE system that resisted this trend up until 1991 when it finally established for the first time, and on an experimental basis, a higher vocational education sector that would rapidly evolve into a fully-fledged "binary system" (Välimaa, 2004, p.40). The "binary system" is notably characterised as being subjected to a common system of regulations which was not the case under the "dual system" where an often very large number

of paraprofessional specialised institutions were governed by various public regulations (Kyvik, 2004, p.394). The number of institutions in the non-university sector also tends to be smaller, since the organisation of the sector is based on multidisciplinary centres located according to geographical criteria and requires many of the small and specialised institutions found in "dual systems" to merge into a more manageable *ensemble*. "Binary systems" are still the most common model and may be found in ten countries in Western Europe, including Ireland (Kyvik, 2004, p.396). Interestingly, although Kyvik classifies the Swedish HE system as binary (2004, p.396) recent literature refers to Sweden as a unitary system (Askling, 2001, p.160; Silander, Haake & Lindberg, 2013, p.174), and indeed according to the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance the Swedish HE system is unitary. In the previously binary Swedish HE system, a first reform in 1977 contained elements of a unified system, with the introduction of the *högskolan* ("university college") as a joint concept designating both universities and colleges (Kyvik, 2004, pp.400-401). However, it was then more appropriate to refer to the Swedish HE system as a "concealed binary system" (Bauer, 2000, p.159), because both types of HEIs continued to use their respective titles and operate different functions in society, with the colleges focussing on teaching and the universities on research activities. Askling nonetheless identified a blurring of the "lines in the former binary structure (between universities and colleges under the common label "higher education") (2001, p.160) and in particular a collapse of the binary structure with regard to research activities as early as the beginning of the 1990s (p.159). The distinction between the two types of HEIs has been unstable, and in the late 1990s, three multidisciplinary colleges were upgraded to university status. Sweden currently has 40 institutions (Ireland has 39), including 15 universities, 10 university colleges with the right to award doctorates and 12 university colleges without such rights (Silander et al., 2013, p.174).

2.6.3 Ireland's binary system

Kyvik (2004) presents Ireland as a prime example of this HE structural evolution from a "university-dominated system" to a "binary system" via the less formalised and more disparate "dual system". Indeed, by the early 1970s, a plethora of multidisciplinary RTCs offering short-cycle vocational programmes were created to fulfil the new requirements of both economic utilitarianism (Clancy, 1989, p.117) and increased social demand with ever larger cohorts of students entering HE (Kyvik, 2004, p.401). Engineering, applied sciences and business administration were amongst the most popular programmes taught in these colleges which were redesignated "institutes of technology" (IoTs) in 1998. They now form a network of 14 IoTs, including the previously established Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), with a higher technological sector, one of the two distinct HE sectors present in Ireland alongside the university sector. McCoy and Smyth (2010) have even gone so far as to qualify this Irish "binary system" as comprising of a first-tier university sector and a second-tier IoT sector with both having distinct historical contexts as well as different positions within Irish education (McCoy & Smith, 2010, p.243). In addition to these IoTs, there are now seven teacher training colleges known as colleges of education and a number of small, specialised colleges (Kyvik, 2004, p.401).

2.6.4 Unified systems – the UK

The first "unified system" in Western Europe appeared in the UK in 1992, following the upgrading of the polytechnics (the non-university sector) to the status of university. This was the result of an institutional and academic drift of the polytechnics but also, of a stronger vocational orientation of traditional universities (Kyvik, 2004, p.403). This means mission

drift stemmed from both the university and the vocational/polytechnic sectors. "Upward academic drift" had already appeared in the mid-nineteenth century in England. Although the initial curriculum offered by the first two colleges of the University of London was a conscious departure from the traditional Oxbridge model, rivalries between King's and University College subsequently led to "upward academic drift" (Rothblatt, 1988, p.130).

In the late 1980s, the two sectors were interlocked in a destructive competitive relationship for students and research funding. This was damaging to the binary system and ultimately making the division it was supposed to institutionalise meaningless as both types of institutions were increasingly similar with regards to the breadth of activities offered. In contrast, other countries such as Ireland acted to maintain a binary system (Reisz, 2013). "Unified systems" were also created by either merging universities with polytechnics (Australia) or by integrating vocational post-secondary institutions into universities (Spain) (Kyvik, 2004, p.395).

2.6.5 Stratified systems

The final model of HE suggested by Kyvik is the "stratified system". It is relevant to note that Kyvik does not consider any Western European HE system to fully match the characteristics of this model, which is best represented by the United States of America (USA), whose HE system is depicted as a "pyramidal structure" (Kyvik, 2004, p.395) with a large base comprising of a constellation of vocationally oriented community colleges all the way up to the small number of elite universities at its peak.

P. Scott (1995) however places the French HE system under the "stratified system" type whereas Kyvik concedes the imperfection of the five fit for all organisational models and suggests that France is the only country in Western Europe that cannot be placed within any of them, and it has perhaps best been described as "fragmented" (Jallade, 1992, p.124). Kyvik does however concede that the French HE system presents some elements of a stratified system. This is partly due to the division within the French traditional HE sector between the more vocational oriented *Grandes Ecoles* which essentially provide education for engineers and managers and the universities, which cater for over 80% of students enrolled in HE. The prestige of the *Grandes Ecoles* is in large part due to their extreme selectivity whereas universities operate an open admissions policy. Indeed, any student leaving the secondary level will be automatically admitted to the University of his *Académie* (Academy), provided he or she has passed the minimum matriculation requirements (see p.22).

This geographical allocation of a HEI and general right to participate in HE is one of the main *acquis* of the 1968 May student riots, a revolt against De Gaulle's government's attempt to reform the HE system in light of its sudden expansion with, amongst other measures, a plan to introduce selection at university entry (Deer, 2005, p.230). Short-cycle (2 years) vocational training is the responsibility of the *instituts universitaires de technologie* (IUT, university institutes of technology), which, to complicate matters further, are formally integrated into universities, not unlike in Australia with the merging of both polytechnics and universities initiated by federal education minister John Dawkins in the late 1980s (Milne, 2001, p.12), although they have been granted by law greater autonomy and can for example select their students and recruit their own staff, which other departments in the same university cannot. Prestige plays an important role in the attraction of HEIs (usually defined by the level of selectivity) in the French HE system and translates into increased job

opportunities, and the variety of institutions with different roles and expectations from their graduates does seem to reflect some elements of a "stratified system" but it cannot be said that it possesses the same pyramidal structure found in the USA.

With regards to the American system and its stratified, "pyramidal" structure, the "California Master Plan" of 1960 established a highly differentiated but coherent system, based on a three-tiered system, all fully integrated into this State's HE system, but nonetheless strongly stratified according to various tiers. At its head, the University of California System became the primary research institution of the state, admitting the top 12.5% of high school graduates within its various campuses such as Berkeley, Los Angeles and San Diego. The California State Colleges, which then became the California State University System, recruited its students from the top 33% of high school graduates and focused primarily on undergraduate teaching and some Master level courses. They were not expected (or funded) to engage in substantial research or to develop doctoral programmes, unless in collaboration with the University of California. Finally, at the base of the "pyramid", Community Colleges would cater for those who were admitted to neither of the above tiers, with the possibility for their successful graduates to transfer to either of the above (Kerr, 1994, pp.118-119). The "California Master Plan" is a good illustration of a "pyramidal structure", and had the merit of clearly differentiating, horizontally, the missions of the three levels of education. This enabled more efficient public funding tailored to the specific needs of the various HEIs while limiting unnecessary duplication of activities. At the same time, this policy of differentiation provided universal access to HE at a time when student numbers were growing drastically. Indeed, according to Trow (1973), the establishment of community colleges was a direct consequence of the transition from elite to mass HE, requiring a rethinking of HE structures.

Kyvik (2004) highlights a common pattern in the evolution of the structure of HE in a group of countries that includes Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland (pp.399-401). Kyvik goes further and discusses to what extent different Western European countries converge to a common structural model with regard to the organisation of their HE systems, either binary or whether unified unitary systems are the natural culmination of HE systems' development, using the UK and Australia as illustrations of HE systems who went from university dominated systems to unified systems, via, the dual and binary development stages. He refers to Neave (1983) who argued that all HE systems "display a dynamic towards integration" (Neave in Kyvik, p.406) even where national policies are aimed at preserving a binary or dual system. Revealingly, the passage from a binary to unified system in the UK was due to "clear institutional and academic drift of the polytechnics, combined with the stronger vocational orientation of traditional universities" (p.403). This led to a situation where the:

> Two sectors developed a strongly competitive relationship, ultimately destroying the binary system. This was primarily due to the comprehensive establishment of Master's and doctoral studies in the polytechnics, and the strong involvement by their staff in research activities (p.403).

I will attempt to demonstrate how Kyvik's theory, supported by Neave, of system convergence towards a unified system is resisted at the policy level in Ireland, as visible in the Hunt Report (2011, p.70; pp.96-97).

2.7 Interpreting higher education expansion trends

It was the American HE researcher Trow (1973) who coined the most popular terms that were to characterise quantitative development trends in HE (Teichler, 2004, p.4). Trow initially presented a linear model of development or transition, from "elite" (under 15 per cent), to "mass" (16-50 per cent) and then "universal" (above 50 per cent) HE (1973, pp.7-8).

The purpose of elite systems is to shape the minds and character of the future ruling class. However, traditional HEIs cannot expand indefinitely. They have structural limitations and in European countries, this means that enrolment rates going beyond 15 per cent require more fundamental alteration of the university system (Trow, 1973, p.7). In mass systems, institutions are still preparing elites, but they seek to prepare students for a broader range of technical and economic elite roles, the "emphasis shifts from the shaping of character to the transmission of skills for more specific technical elite roles" (Trow, 1973, p.8). Finally, universal HE systems' priority is to prepare the whole population for rapid social and technological change (Trow, 2005, p.1). In these systems, institutions are not primarily concerned with training elites, either broad or narrow, but the entire population and their main concern is to "maximize the adaptability of that population to a society whose chief characteristic is rapid social and technological change" (Trow, 1973, p.8).

2.7.1 Trow's revision to his linear model of development

Although this linear model received much criticism, in particular in Europe, where in 1978 HE expansion had been slower than expected, it has been useful in providing a framework for researchers to analyse the stratification of HE and in understanding the diversity and levels of differentiation between HEIs found within mass and universal systems (Wheelahan, 2012, pp.42-43). Trow later admitted that his "analysis of the movement of European Systems toward an American-style system of mass higher education [was] simply wrong in the light of what has happened since 1973" (Trow, 1987, p.187).

While discussing the caveats of the three phases of HE, which he presents as "models" or "ideal-types" (Trow, 2005, p.1), Trow warns against accepting the description of any of the

aforementioned phases on its own to adequately represent the totality and complexity of a HE system. He combines a structural argument to his quantitative one, whereby mass HE developed alongside elite HE, as a separate and additional layer, providing HE opportunities for a larger pool of prospective students, but with different characteristics to the persisting "elite education" offered in the "elite sector" (Teichler, 2004, p.4). The transition of a system from elite to mass and from mass to universal HE did not equate to a removal of the forms and patterns of the prior phase or phases. Rather, the elite and mass systems were subsumed and integrated so that their role and function continued within the universal system. This means that even within a mass HE system, elite HEIs can flourish, while elite functions may also be performed within non elite mass institutions. In the same way, both elite and non-elite mass institutions may survive and flourish in nations moving toward universal access (Trow, 2005, p.36).

2.7.2 European participation and attainment targets in higher education

If one relates this linear model of development towards universal systems with EU predictions that the move towards an increasingly global and knowledge-based economy (EC, 2006, p.2) will require more highly qualified graduates, then the logical conclusion is that national participation and attainment targets must be increased, pressing unrelentingly towards Trow's (1973) description of universal systems. The EC has estimated that 35 per cent of all jobs will require high-level qualifications by 2020, but currently only 26 per cent of the workforce holds a HE degree (EC, 2011, p.2).

Continuous expansion trends meant that HE systems became increasingly stratified (Wheelahan, 2012, p.48). The new, larger circles representing mass and universal HE now

surround, but do not necessarily mix with the original core elite system. There is much debate on the level of penetration or mobility between circles. Trow argued that the stratification of HE into elite, mass and universal systems was the only economically sustainable way for democratic nations to ensure HE opportunities to a majority while simultaneously preserving the traditional role of the elite sector in training the social elites (Wheelahan, 2012, p.48). This was reiterated by Clark Kerr, President of the University of California and strong advocate for differentiation as a means to enable universal access while delineating excellence within a three-tiered Californian public higher education system (Highman, 2012, p.144):

> I feared that atomistic competition would lead to all institutions seeking to homogenize themselves with similar academic missions as research universities... So I had in mind that we wanted universal access, but we also wanted a margin of excellence as well (Kerr, 1994, p.120).

Mass HE has been essentially identified as a post-World War II phenomenon common to all Western nations. At the start of the twentieth century, these nations harboured an "elite" HE that catered for roughly one per cent of the student cohort graduating from secondary level, except for America where a slightly higher percentage (two-four per cent) of this cohort enrolled in universities (Rothblatt, 2012, p.16). In the UK, in the early nineteenth century there were only 5,000 students enrolled in the seven existing ancient universities of Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews, Glasgow, Marischal College, King's College (which would both merge into the university of Aberdeen in 1860) and Edinburgh. With the advent of the seven new civic universities, starting with University College London, this figure would rise only to 20,000 by the end of the nineteenth century (Smith & Langslow, 1999, pp.148-149), a number that would correspond today to the total aggregate of students of a single British university.

In the 1950s and 1960s, there seemed to be a general consensus amongst the economically advanced countries that the expansion of HE opportunities was vital for economic growth but HE was still "elite", with only five per cent of the respective age group enrolled in HE programmes in 1950 (Teichler, 2004, pp.4-6). Policies were implemented to remedy this low enrolment rate and in 2000, OECD figures suggested that over 40 per cent of the respective age group of the economically advanced countries was registered in HE programmes, a percentage that was above 50 per cent when a wider definition of "tertiary education" was employed (Teichler, 2004, p.4). This has led to yet another shift whereby industrialised states are progressively moving towards universal systems of HE, whose purpose is to prepare the entire population for rapid social and technological change (Wheelahan, 2012, p.42).

2.8 Higher education economics

British politician and statesman Joseph Chamberlain once said, as early as 1902 that:

> University competition between states is as potent as competition in building battleships, and it is on that ground that our university conditions become of the highest possible national concern (as cited in Armytage, 1955, p.247).

In the following century, a similar concern was reiterated, directed towards the HE system level, by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997-2007), at a special interview given at the London School of Business and Finance (LSBF) with David Blunkett, previously his Secretary of State for Education (1997-2001):

> Your education system, if it's done properly, becomes a major part of your economy; it doesn't just serve your economy, it's a major part of your economy (Blair as cited in Cunnane, 2012).

Willetts emphasised the role of the Midlands in rebalancing the British economy, a goal which could only be achieved through "meshing enterprise and manufacturing with training, learning and research" (Willetts, 2010). This stance may also be found within legislation in

the Irish context. The Universities Act 1997 is very clear about what it considers to be one of the main objects of a university, namely that of supporting and contributing to "the realisation of national economic and social development" (Universities Act 1997, Part III, Chapter I).

Neave (1985) characterises the 1975-1985 decade as one that witnessed an unprecedented degree of government involvement in HE, one tailored not only toward change, which was just as characteristic of the 1960s, but specifically engaged in profiling institutional mission and thus delineating a new disciplinary dynamic within HE:

> The combination of economic stringency, the realisation that higher education occupied a crucial location as the knowledge base the quality of which would ultimately determine the success of national industrial strategy, placed the relationship between the university and the polity on a different plane. Higher education moved from being a vehicle for attaining strategies that lay "upstream" from it in the labour market or in the economy generally to becoming an instrument of policy itself. And as a result, it became increasingly part of the national planning process (p.118).

The economy and therefore the competitiveness of the nation remains a primary concern for European political leaders. Education, and HE in particular, is regularly singled out as a crucial parameter towards achieving prosperity. Nowadays it is linked to knowledge, whether we are speaking of knowledge production, dissemination or transfer, all of which take place in the university. Funding HE is therefore a necessary investment for which important economic returns are expected. Economic renewal and sustainability of the HE sector are two important drivers of the modernisation agenda for HE in Ireland.

Part IV: Introducing differentiation

2.9 Differentiation and diversity

Differentiation is generally understood to be the "process of developing different types, profiles and forms of higher education institutions" (German Council of Science and Humanities, 2010, p.12). Diversity is a direct result of the state of differentiation that a HE system achieves, and is often portrayed as a desirable objective of the policy of differentiation **(see section 2.13, pp. 49-50)**. Dedifferentiation is at the opposite end of the spectrum, and refers to the dissolution, or erosion of previous differences between HEIs and/or the different HE sectors (e.g., the traditional university versus vocational divide usually found in binary HE systems). Difference of type refers to the legal differentiation between types of HEIs (universities and IoTs in Ireland, the former polytechnics and the universities in the UK), and the ascribed mission and role(s) connected therewith. This trickles down to very different requirements, depending on the type of institution, in terms of equipment, funding, teaching load, admissions requirements, and other strategic priorities that build up the profile and mission of a HEI. Differentiation processes operate on different levels. At the macro-level, differentiation may alter established, sometimes well-entrenched, differences of type characteristic of the system, thus potentially altering the system structure (unified, binary, stratified) by changing those traditionally ascribed functions. Differentiation can also occur between HEIs of the same type (e.g., research versus teaching focus). Finally, differentiation may take place within an institution. This is referred to as internal differentiation. Institutional differentiation occurs when an individual HEI is either affected by differentiation processes from a top down perspective, forcing it to react, or actually voluntarily initiates differentiation from a bottom up perspective (German Council of Science and Humanities, 2010, pp.12-13).

Van Vught (2007) explains differentiation as "a process in which new entities emerge in a system" (p.2). This is another aspect of differentiation one must be aware of since it can help

understand recent mergers between HEIs. However, differentiation does not necessarily require new entities to be created, since HEIs may simply reshuffle their activities, even their mission, within a system level horizontal strategy imposed from above. Van Vught's definition is in line with others (Smelser, 1959; Rhoades, 1983), who define differentiation as a process in which a single social unit will mutate into two or more units, or in other words, whereby "new social units [that] are structurally distinct from each other, but taken together they are functionally equivalent to the original unit" (Smelser, 1959, p.2). However, he goes further than Smelser who restricts his definition to the splitting up of an existing unit into new ones, whereas van Vught, like Rhoades, includes in his definition the coming into being of completely new units that have no relation to the existing ones. This increase of HEIs could possibly lead to a greater diversity of the HE system, if 'institutional drift' is prevented.

While diversity refers to the variety of entities within a system at a specific point in time, differentiation denotes a dynamic process through which "new entities in a system emerge" (Huisman, 1995, p.51). Diversity may be understood as the result of the process of differentiation. The concept of differentiation needs to be distinguished from that of diversity (van Vught, 2007) even though they are related. Differentiation, as a dynamic process, may lead to the creation of new entities (e.g., Aalto University in Finland in 2010) but it may also encourage existing HEIs to maximise their resources and to prioritise their activities accordingly. In this sense, it may lead to an organic restructuring of the missions and activities of existing HEIs (horizontal differentiation) without necessarily transforming them into completely new legal entities. Differentiation does not always lead to a greater diversity of HEIs. It may polarise a HE system according to two different but rigidly defined (horizontally) types of HEIs. It may be synonymous with the emergence (in the case of a unitary HE system) or reinforcement (in the case of a binary HE system) of a Type A versus

Type B set of institutions. Ultimately, in this context, only two different kinds of HEIs would exist, those that predominantly perform research and some teaching, of a more general and less practical nature and those that mainly focus on teaching and offer a more vocational education and/ or training.

2.9.1 Horizontal versus vertical differentiation

The process of differentiation itself consists of two distinct but related facets particularly relevant to the focus of this research. While horizontal differentiation refers to the mission of a HEI and what level of degree programmes it offers based on its particular strengths (teaching versus research in particular), vertical differentiation goes deeper in the academic fabric and puts those activities the HEI has chosen to offer (whether voluntarily or not) under the magnifying glass. This it does by comparing similar activities undertaken by one institution against another. This may mean comparing the quality of the research output from one institution to another, the strength in undergraduate teaching, in lifelong learning and education for adults, in professional and Master's courses or in distance-learning (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, pp.4-6). Vertical differentiation therefore goes deeper into the academic fabric of a HEI than horizontal differentiation, which is more preoccupied with the overall formal structure of the HE system.

Bonaccorsi and Daraio (2007) provide complete definitions for the various types of differentiation, whether horizontal or vertical, that will be essential to this thesis:

> Horizontal differentiation means that universities decide to concentrate their efforts and resources in specific regions of the output space, keeping the level of quality constant. For example, they may decide to play the game of leaders in fundamental research, or to characterize as an innovative, industry-oriented university in applied fields, or to become a provider of proximity research in the local development. At the same time, they may specialize in large-scale undergraduate education, investing in up-to-date teaching and

> technologies, or to target mainly the professional market for Masters' courses, or finally play in the world competition for PhD students (p.7).

This definition of horizontal differentiation is concerned with how HEIs differentiate between themselves in terms of what they do. Horizontal differentiation is focused on how HEIs are adapting to their environment, without them disappearing or transforming into completely new entities, although this may happen (several mergers in France and Finland have already taken place, and technological universities (TUs) are on the verge of being designated in Ireland). The change of mission, whether more research intensive or focused on teaching, is a key interest of this study since horizontal differentiation attributes substantial funding based on the identified mission of an institution thus laying the ground for efficient and steeper vertical differentiation. According to the same authors, vertical differentiation:

> Implies the definition (sometimes implicit) of different metrics for each of the dimensions of the horizontal strategy. Universities wishing to play the game of fundamental research may have to choose whether they want to be part of the world elite, or a regional player, or play nationally. Universities wishing to specialize in Master's degrees must decide whether they apply for the top league or compete on a national or regional level (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, p.7).

2.9.2 Institutional obstacles to the implementation of differentiation in Continental Europe

The policy of explicit differentiation has traditionally been avoided on the Continent (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2008, p.5). Instead, the tradition has been to promote a world-class HE system as a whole. This holistic approach was the one taken by France, very much attached to the egalitarian model of its university sector, although recent policy choices in this country seem to indicate a certain departure from it (Campus Operation, 2008; Excellence Initiative, 2011). The same could be said for Finland, where regional development policies that began in the late 1950s were concerned with providing HE opportunities throughout the territory as opposed to the historically privileged southern area around

Helsinki. Recent trends in Finland indicate a desire to merge certain HEIs (both universities and polytechnics) to reduce their number by 2020. In 2009, the Finnish HE system encompassed 26 polytechnics and 20 universities but these relatively high numbers are expected to decrease to 18 and 15 respectively by 2020 (Aarrevaara, Dobson & Elander, 2009, p.99). The creation of Aalto University in 2010 is a result of the merger between the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics, and the University of Art and Design Helsinki. It was motivated by the determination of the Finnish government to create a university highly visible on the international scene and will be accompanied by an initial public investment equivalent to EUR 500 million. Some have argued this move presents symptoms of the "Harvard here syndrome" (Aarrevaara, Dobson & Elander, 2009, p.99). However, Sheil (2010) has provided evidence that it is unlikely for a small country to be able to develop a top 20 university since his research demonstrates that to nurture such a high ranking institution is a costly enterprise that can range anywhere from USD 1.5-2 billion (p.73).

In any case, Bonaccorsi and Daraio observe a rather "limited amount of differentiation" (2005, p.7) taking place in Europe, at least until the recent policy changes that occurred in Germany in 2006-2007 promoting selective funding for universities, regardless of the increased pressure from mass or even universal student participation in many countries. They warn us against taking differentiation as a "linear outcome" (2005, p.7) of the large expansion of any HE system, mostly due to a plethora of institutional rigidities found in European HE systems, constraints that they consider potentially damaging for the competitiveness of European universities internationally, one that is largely determined by research and international attractiveness. In Europe, institutional rigidities may postpone what has been compared to a "Durkheimian division of social labour" between those HEIs that deal with

teaching and those that perform research (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, p.7). These authors argue that institutional rigidities may hinder European universities and prevent them from being competitive on an international scale. However, horizontal differentiation may also be equally damaging in terms of international competitiveness and visibility for those HEIs that do not focus on research (whether voluntarily or not).

International competitiveness is often measured through crude metrics used by university rankings. Albert Einstein famously said that: "everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid".

Global rankings are perhaps the best illustration of this trend of comparing and ranking institutions that often have little in common, according to quantitative (size, shape) or qualitative (citations) criteria. The rankings that get the most attention generally give prominence to the research output of HEIs. However, governments are encouraging HEIs to strategically differentiate their activities and to specialise in what they do best. Consequently, the missions of HEIs may be sharply distinguishable and some may do little or no research. These rankings will then have little other choice than to either rank poorly, or not at all, those HEIs devoted to teaching, who will in return suffer from poor reputation and a drop in applications.

2.9.3 Examples of differentiation between higher education institutions in EU Member States

At the national level, most EU governments are seriously considering or in the process of investing large amounts of public funds in a small group of research intensive universities

capable of competing with the best universities worldwide while acting as high profile flagship universities of their respective HE systems. This concentration of funding is an objective that had first appeared in Communications emanating from European institutions and was particularly visible in policy documents issued by the EC since 2003 (EC, 2003). This process of "continuous concentration" in an ever smaller group of universities (Mazza et al., 2008, p. 5) could lead to sharper external differentiation between HEIs, both horizontally according to their chosen (or imposed) missions but also, and perhaps in a second phase vertically, by ranking universities on what they do, to what extent, and how well they do it compared to others. The EU funded multi-dimensional "U-Multirank" was launched in May 2014 and compares 500 HEIs. It seems to indicate a trend towards ranking, or profiling that was so far uncommon on the European Continent. Rankings using various criteria such as average entry standards (selectivity), research productivity and student satisfaction thrive in the UK (The Complete University Guide, The Guardian league table, The Sunday Times University Guide, The Times university ranking). "U-Multirank" is different from these existing rankings in that it takes into account a wider range of HEIs' activities in five crucial dimensions (education, research, knowledge-transfer, international orientation and regional engagement), departing from the established rankings prioritising research performance as an indicator of excellence. National policies prioritising differentiation based on research productivity and rewarding high research performance have already occurred in countries such as France and Germany, where amongst research universities, a small number were identified as deserving of considerable additional public funding, according to criteria that privileged in particular the intensity and/ or impact of their research. In September 2010, the French government launched a nation-wide call for projects, or national university competition, called *Initiatives d'excellence* (IDEX) which selected eight university projects in February 2012 (Aix-Marseilles, Bordeaux, Paris-Saclay, *Paris Sciences et Lettres*, *Sorbonne*

Universités, *Sorbonne Paris Cité*, Strasbourg and Toulouse) to be awarded between €700-950 million euro each (Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche website, *Initiatives d'excellence*). Grove equated this concentration of funds to a desire of the Sarkozy government to build a French "Ivy League" of its own (2011).

2.10 Dedifferentiation: "academic" and "institutional" drift

Other studies (Riesman, 1956; Birnbaum, 1983; Rhoades, 1990) argue that HE systems are experiencing "dedifferentiation" from within. This can be explained through the concept of "academic drift" (Burgess, 1972; Neave, 1979) or "institutional drift" (Neave, 1979, p.155) that was originally used to characterise the tendency of the non-university HEIs to emulate established universities. This creates a tendency towards uniformity because HEIs attempt to behave in the same way that they perceive to be successful or has proven to be successful. Riesman had already observed this phenomenon in his classical study *Constraint and Variety in American Education* (1956) whereby he compared the American HE system to a reptilian procession in which some HEIs will move to the positions where other institutions were before thus replacing them in the hierarchy of HE. As argued by the supporters of the theory of "academic drift", this is because lower status HEIs will always seek to increase their reputation and will mimic perceived successful HEIs in order to reach higher status (Van Vught, 2007, p.7). In times of scarce public funds, and since most HEIs in Europe are public and rely for a large part on State subsidies or grants, competition for funding is crucial to the survival and development of HEIs. In order to compete efficiently, similar strategies will be developed by the various contenders who will not hesitate to either replicate a successful model or present a profile that responds exactly to the expectations of governments as described in policy documents or funding competitions. The result is that HEIs will present

themselves in strikingly similar terms which will affect the level of diversity within a HE system.

The theory of "academic drift" was originally developed by Burgess (1972) to coin what he saw as the tendency for institutions newly created with an initially strong vocational purpose (such as the polytechnics in the UK) to mimic established traditional universities. This concept of "academic drift" (Burgess, 1972) was further refined by Neave (1979). Neave expands on this concept commonly used in analyses of "academisation processes" although he reserves this choice of terms for processes occurring at the department or faculty level within an individual establishment. Indeed, he sets out a four-fold hierarchy, or types of "drift", depending on the level in the administrative structure at which drift operates (e.g., central administration, individual establishment, Faculty/Department, curricular content) and the way it translates itself in terms of institutional behaviour (e.g., reorganisation of course structure on academic lines, less emphasis on part-time students, increase of theory or abstract knowledge in curricula). Indeed Neave distinguishes between "policy drift", that manifested itself at the level of the national administration through a failure to provide defined objectives and a clear policy for the structure of HE. "Institutional drift" would occur at the level of the individual HEI, and would be characterised by attempts to seek parity of esteem with institutions in the university sector, through a unilateral reinterpretation of institutional objectives. "Academic drift" would take place at Faculty or Departmental level, through a greater emphasis on advanced work (i.e., higher Levels of provision) and/or a greater focus on research. Finally, "drift in curricular emphasis" was identified by Neave as occurring at the level of the curricular content, with move away from an applied focus to one favouring abstract knowledge (1979, pp.154-155).

Kyvik (2009, p.137) offers an even more refined typology of "academisation processes". The latter may occur at the student level (student drift), staff level (staff drift), programme level (programme drift), institutional level (institutional drift), sector level (sector drift) and governmental level (policy drift). The author of these six different types of 'drift' concedes that they are all intertwined but that their breakdown is necessary for a deeper analytical exploration and understanding of the dynamics of this process.

"Institutional" and "academic", as well as "drift in curricular emphasis" (Neave, 1979) can already be observed in the British context in the early to mid-nineteenth century with the foundation of the London colleges (University College London and King's College London) and other institutions of HE in the English provinces (Durham, Owens College in Manchester). These new universities did not manage to create a rival university model in the public mind. From then on, a key characteristic of the future British HE system would be the hierarchical form that would accompany both expansion and differentiation (Anderson, 2004, p.192). The prestige of Oxford and Cambridge remained unrivalled, and both universities continued to recruit nationally, principally from the public schools, to produce "a rejuvenated elite of a traditional kind" (Anderson, 2004, p.192), but in no way did these universities attempt to serve the full range of middle-class needs and even less local demands. Since Oxbridge neglected or looked disdainfully upon these demands, the new civic universities could fill the gap and had a chance to offer programmes that catered for all strata of the middle class, without suffering from a lack of established reputation. These civic universities had a more practical, scientific orientation that was nevertheless soon to fade away. They "started with a distinctive scientific mission, but as they matured they expanded their arts teaching, and increasingly subscribed to Oxbridge values without being able to challenge Oxbridge on the level of prestige" (Anderson, 2004, p.192).

2.11 Higher education institutions as part of a system

HEIs, and universities in particular, are invariably framed within a discourse of high return investment, as either "founts of generalized creativity, in other words as prime pieces of economic real estate as well as hallowed cultural entities" (Thrift, 2008, p.18), "jewels in the crown" (Russell Group, 2012) or even as a "surrogate for national economic performance" (Neave, 1985, p.118). The pressure on HEIs is immense. Nonetheless, focus on the system level is just as crucial to ensure the competitiveness of a country as indicated by Neave who declared that:

> At a time of cut throat competition between trading blocs and, frankly within them, when higher education is universally held to be a *pièce maîtresse* in ensuring the nation's competitivity, when Britain's more important partners are seeking to expand their research training systems, to bring them closer with industry and to be increasingly more efficient, what does Britain have (1993, p.9)?

The modernisation agenda for HE systems and the HEIs that are embedded within them is a recurring theme in the political arena since they are expected to play a crucial role in contributing to the competitiveness of a country. The modernisation agenda deserves to be further qualified. Indeed, what does it mean to 'modernise'? According to the EU High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe set up by European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism, Youth and Culture Androulla Vassiliou and chaired by Mary McAleese, the emphasis appears to be on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in all European higher education institutions (June 2013). The context for this "modernisation agenda" is set by an EU agreement that a target of 40 per cent of young people should have gained a higher education level qualification by 2020. To reach this target, "the Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education provides an overarching policy framework for national and EU policies focusing on levels of attainment, quality and

relevance, mobility, innovation, regional development and funding and governance" (EC, June 2013, p.4). The "modernisation agenda for higher education" is therefore a broad framework that encompasses nearly all activities conducted within higher education institutions, from the quality of teaching to student exchange opportunities as well as domestic and institutional governance and funding mechanisms. The emphasis is on achieving value for money and greater efficiency. In the words of Androulla Vassiliou, there is room for improvement in maximising HEIs' potential:

> Universities are one of Europe's most successful inventions, but we cannot rest on our laurels. We need to think and act more strategically to realise the full potential of our universities. To do that, we need better information about what they offer and how well they perform (EU, January 2013).

Historically, HEIs have always been a source of pride to the town, city or nation they were established. They brought not only renown but also money. The city provided an "institutional shell around the business of learning" (Hyde, 1988, p.19), a pattern of mutual support that was unique to Europe and contributed to healthy universities.

2.12 Higher education as a national and/or international prerogative?

Education, including HE, has the particularity of having long been considered to be a national prerogative (Garben, 2010, p.210). This tradition has its origin in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when secular rulers who did not yet have a university on their territory became particularly keen to establish one to serve their own policy and forbade their own citizens from studying elsewhere. Often, a prohibition to practice (*Berufsverbot*) was combined with this mobility ban, allowing only graduates of the national university the possibility to be hired by the State (Ridder-Symoens, 2006, p.372).

However, Martens and Balzer (2004) put to test the position according to which HE remains a national prerogative. They analysed to what extent domestic policies are increasingly shaped by international organisations, through examining the influence of the EU's educational policy since the 1990s, as well as the OECD's comparative studies that reveal the strengths and weaknesses of individual HE systems. Through the use of these two institutions as case studies, they want to provide evidence of forms of governance through which international organisations, one intergovernmental (OECD), the other supranational (EU), actually exert influence on national policy makers (2004, p.1). They found that organisations do through the exercise of three types of governance, namely "governance by co-ordination", "governance by opinion formation" and "governance by instruments" (2004, p.2). Through "governance by co-ordination", the international organisation makes use of its capacity to "pull the strings together" (2004, p.2) by bringing all the relevant actors together and initiating meetings and conferences, while also providing independent experts who participate fully in these exchanges. Governance by "opinion formation" refers to the influence on national educational discourses of documentation and other materials issued by an international organisation, whether under the form of communications, memos or more official outputs such as books and brochures. It also encompasses concepts and models created by international organisations such as assessment schemes, policy proposals and benchmarking schemes. This type of governance has the capacity to influence the vision and values, in other words the core thinking of national policy makers. Finally, "governance by instruments" refers to a more direct form of governance, whereby member states of an international organisation must comply with the binding regulations they adhered to when seeking membership, because that is what they legally agreed to do (2004, p.3).

2.13 The benefits associated with diversity

The concept of diversity is often linked to the process of differentiation, and often the former is portrayed as a result of the latter. According to Stadtman (1980, pp.98-99), there are various benefits that result from diversity in HE. Not only does diversity increase the range of opportunities for potential learners but diversity also enables HE to be virtually universal, despite inherent differences among individuals. This was part of the reasoning behind the Master Plan of the state of California in 1960, which managed to maintain a universal HE system while preserving or delineating different levels with the University of California at the apex of its HE system (see p.222). These differences make diversity desirable, as not everyone has the same capacities, learning styles, needs, motivation or goals. Historically speaking, meeting students' needs meant catering for the religious demands of a population, a motivation that required the founding of no less than eight of the nine original colonial colleges and hundreds of institutions prior to the Civil War in the USA (Birnbaum, 1983, p.3). One single model for all, while perhaps convenient for a majority, clearly shuts out from the system many learners who do not fit within a top down, centralised HE mould.

Diversity also enables HEIs to focus on specific missions, enabling them to adapt and confine their activities to those which are consistent with their geographical location, their resources and clienteles. This would not be possible if the model of a university for all was imposed top down, with no margin for difference. Diversity is a natural way of responding to the pressures of a society that is itself extremely diverse and whose requirements and expectations cannot be fulfilled by a single 'one size fits all' type of HE. However, for diversity to occur, a certain amount of differentiation must take place. Birnbaum (1983, pp.6-8) makes a convincing case for diversity as providing models of what, or especially what not to do. This is due to the fact that from a system perspective, diversity enables low-risk experimentation, since failure is

isolated to an individual HEI. Finally, diversity is a synonym for university autonomy by the mere fact that it makes it far more difficult for a central authority to subordinate HEIs into instruments of indoctrination rather than of education. In a highly centralised HE system, such as France or Finland, the state has enormous control and oversight over the curriculum, appointments, funding decisions and even admissions. For example, French universities must remain open to all those obtaining a Pass in the French Baccalaureate, whatever the subject or the amount of students enrolling in first year, while their Finnish counterparts may only admit a pre-determined number of students, as the result of intense negotiations between the university and the State.

2.14 Higher education institutions: between natural selection and isomorphism

Jencks and Riesman made an interesting albeit controversial comparison, within the American context, between the social system that is HE and the biological one:

> In the evolution of colleges as of species, then, order and apparent rationality emerged through natural selection and adaptation over time rather than from the initial mutations, many of which were freakish and almost random (1977, pp.3-4).

It has even been conjectured that the institutions that still exist today are "the survivors, the institutions that adapted to the needs of their constituencies" (Harcleroad, 1981, p.199). This implies that in order to survive HEIs need to prove their value and usefulness or else the process of natural selection will eliminate them. In the 1970s, social scientists and organizational scientists paid close attention to the role played by the environment in influencing organizational structure and functioning. They came to the conclusion that the similarities between biological change found in nature and organizational or cultural change were not merely metaphorical niceties. Instead, they proposed that changes in communities of organisations over time were caused by the same interactions as found in the natural realm,

namely between organisms and environment, leading to the natural selection model of organizational change and the "survival of the fittest" (Birnbaum, 1983, pp.21-22; see Birnbaum, pp.49-50).

Isomorphism offers another perspective and has been explained as "a constraining process that forces organizations to resemble other organizations that face the same set of environmental conditions" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p.149). The environmental conditions are framed by globalisation, the knowledge economy paradigm and the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Organisations will tend to copy what they perceive to be successful strategies used by their competitors faced with the same external conditions. This in turn will lead to strong institutional homogenization within the sector, with organisations reacting in similar ways to their environment. The consequence is a decrease of system diversity. There are two forms of institutional isomorphism that may lead to homogenization of relevance to my research. Coercive isomorphism is particularly relevant since it results from "the pressures applied by other organizations in the environment, on which the organization is dependent (e.g., governmental policies and laws, social and cultural expectations)" (Zha, 2009, p.462). Coercive isomorphism as it applies to organisations can be relevant to both system and institutional levels in the HE arena. Mimetic isomorphism originates from the uncertainty produced by the "symbolic environment" (e.g., the knowledge economy paradigm shift, austerity), which causes organisations to mimic the behaviour of what they perceive to be successful organisations. In both cases, organisations are highlighted as open systems that are shaped by their environment. Interestingly, Zha argues that this may lead organisations to conform to conventional beliefs that result from social and cultural pressures rather than to rational pressures for increasing efficiency (2009, p.462). According to Vaira (2004), these conventional beliefs are translated, disseminated by "institutional

carriers" (p.488) such as the EC. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) remarked that "one of the undisputed impacts of the adoption of the Knowledge Society as the leitmotif for economic development is that higher education and research have been reconceptualised as central to economic growth and national competitiveness" (UNESCO, 2008, p.1). As such, this belief contributes to shaping the "world polity" defined by Boli as an "overarching ontological and symbolic normative cathedral" constructed at supra-national level (1987, p.90) which creates "an agenda, or an account, of legitimated actions" (Thomas & Meyer, 1987, p.95) in the context of globalisation. It has yet to be proven that the current economic discourse and the imperatives for reform of HE related to the knowledge economy are not simply mere conventional beliefs about what ought to be done, rather than based on any empirical evidence that would suggest such rationalisation is effective.

2.15 Structural issues in higher education: a recurring theme

Teichler (UNESCO, 2004) stresses the recurring issue of the restructuring of HE systems, in terms of size and shape, which he identifies geographically as symptomatic to the economically advanced countries and temporally as spanning the last four decades. This would suggest that these specific issues of size and shape are both central to the system as a whole but also difficult to resolve. He remarks this is partly due to the variety of stakeholders that have legitimate interests in HE and whose views on what the most desirable quantitative and structural changes should encompass vary greatly:

> They [structural issues of size and shape] are obviously at the crossroads of external expectations and internal dynamics of higher education, and are shaped by legitimate influences and interests of society at large, governments in their steering and supervisory roles, institutions of higher education and their staff, as well as the learners (Teichler, 2004, p.2).

According to the Samuel Neaman Institute (2006) that bases its findings on a sample of four countries (Australia, Israel, the UK and the USA), four typologies of HEIs emerge from within a fully differentiated system. First of all, there are those research universities that offer all levels of degrees up to the doctorate. Then there are colleges who are responsible mainly for teaching and the awarding of undergraduate professional degrees, sometimes Master's degrees. They do little research, although they are sometimes to be found involved in applied research. Community colleges offer a general education for those students who may wish to transfer at a later stage to colleges or universities and finally distance learning is provided by HEIs such as the Open University. This categorization of HEIs describes horizontal differentiation as it is based on the configuration of activities offered by these institutions to "well-defined target audiences" (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, p.4). The California Master Plan of 1960 that created a three-tiered level of HE is perhaps the closest illustration of this ideal typology. However, as explained previously, it is uncommon on the Continent where several institutional models may be found and where it would be impossible to speak of a European model.

2.16 Converging or diverging higher education systems?

Recent agendas have brought differentiation back into the limelight. With ever increasing rates of participation and completion of HE programmes, the increasing need to differentiate between HEIs within a HE system has emerged as a helpful solution in the allocation of public funds. As part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, EU governments have agreed to increase the attainment target for HE among those aged 30-34 to 40 per cent by 2020, with the current EU average hovering at 31 per cent (EC, 2010, p.9). This implies even higher numbers of students in universities, IoTs and other HEIs, in a time of scarce public resources. As the

"massification" of HE continues and some HE systems are transforming into universal ones, policy-makers need to make difficult choices with regards to public expenditure. Education, and HE in particular, is expensive. However, it is also an essential driver in economic, cultural and social growth as well as having recently been identified as the motor for research innovation, so crucial to the knowledge economy. According to Thrift a convergence of HE systems, encouraged by the EU in order to achieve its Europe 2020 Strategy, is inevitable:

> It is apparent that university systems are going in roughly the same direction in many European countries, although against the background of sometimes radically different national higher education systems. The general direction is well put in several European Commission documents that have been published recently, all of which argue for the modernization of European universities and all of which espouse better "management" as a necessary nostrum to achieve an exalted modernized economic state (Thrift, 2008, p.17).

He is referring to the numerous Communications issued by the EC (2003, 2005; 2006; 2007; 2011) and Resolutions of the European Council (2005; 2007). Once again, the necessity of having strong universities (and by extension dynamic HE systems) is portrayed to be one of the quintessential characteristics inherent to the prosperous modern state. Indeed, "Europe is going through a kind of higher education convulsion at the moment as European governments chase the Lisbon dream of a knowledge-led society in which universities have a leading place as key actors in the economic renovation of Europe" (Thrift, 2008, p.18). Why are universities to be so prominent in the economic recovery of our Continent? This is because universities are considered by governments as not only employers in their own right but also as "suppliers of innovations, as producers of skilled labour, as transnational businesses, and as founts of a generalized creativity, in other words as prime pieces of economic real estate as well as hallowed cultural entities" (Thrift, 2008, p.17).

Vaira (2004) argues that all dimensions of social life have been affected and transformed by the globalisation process including culture, politics, economy and social relations. However,

Vaira concedes that the "idea of globalization is a multifaceted and contentious one" (p.483). This is because there is no unambiguous and clear-cut definition of its core features, contents and perhaps crucially to this thesis, its outcomes. The latter are best exemplified by the divergence – convergence thesis. The convergence (becoming similar) versus divergence (diversifying into a multitude of practises) of HE systems is a key debate in the comparative HE literature (Watson, 2009, p.420):

> (The globalization) debate is structured around two main streams of thought: the convergence and the divergence thesis. The first emphasizes the progressive and sometime ineluctable trend towards homogenization (cultural, political and economic). It is founded on a linear, top-down and sometimes deterministic causal explanation (Vaira, 2004, p.484).

In this case, homogenisation is to be expected because of "top-down" pressures leading to similar provisions to be replicated from one location to another. However, the divergence thesis argues the opposite:

> The latter emphasizes the heterogeneity of globalization's effects and outcomes on the local level (national, regional and even organizational). That entails a greater prominence accorded to bottom-up processes of manipulation, localization, interpretation, mediation, resistance and so on. Thus the kind of explanation is nonlinear, non-deterministic, conflictual and, sometimes, voluntaristic (Vaira, 2004, p.484).

Neave (2002) warns us against necessarily equating similar provision, or similar structures, as evidence of consensus. According to Neave, this type of syllogistic reasoning, whereby: "Similar provision means convergence. Convergence towards similar provision means agreement and thus consensus. Therefore, similar provision means consensus" (p.187) is simply inadequate because relying nearly entirely on government sources and official declarations of intent. The difficulty arises in understanding or measuring the depth of the consensus that is depicted in official documents. In other words, we need to go beyond and understand how the apparent consensus present and documented in "le pays politique" of high level meetings has translated itself into "le pays réel" (p.187), meaning on the ground, e.g., the staff common room, the laboratory, etc.

Indeed, according to Neave, "le pays réel" needs to be given full attention, if not only to reassure "le pays politique" that its policies are implemented on the ground. Neave warns us against taking convergence for granted and to generalise convergence occurring in one "segment" to an entire sector or system(s). Although it may seem clearly visible or desirable at the highest level, its implementation may still be resisted at other levels:

> Convergence, whether between systems or within them, often depends on the level of analysis. It does not follow that convergence in one segment of the higher education system or at, say, the systems level, is replicated automatically and homogeneously at either regional or institutional level (Neave, 2002, p.188).

Huisman and Van der Wende (2004) attempt to explain how in less than a decade, the convergence of HE structures changed from an undesirable objective to a strongly advisable aim (pp.349-350), suggesting that convergence, or harmonisation, is *de facto* either occurring or has already been achieved. They believe that in the early 1990s, parallel to the drafting of the Treaty, there was a gradual shift from the previous association of HE with a national and cultural role, to one more closely connected to economic needs. This was already visible in the Memorandum on Higher Education (1991) which included HE as part of the Community's broader agenda of economic and social coherence (p.350). Although at first criticised by many national and institutional official representatives, the economic rationale grew to a point where it was actively promoted and branded by national governments. Governments began to grant their HEIs more autonomy, because they believed this would enable their institutions to adapt better to their international, national and local environments. From then on, the economic rationale overtook the political, educational and cultural rationales and became embedded in the general government's "steering philosophy" (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, p.350).

National views on the role of HE "gradually grew closer – not necessarily intentionally - to the EC's perspective" (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, p.350). This distinction is of the essence to this study since it admits that convergence may have various origins and that a common outcome is not necessarily EU-driven, even though it may coincide with EU objectives. These origins may not at all be related to EU policies. Mény (2008) for instance argues that the influence of the EU on national university systems would have altogether been rather limited had it not been "combined with other trends developing in the same direction" (p.330). He believes the reform of British universities instigated under Margaret Thatcher's government and which brought into the HE equation market mechanisms in the delivery of a fundamental public good led to a radical "shake-up" of Britain's university system which had repercussions on the Continent. This provided the rest of Europe with a shocking and indeed what many European academics would initially consider to be an appalling precedent in rationalisation. Nonetheless, because of the results it produced it would eventually inspire reformers in other Member States. Another non- (directly) EU related factor that contributed to the "Europeanising of university reform agenda" can be attributed to the Bologna Process (Mény, 2008, p.330). This pan-European effort to structure the degree system into a standardised 3+2+3 rule may have for instance led to a blurring effect on the relationship between university and non-university HEIs, in France, Germany and the Netherlands (Witte et al., 2008). In these countries characterised by a dual or binary divide (Kyvik, 2004, p.396; Regini, 2011, p.14), two originally distinct sectors cohabit within the same HE system, whether it is the universities and the *Fachhochschulen* in Germany, the universities and *hogescholen* in the Netherlands and universities and *Grandes Ecoles* in France (Witte et al., 2008, pp.217-218). These HEIs traditionally awarded different degree levels and degree titles that reflected important status differences between the HEIs. However, with the Bologna degree framework, degree titles were standardised and the length of degrees adjusted,

seemingly leading to convergence of "institutional types". This contributed to a "blurring of boundaries" (p.223), potentially providing policy-makers with incentives to reconsider the rigidity of binary divide, hence the "distribution of roles and status between the institutional types in the system" (p.218).

Part V: Contemporary Policies

2.17 Higher education institution alliances: a bottom up push

Not only governments insist on including differentiation in their policy documents or strategies. Universities and other HEIs see themselves invested with a mission to be at the brink of cutting-edge research, and those with the most potential to do so have already identified compatible partners. This may be observed at the national level, for instance in the UK with the Russell Group representing the interests of 24 leading research intensive British universities since 1994. This was replicated in 2002 at the European level, with the self-branded "League of European Research Universities" (LERU) including 21 research-intensive members spanning the Continent, who remain extremely attentive to European issues and policymaking with regards to research and HE (LERU, May 2012). Even in France, where the principles of egalitarianism and non-selection at entrance to university are practically non-negotiable features of the system (Deer, 2005, p.230), this university lobbying mentality is present, with the more recently created *Coordination des universités de recherche intensive françaises* (CURIF, Coordination of French research intensive universities) comprising of 18 members, although it is still at an early stage of development and does not issue policy opinions in such a public way as the two aforementioned alliances.

Differentiation may therefore the result of a combination of top down pressures from government policy making in the arena of HE as well as more bottom up action at institutional level, with HEIs competing for status, prestige and funding.

2.18 EU involvement in higher education: fuelling the Europe 2020 Strategy

One should distinguish between actions made by the EU within the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), launched in March 2010, and policy documents pertaining to HE emanating from various EU institutions, in particular the Commission. The latter started to issue regularly from 2003 onwards a high volume of policy documents pertaining to HE independently from its initial observer role to the Bologna Process (EC, 2003; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2011; Council Resolution, 2007).

Indeed, the European Commission is a full member of the EHEA, on the same basis as the 47 participating countries. The overarching aim for the 2010-2020 decade is to consolidate the EHEA and the European Commission remains strongly committed to this goal and is heavily involved in the process in order to ensure the implementation of the steps agreed upon by Ministers at the biannual Ministerial Conferences ever since the Bologna Ministerial Conference in 1999. This is does perhaps most visibly though its representatives composing the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) structure that meets at least once every six months and is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Bologna Process in between Ministerial Conferences. This will further be explained in the following section (2.19). This work is itself overseen by a Board whose members include once again representatives from the European Commission. Independently from this process however, the European Commission is also urging Member States to 'modernise' their HEIs and HE systems.

Figel argues that debates over HE are a "microcosm of the larger European debate" (Figel, 2006, p.415) since HEIs are responsible for providing solutions to the crucial challenges that lie ahead and on which the future of Europe depends. Within the context of the needs of the knowledge economy and society these challenges viewed by policy-makers as twofold. First, Europe's human potential must be maintained and improved as it will determine the Union's level of prosperity and prospects for development. This was part of Europe's larger Lisbon Agenda (2000-2010), that was based on the requirements of the knowledge economy and which asserted that increased job opportunities and higher employment rates were the motor for European growth. For this to happen, graduates had to become more attractive to employers, meaning HEIs needed to review their structure and curriculum which in many cases implied a review at the HE system level. These objectives were renewed in the following Europe 2020 Strategy, the successor EU strategy to the Lisbon Agenda for the following decade. Consequently, governments are expected to rethink not only formal aspects of their HE system such as the structure of the degree system, which was most comprehensively dealt with by the Bologna Declaration and its subsequent implementation across 47 countries, but also consider tackling more substantial issues such as learning outcomes and curriculum changes. However, the Lisbon Agenda was also tailored towards responding to societal dimensions such as inclusion and sustainable development. These rather vague objectives can certainly be interpreted as giving a more prominent role to HE in promoting and nurturing an efficient educational system that encourages social mobility. A key challenge according to Figel is the growing contradiction between the "traditional role of universities as repositories of our cultural and intellectual traditions" and their increasing economic and social orientations. The author believes that this conflict of interests is real but that it should be considered as a type of "creative tension" that can boost universities and help

them better adapt to their time through beneficial reforms instead of polarizing the issue between an intellectual versus economic role of HEIs (Figel, 2006, pp.415-416).

2.19 The Bologna Process

The EHEA originated in the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998. The 800th anniversary of the University of Paris provided the opportunity for four ministers responsible for HE (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) to voice their commitment towards creating a European area of higher learning since they agreed "to engage in the endeavour to create a European area of higher education, where national identities and common interests can interact and strengthen each other for the benefit of Europe, of its students, and more generally its citizens" (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998), an objective confirmed in stronger terms in the Bologna Declaration. Connecting European HE systems was the idea pervading this Declaration, to enhance the educational opportunities for the student, a European citizen in the making, one that would play a crucial role in the building of the "Europe of Knowledge" (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). For this to happen, mobility and commensurability had to be improved. First and foremost, formal programme level issues such as the architecture of degrees needed to be 'harmonised' in order for them to be more easily understood and therefore recognised in another state. Only a year later, in 1999, the Bologna Declaration was signed by the Ministers responsible for HE in 29 countries. The EHEA started off as an intergovernmental agreement, it has been argued that it cannot be understood or examined independently of EU policy (Pépin, 2007, p.127). Since the European Council in 2000 adopted the Lisbon Agenda (European Parliament website, *The Lisbon Strategy*) the Bologna Process has seen its scope widen, as well as the number and involvement of its participants.

This theme of a "Europe of Knowledge" is recurrent in all EU and HE policy documents or assessments, a goal to aspire to in the internationally competitive environment (Ravinet, 2008, p.356; Keeling & Robertson, 2008). Indeed, the involvement of the EC, although initially intentionally excluded by the French Minister Claude Allègre in 1998 at the Sorbonne meeting (Ravinet, 2005, pp.188-189), has steadily increased throughout the history of the process by playing multiple roles, be it that of a coordinator, facilitator, initiator, partner, planner, and perhaps most crucially by setting the agenda. The meaning or understanding by policy makers and other actors of keywords such as "Knowledge", or the "modernisation of universities" has evolved (Dale, 2008). This was to be expected in a process spanning over a decade with multiple actors each with their own motives, interpretations and priorities. This may have led to different understandings of what an EHEA should entail, something hardly surprising when one considers this is a policy area that encompasses 4,000 HEIs, 19 million students and 1.5 million academics and other staff throughout 47 countries (Corbett, 2011, p. 38).

The EHEA came into existence in March 2010, following the Vienna-Budapest Ministerial Conference and subsequent Declaration. What is meant by "Area" is perhaps the first obstacle in its actual effective implementation, or at least understanding by the general public. A good starting point would be to see who has actually voluntarily joined this "Area". Amongst the full members are a wide variety of entities such as the Russian Federation, the French Speaking Community of Belgium, the Flemish Speaking Community of Belgium, the Holy See, the Principality of Liechtenstein or the *sui generis* supranational institution that is the EC (official Bologna Process 2010-2012 website, *Members*). This European and Eurasian United Nations of Education certainly is an eclectic mix. Lažetić (2010) goes further by highlighting the importance of understanding the interactions between the different policy

actors within the multi-level policy arena that is the intergovernmental Bologna Process, for instance in the arena that is the Bologna-Follow-Up-Group (BFUG), considered to be the main political forum of the policy process (pp.549-550).

The main concern of this "Area" is to facilitate unhindered mobility of students, staff and ideas, thereby reinforcing its appeal, by removing or at least reducing previous obstacles. As of March 2010 and the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Bologna Process, the EHEA was officially launched, giving a tangible outcome to over a decade of reform tailored towards establishing more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of HE in Europe. Very recently however, some states have sealed themselves off by reverting to a certain level of "HE isolationism". This is the case within the UK, where fee refugees from England to Scotland in particular are to be expected as soon as 2012 following the tripling of tuition fees in England (Matthews, 2011).

2.20 A focus on research intensive higher education institutions

These "prime pieces of economic real estate" (Thrift, 2008, p.17) are worth nurturing, in particular those with the most research impact or potential. According to Thrift, it is under the influence of the EU that European governments are reviewing and restructuring their national research systems. He refers to Germany as a prime example of this great structural reform. Other examples he lists (p.18) include "designing regions with universities", to be understood mainly as consolidation, or at least strong collaboration between regional universities to become "central nodes", the creation of a European Research Council (ERC) and the founding of the European Institute of Technology (EIT), a potential European equivalent of the world renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

An EC Communication (September 2011) declared that Europe needed a wide diversity of HEIs, with clearer missions tailored to the identified areas of excellence an institution has demonstrated. The end result (a diverse set of HEIs) is presented as the ultimate objective sponsored by the EU, but this is to be accompanied, or possibly be the result of each HEI rethinking its activities, according to its own strengths and weaknesses, in order to develop suitable and successful strategies promoting the relevant mission. The Commission has already sponsored the elaboration of rankings based on this philosophy. The European classification of HEIs, known as U-Map, is designed to map the diversity of European universities according to their mission, and U-Multirank will be its equivalent on the international scale. The EC Communication (2011) emphasis on diversity and differentiation shows how the latter are associated by EU policy-makers with achieving excellence in the realm of HE, at institutional and system level. The central issue of diversity in HE has been paid much attention, albeit by a small number of scholars. Although they all agree on its importance they are divided about whether diversity is increasing or in fact decreasing (Birnbaum, 1983, p.57). By looking in what way differentiation is operating in practice, I shall examine how it may impinge on the system structure and on institutional diversity in the Irish HE system.

2.21 The EC's incremental role in higher education

However, the EC's incremental role in the process has certainly made questionable the extent to which this process is devoid of EU interference. Universities, in their capacity as participants to European schemes (Erasmus) and the Bologna Process more generally have also had a part to play in homogenising the landscape as much as possible to make exchanges

valuable and positive experiences for their students. Neave argued that it was the dramatic increase in mobility, due to the success of the Erasmus programme set up in 1987, that "laid bare a very shocking diversity – which would have disturbed the student of comparative education not one iota but which now posed real and practical problems to the builders of a European higher education area" (2003, p.151). This in turn spurred national governments, either through observations of their own, or through advice originating from HEIs and/or their buffer agencies, to consider reviewing what would have been previously considered domestic issues such as those relating to the "quality of provisions, the transfer of credits, the language of instruction and even the structural features of the national system" (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, p.351). The "structural features of the national system" had to be adapted to the new influx of foreign students, which was a core part of the internationalisation policy agenda, itself becoming increasingly included into mainstream higher-education policy-making (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, p.351). Finally, Mény identifies a third factor in the "growing general awareness of the new challenges universities have to face" (2008, p.331), although once again, the EC had a part in shaping such a discourse (EC; 2003, 2005, 2006).

Regardless, Huisman and Van der Wende (2004), attribute convergence to the "invisible hand" (p.351) of the EC and other supranational agencies, in particular the OECD, through its HE policy reviews (OECD, 2004) that bring greater awareness of what is happening in other countries, enabling national governments to evaluate to what extent their HE system is sufficiently in line with a certain model, whether European or international, even if the latter remains an ideal type that may never be reached. The establishment of a vocational HE sector alongside the university sector in Finland and Austria was an explicit attempt made by these countries to align their HE systems with the predominantly binary systems that were the main

currency amongst HE systems in Europe. This was made clear in policy documents that referred to "Europe" as a legitimate justification to change the domestic structure (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, p.351). However, reference to the European model, or compliance with OECD reviews alone cannot satisfactorily explain domestic HE policies. Attention must be paid to a constellation of other actors, including European and national organisations responsible for specific policy elements such as the European Universities' Association (EUA), those agencies in charge of Quality Assurance (QQI) and last but not least the policy advisory role of national groups representing the interest of HEIs (IUA, IOTI). Therefore, attention must be given to both domestic (national and local) and European levels when examining the rationale behind national policy agendas:

> Either informally or formally (through policy documents, CRE 1999; EUA; 2003), national policy agendas can be assumed to have been driven by domestic problems and issues, as well as by the international discussions taking place at the level of non-national organisations. As such, the invisible hands of supranational organisations have an impact on the change from greater introspection of governments (focusing on solving domestic problems) towards a more inter- and cross- national perspective on domestic problem solving. It has certainly increased the awareness of "foreign" or even European solutions to certain policy problems and in a number of instances has led to policy borrowing and imitation (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, p.352).

Based on an overview of domestic responses in a representative sample of European countries (Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Greece, the UK and Norway), Huisman and Van der Wende (2004) concluded that there is evidence of existing converging policies in HE. Their findings concern diverse areas such as the undergraduate-graduate structure (Bachelor and Master), these countries' approach to international competition and the marketization of their HE, the domain of development cooperation with non-EU partners (p.354), whereby they conclude that "governments have developed policies that fit the European agenda towards converging systems of higher education" (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, p.355). However, they also remarked that there were clear differences between the countries they studied with regard to process approach and outcomes. Nonetheless, and

disregarding the problematic issues related to the language of instruction and the variety of national responses to globalisation, there is evidence to confirm a broad overall picture of "gradually and rather smoothly adjusting to the broader supra- and international agenda" (p.355). Thrift concurs with their analysis, adding another perspective to this convergence thesis of European HE structures at programme level (Zha, 2009, p.470); that of university reform, which he identifies in many Member States' agendas. He argues that despite the extraordinary diversity of European HE systems, "university systems" are moving in the same direction (Thrift, 2008, p.17). He points to the particular role of documents published by the EC, one which he fails to characterise beyond that of providing a "general direction" (p.17), but that clearly call for the modernisation of European universities. Thrift focuses on how these documents promote better management of universities as a necessary attribute to the modern economic state (p.17).

Part VI: Ireland: The review of Ireland's higher education landscape

2.22 The binary origins of the Irish HE system

As already discussed in section 2.6.3 (pp.24-25), Ireland's binary system provides a good example of a horizontally differentiated system based on the lines of the binary system. Clancy argued that it was the return to office of Fianna Fáil in 1977 that firmly cemented and institutionalised the binary structure in Ireland. This followed a brief episode in the history of Irish HE during the mid-1970s when the government showed signs of developing a unitary higher education policy of the likes in place in Italy and Sweden. Indeed, in 1974, Minister for Higher Education Richard Burke proclaimed that in future all degrees were to be awarded by the universities while the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) would be

responsible for only the sub-degree level certificates and diplomas. This would have resulted in either mergers, or at least the forging of closer links between the NIHEs, National College of Art and Design (NCAD), Thomond College and some of the technological colleges with the universities. However, this policy direction was overturned in 1977 and the degree-awarding responsibility of the NCEA restored, enabling the technological and vocational sector to remain separate and independent from the universities and to develop as such (1989, pp.123-124).

As argued by P. Scott (1995), this division of national HE systems into distinct categories of HEIs, each with its own assigned mission and role is a typical strategy present in binary systems and was clearly present in Ireland throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, the corollary of this kind of differentiation between a university sector and a more vocational sector is that it encourages "academic drift" (Clancy, 1989, p.124).

2.23 Ireland's focus on the system level

Reform is a consequence of government-led engagement with HE, and in Ireland this goes through a review of the system level, as revealed by a document issued by the HEA in January 2013:

> System reconfiguration is aimed at creating a reduced number of higher education institutions of more significant scale and critical mass in the best interests of students. A key objective is to protect the distinctive roles and mission of universities and technological institutes within the Irish system while delivering the quality outcomes in teaching, research and engagement for students and stakeholders envisaged in the National Strategy (HEA, January 2013, p.1).

In Ireland, the austerity measures introduced following the global financial crisis of 2008 included significant cuts of at least 20 per cent to the Irish HE budget, to which one must add an estimated 12 per cent increase in student numbers from 2008-2012. The moratorium on

recruitment and promotions in the public service applies to third-level institutions through the Employment Control Framework (ECF) for the HE sector. It restricts HEIs in their capacity to hire, replace and promote staff. A revised ECF was adopted in June 2011. It is an integral part of the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014, whereby the government is committed to reduce the public sector pay bill through an average annual reduction of roughly 3,300 in the number of serving public servants (HEA, June 2011). This has seriously affected staff-student ratios, an indicator of considerable weight used in various university rankings methodologies, which plummeted from 1:18.7 in 2008-2009 to 1:24 in 2010 - 2011. Lecturers' salaries were cut by an average of 15 per cent in 2009-2010 and various incentives were given to encourage staff to retire by the end of February 2012. Funding per student is now at an alarming 30 per cent below that in the UK (Reisz, 2013, p.35). The immediate economic context and the terms included in 85 billion euro bail-out package agreed with the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) play an important part in understanding the urgency for Irish political figures and policy-makers alike behind reconfiguring the Irish HE landscape to maximize its potential for the recovery of the Irish economy.

Ireland is currently engaged in reconfiguring its HE system, and one of the government's priorities is also to drastically reduce the number of third-level institutions, from 39 to 24, according to a document published by the HEA (January 16, 2013, p.13). The OECD's Review of Higher Education in Ireland (2004) made it clear that it did not believe any new university should be established in Ireland. It specified that even in the case where a particular city had been designated as a regional Gateway by the National Spatial Strategy, there would still be no grounds to transfer from "institute to university status" (OECD, 2004, p.20). Instead, the OECD encouraged HEIs to focus on their respective mission in order to preserve the successful binary system in place, and to avoid at all costs any trend towards an

institutional drift, thus maintaining the differentiated but complementary roles of the universities and the IoTs:

> We do not believe that location in a designated regional Gateway provides a justification for the transfer of an institute to university status; indeed we think it is essential that the applied focus which their current differentiation of mission prescribes for their role in regional Gateways is preserved and utilised to the full (OECD, 2004, p.20).

This decision appeared to pre-empt recent attempts to establish a university in the South-East, where regional needs allegedly required an upgrade to university status for this institute, according to supporters for a University in the South-East. This strongly worded conclusion reflects the OECD's position, one that is against the creation of a new university in Ireland. Expressed nearly a decade ago in a report reviewing the entire Irish HE system, it still reverberates in today's debates about the necessity to upgrade Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) to university status, or in the impending redesignation of some IoTs into merged TUs, subject to strict criteria as defined by the HEA (June 2011). The report was drafted by seven independent international experts within a tight timeframe while visiting Ireland from the 15th to the 27th of February 2004 (OECD, 2004, p.2) after a year of investigations and consultations. The debate is controversial and has been ongoing for several years now, with several independent assessments contradicting the OECD's initial stance (Goodbody Report 2005, 2007; Dr. Port Report, 2008). Irish law seems to have kept the issue of creating new universities open, since there exists a statutory procedure, under section 9 of the Universities Act 1997, that explicitly refers to the possibility for an educational institution to be established as a university, under the heading "Establishment of additional universities" (Universities Act 1997, Section 9). In any case, if Irish politicians were to finally accept this view, it would also indicate the extreme permeability of Irish HE policy making to external factors/ and or authorities. While no further university is envisaged to emerge from the Irish HE system, the General and Technological University (TU) Bill (2014) provides for the

necessary legislative framework for the establishment of a TU according to strict criteria (General and TU Bill, 2014, pp.49-55), largely based on the criteria set out by Professor Simon Marginson (2011).

2.24 Technological Universities

In January 2014, the General and TU Bill was published, allowing for the future establishing of the TUs. According to Minister Quinn "this Bill represents an essential milestone in the modernisation and reform agenda for higher education institutions" (Quinn, 2014). TUs will be designated according to criteria set out in a report delivered by Simon Marginson, Professor of HE at the University of Melbourne (HEA, February 2011). The traditionally binary system of HE in place in Ireland has arguably reached a watershed that may see its system structure evolve in a new direction. It is not yet clear how policy change will affect the system structure - whether TUs will form a sector of their own and eventually come to subsume the IoT one, or be integrated into the university sector, or add itself as a third category of HEIs, creating a layered, three-tiered HE system.

Conclusion

There is a considerable range of literature on the processes of differentiation in European HE systems as a result of increasing expansion (Neave; 1993; Teichler, 2002; Anderson, 2004; van Vught, 2007). From it, one could deduce that the process of differentiation has indeed gone forward. However, this analysis would be flawed since the primary purpose of differentiation in Western European countries is focused on where to locate vocational, technical and skill-related activities, whether outside of universities as is the case in Ireland

and Finland with the creation of the IoTs and polytechnics, or sometimes within universities themselves (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, p.4). Although this type of horizontal differentiation is important, vertical differentiation, based on the measurement of research, for example, has traditionally been less obvious on the Continent. The notion of a research university as a separate institution from colleges that we find in the typology of the Samuel Neaman Institute does not find fertile ground on the Continent. An explanation for this would be of course that the European tradition follows the "Humboldtian model" that nurtures the integration of both teaching and research within a single HEI (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, p.5). Bonaccorsi and Daraio maintain that "European national systems have not established a consistent policy of institutional differentiation between universities that do all kinds of research, and those that limit themselves mainly to applied research or even do not do any research at all" (2007, p.5). Although this appears well founded until the early twenty-first century, the validity of this statement may have diminished following new government policy actions (therefore top down) in both Germany (German Universities Excellence Initiative, 2006/2007 and 2012) and France (Campus Operation, 2008; Excellence Initiatives, 2010) that tend to distinguish and reward those universities whose research intensity is the highest. It is interesting to note that these authors have also identified a push towards this trend from a "bottom-up effort of a small group of research-intensive universities (LERU)" who are actively seeking to promote differentiation although the "theme is still subject to considerable controversy" (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, p.26). This seems to imply that deliberately establishing, or institutionalising this process of differentiation, is much harder in Continental Europe than North America. Nonetheless, in recent years, greater emphasis on institutional differentiation, and the reasons behind this development, is important to dwell on to understand why and to what extent European HE systems are facing sweeping structural changes.

A variety of factors have traditionally played an important role in pushing for differentiation, including continuous student expansion since the 1940s, the modernisation of HEIs advocated by the EC since 2003, the needs of the "knowledge economy", globalisation and finally the "commodification" or "marketization" of HE. However, at no time in history have all of these factors been combined with such clearly defined objectives to be achieved within a specific time frame. The past decade has been an intrusive one for national HE systems. This can be seen through ever higher national and supra-national targets for student participation in HE; the structural reforms in HE expected by the EU from its Member States in order to achieve the Europe 2020 goals and the increased competition between HEIs for public and private research funds. The latter forces university governing boards to disclose detailed strategic plans in order to present a clearer image of the profile and potential of their institution leading to fierce competition and to the creation of university alliances representing the interests of institutions sharing the same missions, values and perhaps most importantly reputations. These so-called groups of research intensive institutions, e.g., the Russell Group and the League of European Research Universities have vested interests, such as securing the maximum possible research funds for member institutions under the Horizon 2020 programme. LERU for instance has raised serious concerns over the creation of the new U-Multirank ranking mechanism funded by the European Commission because the latter is intended as a user-friendly, multi-dimensional (not just focussing on research intensity) benchmarking tool (LERU, June 2012, p.3). U-Multirank could disrupt the *status quo* enjoyed by LERU members by potentially creating a new hierarchy of institutions and influence vital EU funding decisions.

The aim will therefore be to examine in detail changes within the context of the Irish HE system. Through an embedded, single-case design I will analyse if and to what extent

differentiation in mission and role between Irish HEIs has occurred and how national and EU policies have shaped institutional differentiation, and finally whether Ireland is an example of "convergence" or "divergence" with regard to the evolution of its (binary) HE system towards either a more formally divided HE system, or towards a unified system (Kyvik, 2004).

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Structural changes to a HE system are a relatively rare (albeit often cyclical) phenomenon. They are the result of a long internal review process of a nation's HE system, often with regard to how this affects its competitiveness and overall employability of graduates. Within these reforms, it was the broad 'modernisation' agenda for HE that I engaged with and in particular, its focus on differentiation in mission and role of HEIs. In order to examine how differentiation between HEIs operates in both policy and practice (i.e., at institutional level), a single-case study of the Irish HE system, contextualised within the wider European framework, with an embedded case study design (Yin, 2009, p.50) was chosen in order to extricate findings not only from the national and European levels, but also from the institutional level. The rationale for choosing the single-case study was based on the representativeness of Ireland as a traditional binary system of HE, making it typical of a majority of Western European HE systems (Kyvik, 2004, p.396).

3.1 Research questions

The research questions guided me in determining why certain policy decisions, in particular initiatives for greater institutional differentiation, were made by the relevant Irish authorities and how this came about, within the context of globalisation. I analysed the rationale for these changes within the context of HE reform at European level, particularly the agenda for 'modernisation' advanced by the EC since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This called for the use of "how" and "why" questions, because such questions "deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence"

(Yin, 2009, p.6). I wanted to understand why and how, and under what form did differentiation appear in Irish policy documents and in institutions' strategic thinking. I wanted to shed light on the reasons why a set of decisions was taken with regard to HE reform in Ireland, before looking at how they were implemented (if at all) and with what result. I explored why new policy and institutional developments, such as TUs, were deemed necessary in the first place.

Attention was paid to avoid research questions that were either too narrow or too broad. Indeed, the latter type of questions may prove unanswerable because of their wide scope, leaving the researcher with findings that are likely to present more of a patchwork of unrelated snapshots rather than a deeper understanding of the issues and process, one that benefits from enjoying the perspective of context. However, narrow research questions are likely to produce findings that are either not very interesting or simply not useful. To support this statement, King and Horrocks (2010) argue that "a very narrow research question can result in a highly homogeneous sample that does not enable diversity of meaning and experience to be revealed" (p.27).

1. **How has differentiation manifested itself in the HE sector in Ireland since 2000?**

This question examined how differentiation in the role and function of HEIs manifested itself since the early twenty-first century, following the upgrade of the RTCs to IoT status in 1998 and the launch of the Lisbon Agenda in 2000. The "diversity of mission" between the universities and the IoT sector was celebrated in an OECD review of HE in Ireland (2004, p.20) that emphasised the importance of maintaining such a divide with clearly differentiated roles for universities and IoTs, although it regretted the absence of a unified and coordinated

concept of HE. Such horizontal differentiation between the two sectors has been a leitmotiv of Irish HE policy, one that resonates strongly today, even in a period of consolidation, where no mergers across the binary divide are envisaged (Reisz, 2013, p.36) but significant mergers within the IoT sector are expected to take place.

2. **Has the traditional binary structure of the Irish HE system been reinforced or diluted in the early twenty-first century?**

This question's purpose was to look more specifically at the traditional binary divide in Ireland, separating the universities from the IoT sector, and how it has been affected by HE policies targeted at structural reform at system level. The focus was on the seven universities and the 14 IoTs currently existing in the Irish HE system, excluding private colleges. This included analysing the extent of "academic" and "institutional drift" (Neave, 1979, p.155) that operated since the early 1990s in order to verify whether the Irish HE system did not, in substance, follow the example of the British HE system. The latter became unified in 1992, after the upgrade of the polytechnics to university status, a situation the Minister for Education and Skills was reportedly delighted was not replicated in Ireland (Reisz, 2013, p.36). The General and TU Bill (2014), which provides the legislative framework for IoTs who have created partnerships and wish to merge, with a view to be redesignated as TUs, has the potential to affect the binary divide, by creating a new type of HEI alongside the two already co-existing set of institutions.

3. **Have national HE policies tended to promote greater differentiation in the role and functions of HEIs?**

This question sought to examine whether the demand from policy-makers for a more coordinated, top down approach to HE, also referred to as "directed diversity" (Boland, 2011, p.8), has encouraged greater and more formalised differentiation between HEIs (e.g., research versus teaching missions). This study explored whether the specific experience of the HE sector in Ireland during this period provides evidence establishing the convergence or divergence in role and mission of HEIs. This meant looking at various national policy documents actively promoting more transparent institutional profiling and institutional strategies that are compatible with the HE Landscape documents issued by the HEA.

4. **To what extent are HE policies and institutional strategies informed by EU policy approaches for the 'modernisation' of HE?**

A key issue is whether there is such a thing as a distinctively Irish national policy in the area of HE. Certainly national policy-making cannot completely detach itself from EU priority actions and wider international trends. My intention was to understand how a relatively small country like Ireland, with an open economy and membership of EU, incorporates into its own HE policies international and particularly regional contributions. Since the EU adopted the ambitious goal to become the world's "most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" in March 2000, at a European Council meeting held in Lisbon, the modernisation of HE systems and their institutions has been of great concern to EU institutions, to the point where they are currently financing a multi-million new ranking system of European institutions (U-Multirank). This question reflected on the origins of Irish HE policies and institutional strategies. My study focused on investigating the influence of the flurry of EU policy documents on modernising HE systems and HEIs on policy-makers and institutions in Ireland.

3.2 Research design

The research design has been described as a plan that "guides the investigator in the process of collecting, analysing, and interpreting observations. It is a *logical model of proof* that allows the researcher to draw inferences concerning causal relations among the variables under investigation" (emphasis added, Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992, p.26). In other words, it is the logic that connects the data to be collected (and the conclusions that will result from the data analysis) to the initial research questions (Yin, 2009, p.24).

The research design serves as a "blueprint" in guiding the researcher and enabling him to decide how to deal best with what questions to study, what data is to be considered relevant, what data to collect and how to analyse the findings (Philliber, Schwab & Samsloss, 1980, p.12).

In order to do so, the research design for case study research must include five components. These include the study's questions, the study's propositions, the unit(s) of analysis, the logic linking the data to the propositions and finally the criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2009, p.27).

This research project was based on a single-case study of the Irish HE system in light of the wider European and international context that nonetheless involved more than one unit of analysis. Indeed, within the same single case, I used an embedded single-case design that paid significant attention to five HEIs selected from each side of the binary divide; two universities and three IoTs. I examined how and why they were affected by national and

European policy change in HE, and in particular how this translated into the implementation of sharper differentiation and its consequences for the system level.

3.3 Theoretical framework

Within the scope of my research, I focused on national policies implemented within the Irish system. Although my focus was on the HE system in Ireland, it was necessary to identify and understand the various linkages between the national HE system and the European landscape. The Irish HE system does not exist in a vacuum and globalisation and Europeanisation theories certainly imprint on the form and substance of Irish HE policy-making. This enabled me to position HE structural reform in Ireland within the wider globalisation debate and identify whether it fits with either the convergence or diverging thesis (Vaira, 2004, p.484). Kyvik (2004) and Neave (1983) argue that Western European HE structural models are either converging towards binary or unified systems. This provides a useful theoretical framework for differentiation, because according to these authors lack of differentiation between HEIs leads to unification and the abolition of binary systems. This is a particularly helpful lens through which to examine the ongoing developments occurring in the Irish HE system, and their effects on system structure.

The Irish HE system is a critical case in that it tested two established theories with regard to the development of HE systems, the first stemming from Martin Trow's linear model of transition from elite to mass to universal HE (1973), which would explain Irish HE reform as a way of adapting to quantitative development trends in HE, bringing Ireland into the universal phase. Globalisation also offers two main streams of thought namely the converging and diverging theories (Vaira, 2004, p.284). The convergence theories appeared

in the late 1990s and provided a lens in explaining changes arising in national settings from pan-European and EU initiatives, leading to what authors have categorised as a convergence of European HE systems. Initially, convergence was at programme level (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, pp.354-355; Zha, 2009, p.470), but convergence may potentially be spilling over to structural issues of shape, size and mission. This is in line with Kyvik's discussion on whether Western European HE structural models are either converging towards binary or unified systems (2004, p.406). The divergence thesis is not to be neglected. Neave warns us that convergence depends on the "level of analysis" (2002, p.188) and may be limited to only the highest level, meaning that convergence may not always be replicated or implemented at other levels such as the national or institutional. Marginson and Rhodes argue that there is not a single top down linear flow from the global to the local in the HE arena. Instead, they observe a "simultaneity of flows" (2002, p.289). It is the latter that I wished to examine, through a policy document analysis of documents released by agencies of each level (global, national, local) and through semi-structured interviews capturing agents' reflections and analysis, whether in their capacity as representing their entity or in their own personal capacity. This provided for a rich reflection on which to base our understanding of HE reform in Ireland and beyond in the EU.

3.4 Research approach/Strategy of inquiry: the single-case study

The case is the phenomenon of differentiation in the Irish HE system, selected because of the representativeness of Ireland as a traditional binary system (Kyvik, 2004, p.396). It includes geographical and embedded units representative of the university and IoT sectors.

The case study is particularly advantageous when "how" and "why" research type questions are being asked about a contemporary set of events (as opposed to historical events), such as the modernisation agenda for the Irish HE system, over which the investigator has no control. The extent of the researcher's control over and access to actual behavioural events are key in choosing a suitable strategy of inquiry. The historical method is preferred when there is no access or control in dealing with the past. Experiments are made when the researcher can manipulate behaviour directly, precisely and systematically, the laboratory setting being the environment *par excellence* for using such a strategy, although not the only one (Yin, 2009, pp.11-12).

> The case study is preferred in examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. The case study relies on many of the same techniques as a history but it adds two sources of evidence not usually included in the historian's repertoire: direct observation and systematic interviewing. Again, although case studies and histories can overlap, the case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence - documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations - beyond what might be available in the conventional historical study. Moreover, in some situations, such as participant-observation, informal manipulation can occur (Yin, 2009, p.11).

Yin (2009) offers a two-pronged technical definition of a case study that first encapsulates both its scope and what it does, and second how it does this. In relation to the first, the case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates in depth a specific contemporary phenomenon, within its real-life context, in particular when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurry and would gain in clarification. A case study method is adequate when seeking to cover 'contextual conditions' (Yin, 2009, p.18) in the belief that they will provide light on the real-life phenomenon being investigated. However, because phenomenon and context are sometimes seemingly inextricable from one another in real-life situations, there are specific data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis characteristic of case studies. This is because case study inquiry:

- Copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result

- Relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as a result
- Benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (Yin, 2009, p.18)

The case study therefore cannot be restricted to a single data collection tactic. Systematic interviewing will be key in identifying what the actors most closely involved in the process believe are the reasons for change, if and why the EU modernisation agenda has been a powerful driver in Irish HE reform, while also providing for first-hand interpretations of relevant Irish, European and international policy documents.

According to Mitchell a case study constitutes a "reliable and respectable procedure" (Mitchell, 1983, p.207) for theory-testing, just as effective as survey research techniques. He rebuts the claim that case study research is invalid, because it seeks to generalise from a single case, since he believes this is based on the "misconception that case study and survey research use the same basis for extrapolating from data to theory" (Hammersley, 1992, p.174). He considers this to be incorrect since while survey research uses two types of inference (statistical and logical), case study research relies only on logical inference:

> The validity of the extrapolation (in case study analysis) depends not on the typicality or representativeness of the case but on the cogency of the theoretical reasoning (Mitchell, 1983, p.207).

Mitchell stresses the importance of logical inference for case studies, which he defines as a process through which theoretical relationships among phenomena can be induced from thorough investigation of a single or a small number of cases:

> The process of inference from case studies is only logical or causal and cannot be statistical... We infer that the features present in the case study will be related in a wider population not because the case is representative but because our analysis is unassailable. The emphasis [is] on case studies used to relate theoretically relevant characteristics reflected in the case to one another in a logically coherent way (Mitchell, 1983, p.200).

Through the observation of temporal relationships among events within a particular setting (which provides the case study), Mitchell argues that necessary relationships among the phenomena observed can be inferred in some determinate way:

> The extended case study enables the analyst to trace how events chain on to one another and how therefore events are necessarily linked to one another through time (1983, p.194).

This was particularly relevant for this case study of the Irish HE system because I was examining various events or policy decisions that took place in the HE arena in Ireland and Europe within a limited period of time (since 2000) and attempted to explain how they were related.

The single-case study seemed the most appropriate case selection strategy to enable me to capture the subtleties behind the origins and current implementation of differentiation in the mission and roles of HEIs. The Irish HE system is relatively small and homogeneous, especially if compared to its neighbouring English and French counterparts, rendering it conceivable to develop a holistic account mapping the complex interactions between HEIs, the State, and international and/or supranational actors that specialise in HE. The Irish HE system also provided a well-defined framework and clear boundaries, with an easily identifiable number of state funded HEIs (seven universities, fourteen IoTs, seven colleges of education and a relatively small number of other third-level institutions offering specialist education), entrance (at undergraduate level) to which is principally administered by a common undergraduate admissions system. There are 44 institutions offering undergraduate programmes through the Central Applications Office (CAO) and 27 offering research programmes at Levels 9 and/or 10 (HEA, February 2012, p.3). Narrowing it down to a single case, of an approachable size such as that described above, allowed for a detailed, in-depth analysis of the structure of the Irish HE system as the principal subject of study. This allowed

for an in-depth exploration of how differentiation is being implemented in Irish HE. Differentiation may transpire either as a process, or institutional development, as well as an explicit policy, without necessarily taking the form of deliberate state action.

The choice of an embedded case study design (Yin, 2009, p.50) seemed more appropriate than a holistic one. This is because there was more than one unit of analysis, in particular through greater attention paid to five Irish HEIs. This variant of a single-case study approach is appropriate when attention is given to a subunit or subunits, in this case IoT1, IoT2, IoT3, University 1 and University 2; whereas a holistic design is preferable when no logical subunits can be identified, or if the "relevant theory underlying the case study is itself of a holistic nature" (Yin, 2009, p.50). The latter type of design can create problems by allowing for the entire case study to be conducted at an excessively abstract level. Another issue with the holistic design is related to the fact that the nature of the case study may shift during the time of investigation, without the researcher being aware of it. This "unsuspected slippage" (Yin, 2009, p.51) will have an effect on the orientation of the initial research questions, making it preferable for the researcher to start again, with a new and more adapted research design. However, an embedded design can prevent this because it will focus a case study inquiry more tightly. Nonetheless, an embedded design can lead to one major pitfall. The danger is that the focus of the case study is only on the subunit level, remaining there and failing to return to the larger unit of analysis, here the Irish HE system. In other words, the original phenomenon, or real-life event of interest has become the context and is no longer the target of the study. Yin illustrates this through the study of organizational climate, which, if the embedded design approach is chosen leads to involve individual employees as a subunit of study. The danger here is that the data focuses only on the subunits (individual

employees), rendering the study more of an employee and not an organisational study (2009, p.52).

Mergers and/or clusters in the Irish HE system also have the potential to considerably alter the HE landscape and make the process visible to the outsider, making the findings I collected understandable to a wider audience. In a HE system the size of Ireland, a single merger involving several HEIs will have considerable ramifications for the system as a whole (e.g., in rationalising their course offerings, creating new alliances and partnerships). This meant I was facing an alert academic and administrative corps, one that is expecting changes and either prepared to accept them or ready to resist. It is also a moment of debate and uncertainty, with HEIs trying to place themselves on the Irish HE map, one where arguments on all sides must be articulated and coherently set out. It is a time of intense negotiations, and this context provided for invaluable insights into the role and place of HEIs within a system, and vice versa. This context enabled for a rich collection of data, with the advantage that a sizeable portion of it (although not the valuable perspectives of individual academics, policy-makers or administrators) was available through various public fora. Understanding the rapidly changing HE environment demanded preparatory work prior to, during and after the interview stage, by "immersing ourselves in information about the actors in question, and using both empathy and imagination to construct credible accounts of their senses of identity" (Smith, 2004, p.43). This was done through the use of public policy documents that enlightened me on the national and international context, while semi-structured interviews offered a vital insight into the concrete accounts offered by HE practitioners and their experience with reform. This is in line with the meaning of interpretive analyses given by della Porta whereby it is claimed that they "keep a holistic focus, emphasizing cases (which

could be an individual, a community or other social collectivity) as complex entities and stressing the importance of context" (2008, p.30).

As mentioned above, Ireland's binary system, with clearly differentiated roles for both the universities and the IoTs, makes it representative of a majority of European HE systems. The diversity of the Irish HE system was expressed for the last generation through this binary continuum on which HEIs placed themselves on either side of the spectrum, with little space for a middle ground. An interesting and relevant aspect of current HE policy is the setting up of a third type of HEI, the TUs. Even though the process is still ongoing, a legislative framework has been set (General and TU Bill, 2014), criteria have been defined and applications from the IoTs received by the HEA. On this basis it is likely to be only a matter of time before TUs are designated. The HEA has warned that as part of its "system-level approach" (HEA, 2012, pp.5-6), system level implications will be of major concern in the approval for designation as TU, showing to what extent the system level takes precedence over the institutional. Therefore, the Irish HE system is both typical of European HE systems while also presenting a new departure from the most common European HE structure, even though at this stage, the extent of this departure remains uncertain. The concept of a TU is a long established tradition in Europe and beyond (Australia, Canada), where it is used to emphasise the particular focus of the university (Norton, 2013). However, Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski is sceptical about the existence of an internationally recognised category of TUs as suggested in the Hunt report (HEA, 2011, p.15). He makes the case that the Global Alliance of Technological Universities for instance, whose members include Imperial College London and the California Institute of Technology, is not a particularly helpful benchmark or standard of comparison. This is not only because these institutions are of a different calibre to Irish IoTs, but also because they differ little in mission and standard

to other universities (Prondzynski, 2012). The objective included in the Hunt Report to preserve the diversity of institutional mission would therefore not be achieved by importing such a model (HEA, 2011, p.15). There seems to be no international benchmark of what a TU is.

The reasons for this departure were an important focus of this study, because the findings exposed that it was closely related to efforts to overcome "institutional" and "academic drift" (Neave, 1979, p.155), both central to the concept of differentiation, and close focus on Ireland was required, while also locating Ireland within a wider context shaped by EU policies and international trends.

3.5 Sampling

Studies seeking quantitative data focus on recruiting a statistically representative sample of the population, in order to produce statistical representativeness. This is due to the need to ascertain the generalisability of the conclusions drawn from the research. In qualitative studies, the primary aim is not to establish this kind of systematic generalisation. Nonetheless, the "sample needs to relate in some systematic manner to the social world and phenomena that a study seeks to throw light upon" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.29). A purely opportunistic sampling strategy was not appropriate here, because the "strength of a study to generalize has to do with whether the sample population is an accurate representation of other populations in society" (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2002, p.154).

Within the context of my embedded single-case design, I was able to sample at two levels. Firstly, since I was examining the changes that shape the system level, and because the latter

are inextricably linked to the institutional level, a selection of sites (i.e., HEIs) provided a core framework of HEIs to focus on. Interviewees from the HEIs were primarily drawn from the selected sites. Therefore, it was important that my choice of sites was as representative as possible of the binary system which characterises the Irish HE system. Secondly, in an effort to return to the larger unit of analysis, interviews were conducted at the national and European levels, as indicated above.

3.5.1 Selection of sites

One cannot study a HE system, the holistic level, without an appropriate amount of attention being given to its HEIs, the subunits. A HE system is the result, both quantitatively in terms of size and qualitatively in terms of institution types, of the aggregation of a diverse set of HEIs. The selected sites provided diverse contributions on the extent to which the 'modernisation' agenda, with a focus on differentiation, affected the institutional level. With Ireland's binary divide in mind and in order to represent proportionally the diversity of mission between types of institutions, I therefore selected five HEIs, two universities and three IoTs. It was important for the selected subunits to be as geographically representative as possible of the country, and focus was not concentrated in a single area, such as the Greater Dublin Area.

University 1 was initially considered at the time of its upgrade to university status to be an unconventional university that broke with the traditional mould by introducing a series of ideas, such as work placement, as part of its degree programmes. University 1 is recognised in Ireland and abroad for having a distinct entrepreneurial orientation. Its presence in recent years amongst the "Times Higher Education (THE) 100 under 50" university ranking is a

recognition of how a HEI that cultivates a particular and distinctive profile and mission can be successful at an international level. University 2, one of the established Irish universities, was representative of the traditional 'elite' university sector (according to Trow's definition, 1973). University 1, as a former National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE) later upgraded to university status in 1989 that was established to provide higher level technical education above the standard of the existing RTCs (Clancy, 1989, pp.120-121) typified the newer, more entrepreneurial oriented university.

Across the binary divide, IoT1 was selected because it is a prime example of an IoT based in a rural setting, as it emerged from the Regional College system in the early 1970s. It intends to remain a "stand-alone" institution (HEA, 2013, p.10) in the sense that it has no plans to merge with another institution. It will however, and as is the case with all Irish HEIs, reinforce existing links with neighbouring institutions as part of a regional cluster (HEA, 2013, p.12). IoT1 was one of the original RTCs established in 1970 and later upgraded to IoT status in 1998. Its rural setting at the heart of the Midlands region provided a different perspective to that of the densely populated and large Dublin based institutions. This made IoT1 an appropriate site because it is typical of the IoT sector. While my choice could have been based on specific factors such as research intensity or number of full-time students, I chose a rural IoT, simply because it was representative of the sector and was not based in either the Greater Dublin Area or in any of the six historically legally recognised cities in the Republic of Ireland (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Kilkenny and Galway).

IoT2 provided yet another perspective from the IoT sector. This institute brought an insight into how a relatively small IoT in the south of the country sees itself within the broad modernisation and rationalisation agendas the Irish HE system is currently engaged in. IoT2

is one of the smallest institutes in Ireland in terms of both full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students (HEA, 2013). The Irish government's aim is to "create a strong and distinct career and enterprise focused technological sector that will comprise of a smaller number of strengthened institutes of technology" (HEA, 2013, p.9). The number of Irish HEIs would drop from 39 to 24, and as mentioned previously consolidation would occur mainly in the IoT sector (HEA, 2013, p.13). Proposed consolidation is likely to affect smaller IoTs, such as IoT2, and it was therefore crucial to include this institution. Amalgamation of this institute with various neighbouring larger institutions has been recently proposed under various forms. Firstly, the International Panel report suggested IoT2 be absorbed into a larger comprehensive regional university (HEA, August 2012). Secondly, in a document entitled "Completing the Landscape Process for Irish Higher Education" (2013), the HEA revealed it received a joint formal expression of interest for redesignation by three IoTs of the Munster region, including IoT2. Although the two proposals have different origins, one top down, and one bottom up, in both cases IoT2 would hypothetically join larger HEIs to form a new single HEI. This led to interesting data with respect to the perceived impact of differentiation and its implications for the survival of smaller institutions.

Finally, IoT3 brought a different perspective from the IoT sector, being the largest institute in Ireland outside of Dublin, in terms of registered students and having a strong emphasis on research. In a similar vein to those English civic universities established in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, IoT3 now provides students with the full breadth of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from Humanities to Health Sciences. It is one of the few IoTs that was granted the right by the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) to award its own awards at all levels, from Higher Certificate to PhD. It is also unusual in the IoT sector in offering post-doctoral programmes in a number of specialist areas. It is based in

one of the historically legally recognised cities of Ireland, as well as being designated a regional Gateway by the National Spatial Strategy. It is a key element within a proposed TU outside of the Greater Dublin Area making it a relevant site to potentially observe both rapid structural changes and institutional profile. It was important to include IoTs with different motivations and aspirations, whether as a single stand-alone institution or possibly as a key element in a bid for TU redesignation in the near future.

From this selection of sites depended to a large extent the sampling of interviewees from the HEIs. This enabled me to go deeper down into the institutional fabric and to contrast what had been said and/or decided at the national and European levels with what had been either effectively understood and/or implemented at the institutional level.

3.5.2 Interviewees from selected higher education institutions

The five subunits I examined in greater depth within the framework of my embedded single-case design (IoT1, IoT2, IoT3, University 1 and University 2) provided for a representative selection of interviewees. I interviewed four to five individuals in every institution; the management and academic workers within the HEIs. To avoid duplication of information collected from the interviews, sampling on the basis of creating a balance between Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences subjects and Engineering, Mathematics and Science subjects was not considered crucial.

Firstly, **two college officers** per university and **at least one college officer** in each IoT were interviewed in order to assess how they understood differentiation and its potential and current implications for their institutions and its role and mission in the broader system they

belong to. In some small institutes, college officers were a scarce commodity hence the lower pool of potential participants which resulted in a single interviewee (e.g., IoT1). Their position implies they are close to the institutional decision-making process, and the assumption was therefore that they were more likely to be aware of institutional, national and European policy decisions, documents and national priorities.

Secondly, **two senior academics** with no executive role were also interviewed in each institution. Since they were chosen on the basis that they do not partake in College Board meetings, it was assumed that they might feel freer to discuss issues regarding institutional development/direction and potentially feel less bound by matters of discretion because of an elected role.

However, by only including high profile senior academics, there was a risk of overlooking whether actual implementation or instead resistance was occurring and therefore miss out on the reality of the situation. Policies and strategies decided at executive level do not necessarily trickle down to the middle or lower levels of the institution and it was important to remain as inclusive as possible to be able to depict a clearer picture of the state of differentiation in mission and roles between Irish HEIs. In order for the sample to be representative of the various functions of an institution, members of both the academic and administrative staff were included.

Hence, at least one **member of the administrative staff** in each institution was interviewed, either an academic administrator (e.g., Quality Assurance officer) or a representative from the Human Resources Office. The latter are key intermediaries in the implementation of high level policies with regard to recruitment, promotion, employee relations, Quality Assurance,

training and development, all of which are potentially affected by the modernisation agenda for HE and differentiation policies that target institutional consolidation and rationalisation.

This enabled the sample in each HEI to be as inclusive and balanced as possible, in order to discover the level of penetration of policies at institutional level. Finally, to secure an indication of trade union view, I interviewed a member of both the Irish Federation of University Teachers Council (senior official, IFUT) and the Teachers Union of Ireland (official, TUI). Interviewees within the HEIs were therefore referred to as either "college officer", "senior academic" or "senior administrator".

3.5.3 Sampling of interviewees at the national and European levels

Secondly, interviews were conducted at other higher levels, and this included paying attention to the national and European levels. In order to get a more holistic perspective and to return to the larger unit of analysis, namely the structure of the Irish HE system, policy officers within the HEA (senior policy officers 1 and 2; senior manager; Member of the HEA) and the DES (policy officer 1, senior manager) were interviewed. A member of other government related agencies, such as Enterprise Ireland (senior manager), Forfás (senior manager), SFI (senior manager), and QQI (senior policy officers 1 and 2) were also interviewed in order to ascertain their involvement with HE planning and to explore their perspectives on national policies and European frameworks. It is important to note that in each case these participants spoke in a personal capacity and were keen to highlight the fact that they were not talking in the name of the entity they were working for. Finally, at the European level, officials working for the EC and the European University Association (senior policy officer, EUA) offered their insights of how they understand HE reforms across Europe

and in particular in Ireland and whether they believed the EU had a steering role in national policy-making geared towards restructuring their HE systems and including differentiation in role and mission between HEIs. To limit the potential amount of bias and lack of reliability that may have occurred when collecting data because of the official capacity of the interviewees, I also interviewed a prominent retired academic (former President, UL) from outside of the five subunits of analysis within my embedded single-case study design. This provided for a semi-outsider perspective.

A particular obstacle in collecting the data may stem from the lack of reliability in what the interviewees choose to communicate within the framework of the semi-structured interviews. This is to be expected to some extent, because of the positions they occupy, and the potential vested interests they harbour may mean they will be reticent to divulge important information or express opinions openly. However, this may be revealing of itself. If the majority of interviewees from the HEA have exactly the same discourse, in contrast to another group of stakeholders (e.g., staff in the IoTs), this may be just as useful in mapping out what drivers have encouraged differentiation, or resisted it. If there is an unwillingness to talk about certain policy issues, this may provide useful insights into the uneasiness about legitimation and justification for policies, but also a general lack of knowledge about what direction the process is taking. In the case of interviews with officials of EU institutions, it may indicate that unless the process is over, the information is confidential and may only be released *ex post*, possibly concurring with theories of Europeanisation by "stealth" (Garben; 2010, 2011). This is relevant to research question 4 examining to what extent the EU institutions have influenced national developments in the Irish HE system.

Diversity in the recruitment of participants at the national level was also essential. The purposefully selected interviewees represented a variety of stakeholders' perspectives in relation to my research topic, namely the importance and the origins of differentiation in modernising and reshaping of the Irish HE landscape. Only through a diverse set of participants can one shed light on meaningful perceptions of reality, due to the accumulation of different experiences by those participants. The more sides to the prism, the more reflections one might hope to capture, the latter reflecting the various perceptions of reality on the subject of research. Combined they may provide a useful, because more holistic, reality, one that could add knowledge to the field. This is why representatives of the Irish government (policy officer and senior manager; DES) and other related agencies (senior policy officers 1 and 2; senior manager; member of the HEA) were included.

3.6 Research methods

The data was generated from the use of multiple sources of evidence including the analysis of a selection of official public documents, emanating from EU institutions, international organisations and the five HEIs, carefully chosen with regard to the themes they presented and the year they were released, thereby establishing context. The latter data collection type was coupled with interviewing a variety of stakeholders in the HE arena, focusing on the meaning the interviewees gave to these documents and sought to determine how they interpreted current policy choices (at system and institutional levels) tailored towards the restructuring of Irish HE. However, the format of the semi-structured interviews allowed interviewees enough leeway to feel free to express what they thought were the main drivers behind the 'modernisation' agenda for Irish HE, and not necessarily feel obliged to establish the possible link between European agendas and the Irish policy and practice. The interviews

were semi-structured in order to allow participants to express their thoughts freely and possibly divulge fresh elements, even depart from their official or original position. Interviews facilitated the collection of comprehensive in-depth qualitative data.

3.6.1 Official document analysis

The analysis of official policy documents deriving from HEIs, national ministries, European and international organisations was key to understanding the origins of differentiation and its current status in Ireland. It was enlightening with regard to the context and the priorities of the different stakeholders in the restructuring of this particular HE system and its HEIs. Documents, whether EC Communications or HEA publications also included material obtained via the Internet, since the medium through which the document is obtained should not be the issue (Denscombe, 2007, p.230). Besides, most newspapers and magazines are now entirely available online and this had no effect on the use of this material as a document for research. Home pages and press releases found on websites were also considered as online documents and were examined within the context of this study.

Newspaper articles provided fresh insights as to what earns media attention, and as a result makes national governments particularly responsive to those issues expressed in a public forum. The value of newspaper and magazine articles depended on a combination of various factors, such as the expertise of the journalist and the specialism of the magazine (which would indicate whether they have the appropriate capacity, in terms of dedicated staff and resources to research and write about a specific topic, such as the Times Higher Education in the arena of HE). Their value increased if they had acquired insider information which their

correspondents had uncovered or gained access to, such as in the case of unreleased reports (Flynn, 2012).

Perhaps the biggest advantage of the use of written documentary sources that are in the public domain was their high level of accessibility. It was possible to access a plethora of government, European and international organisations' websites, themselves host to a myriad of documents of various types, whether under the form of memos, reports, press releases, communications or entire HE strategies. Material was therefore conveniently available at no cost, with no delay and without the need for prior appointment and/or authorization to use, since the documents I used are in the public domain. In some cases, access to documentary sources can be restricted, and special permission may only be granted under certain circumstances and after lengthy periods of negotiations. Within the scope of this study, the material was fully available to the public and no special requests were necessary. However, the downside to this unhindered availability was the wide variety of information on the broad topic of HE policy and the numerous players involved, each with their own communication outlets. A selection of key policy documents from identified stakeholders was therefore necessary, and the reasons for each choice was carefully explained. A balance between policy documents originating from national, European and international institutions was preferable in order to establish the wider context for those documents issued by the DES and the HEA, while capturing the various priorities at each level in order to identify any overlapping agendas.

The major documents I analysed and related to one another within the context of the restructuring of the Irish HE system had to first of all pertain either to the reform or modernisation of HE systems and/or HEIs, and secondly had to be concerned with the causal

relationship between economic competitiveness and a rationalised HE system. My aim was to link the various themes that I encountered throughout eleven documents originating from different sources.

First of all, the Communication by the EC on the **"Role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge"** (EC, 2003), provided a useful starting point to discuss the reasons for this institution's active and regular involvement in HE affairs. From 2006 onwards, the Communications from the EC called on the other EU institutions to support its efforts in the arena of HE. The EC reiterated the importance of its "modernisation agenda" for universities, to be understood as all HEIs irrespective of their national titles, for Europe's competitiveness with a Communication on **"Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: education, research and innovation"** (EC, 2006), an agenda they conceive as crucial to the success of the broader Lisbon Strategy. Finally, I examined the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, entitled **"Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems"** (EC, 2011) since this is one of the more recent Communications and it refers to HE systems and no longer only to the institutions that are embedded within. At the international level, the OECD **Review of Higher Education in Ireland** (2004), conducted and released by an international panel of experts, gave insights into structural issues in terms of size and shape, including the preservation of the binary division and the importance of maintaining different missions for HEIs in Ireland. Within Ireland, a key document of significant importance to this study was the "**National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030"** (Hunt et al., 2011), also known as the **Hunt Report**, which is revealing in that it explicitly called for a smaller number of HEIs and increased collaboration across the system (p.97), while maintaining institutional diversity

with differentiated but complementary roles for the universities and the IoTs (p.98). This was followed up in the most recent HEA document entitled: **"Towards a Performance Evaluation Framework: Profiling Irish Higher Education"** (December 2013) that gave extensive data on the research performance in a plethora of research activities for all publicly funded HEIs. In another document entitled: **"Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape"** (February 2012) the HEA urged the "need to move beyond a simplistic binary notion of a higher education system" (p.5) while emphasizing a holistic vision focused on the system level, or landscape. The mission of a HEI is currently being more precisely defined by clear criteria set up to differentiate between IoTs and potential TUs. The HEA released its **"Criteria for Designation to Technological University Status"** in June 2011, enabling IoTs to become aware of the objective requirements they would need to fulfil if they wished to be considered for designation as a TU, alongside system level implications of such rebranding. Finally, an ambitious independent international panel of experts led by a member of the European Commission's Group of Policy Advisors, Professor Frans van Vught, produced a report presenting reconfiguration proposals for the system as a whole, and provided for an external (non-Irish) perspective. This report, also known as **"A Proposed Reconfiguration of the Irish System of Higher Education"** (HEA, August 2012), focused on the restructuring of the system, principally through a number of mergers at institutional level, highlighting the importance of first creating a sustainable and competitive system that could then potentially harbour world-class universities. Bold suggestions were made in this report, including a full merger of TCD and UCD, based on the belief that "Ireland does not have the capacity to sustain more than one major research-focused university of international standing" (HEA, August 2012, p.21), echoing evidence that it is unlikely for a small country to be able to develop a top 20 university (Sheil, 2010, p.73). In any case, such a proposal was deemed as "an idea almost as radical as a merger between Oxford and Cambridge" (Reisz,

2013, p.37) and it was shelved almost instantly by the Minister for Education and Skills. To give some historical context to HE reform in Ireland, these contemporary policy documents were compared and contrasted with the first report published by the HEA in 1969: **"A Council for National Awards and a College of Higher Education for Limerick"**, and a second report produced in 1979 highlighted some developments arising from the decisions made in the late 1960s with regard to the organisation of HE in **"Higher Education in Dublin: A study of some emerging needs"** (HEA).

3.6.2 Reliability of documentary evidence

At a first glance, government and other official publications appear to be a trustworthy source of information to the social researcher for three main reasons. Firstly, they are authoritative in that the data was produced by a state, or state-like entity, one that has the capacity to produce reliable data, based on easy access to both large financial resources (through taxes) and human resources (expert professionals). This increases the credibility of the data, beyond the fact that it stems from a legitimate and/or representative institution. Secondly, government publications are generally considered to be objective, since they were produced by public officials, and have been described as being impartial. Finally, this type of documentary source emanating from government agencies and other related institutions provides factual information. For instance in the case of statistics, the information is presented in the form of numbers that may constitute "hard facts" (Denscombe, 2007, pp.227-228). The latter have the advantage of dissipating any kind of ambiguity although one should be aware of the use of statistics as a neutral measure of objectivity, as numbers and figures are not impermeable to manipulations (e.g., Profiling Irish Higher Education, HEA, 2013).

Yet this first glance at the trustworthiness and validity of official documentary sources must be put to the test. J. Scott (1990, pp.19-35) presents a set of four quality control criteria that documents must match in order to gauge their validity. The first question the researcher is faced with is the authenticity of the document. In the case of documents emanating from public institutions, there can be little doubt as to their authenticity since forgery is unlikely, due to public visibility of these documents and the lengthy processes of consultation and negotiation required before receiving the final official stamp of approval. The second criteria is credibility, in particular to what level is the evidence presented in the document free from bias, distortion and/or error? Bias is the main problem here, since official documents may be simply manufactured towards legitimating a particular government's own agenda, according to the ideology of the ruling political party (Denham, 2010). It was therefore necessary to know exactly who (when possible, since large national, international and supranational institutions usually issue documents under a single approved institutional insignia, with no credit given to the particular author(s)) issued the document and in what context. Attention was paid to dates, thus establishing a chronology of events enabling an observation of the evolution in the recurrence of themes and priorities, as well as the particular context (cultural, economic, linguistic, political and social) surrounding the documents. Governments may have a specific agenda which the current ruling political class wishes to see implemented, so one must be cautious as to the presupposed objectivity of such documents. The background knowledge surrounding the documents I chose to analyse enabled me to present their rationale, not simply what they seek to bring about. Thirdly, the researcher should also always ensure himself/herself of the representativeness of the written source. The documents reviewed within the scope of this study were all mainstream policy documents pertaining to HE, and shared the same goal of reinvigorating European HE systems. Examined together they established the broad context while demonstrating the tenacity and persistence of key

stakeholders in the development of common policies in the HE arena. The exploration of these documents facilitated a holistic approach to recent trends in the restructuring of HE systems, by providing an international and European background to the changes happening at the Irish level. They were also representative of various stakeholders' beliefs. Finally, the meaning(s) of the words were examined carefully in order to verify if there were any embedded codes, or if on the contrary there were obvious omissions and/or silences (Denscombe, 2007, p.233) since the latter are just as important as what has effectively been said. Ambiguity may be sought in the wording and underlying meaning of a document, and if such ambiguity is identified, the reasons for its presence must be clarified.

In much the same way, online documents were carefully reviewed in order to establish their validity. This was particularly the case for documents collected online since there are few restrictions on what is placed on the Internet. The origin and quality of every document that was retrieved from the Internet was scrutinized, in terms of authorship (whether it is a person or a public institution, thus giving an indication as to the authoritativeness of the website and its contents), credibility and authenticity. Concerning web pages, issues such as the trustworthiness of the site were considered, and in the case of private or personal web sites one must also add attention to how regularly it is updated. In a similar way to library books and the frequency of their checking out, the popularity of the website gives some indication as to its value, one that can be verified by the number of "hits" (Denscombe, 2007, p.234).

3.6.3 The advantages of using documents

The advantages in obtaining official public documents are worth mentioning. The use of official documents that have not been produced at the request of a social researcher, and are

simply "out there" (Bryman, 2008, p.515), accessible to all and potentially assembled and analysed by anyone, gives them an interesting quality. This is because they are collected in an unobtrusive way. Indeed, since they were not created for the purposes of social research, they present the characteristic of being non-reactive. Webb et al., (1966) was cautious when it came to relying on measures of social phenomena stemming from methods of data collection prone to reactivity and called for greater use of unobtrusive or non-reactive methods since the subject's knowledge of his participation in scholarly research could affect the validity of the findings by the very artificiality of the situation created by the researcher which would ultimately not equate to the natural world positivists seek to study and explain (Bryman, 2008, p.266). This could ultimately threaten the validity of the findings and therefore affect any attempt at generalizability.

Concerning the interpretation of documents, Bryman points out that there is an accepted view that documents can be used to understand and reveal "social and organizational realities" of an organisation:

> It is clearly tempting to assume that documents reveal something about an underlying social reality, so that the documents that an organisation generates (minutes of meetings, newsletters, mission statements, job definitions, etc.) are viewed as representations of the reality of that organization... According to such a view, documents are windows onto social and organizational realities (2008, p.526).

3.6.4 Limitations of documentary evidence

However, Atkinson and Coffey (2011) warn us against accepting too easily that an analysis of documents by itself can suffice in representing underlying social and organizational realities. Instead, these authors purport that although documents should be "regarded as data in their own right...They often enshrine a distinctively documentary version of social reality" (p.80). Presumably, this would imply that documents deliver their own reality, one that is

manufactured according to, on the one hand, the context they were produced in, and on the other their implied readership. Documents are therefore significant not only for what they intend and set out to achieve but also when considering their targeted audience. While they are written to convey an impression, the latter will usually be favourable to the authors and/or the institutions they represent. No public official document should be viewed on its own. Rather, each document is part of a larger corpus of related documents. This is true because documents of this type inevitably refer and/or are a response to other previous ones. In other words, a single document is like a single thread, and one must keep in mind the larger tapestry to which it belongs. Only then can one have a clearer picture of the design or complete image. This inter-connectedness of documents has been described as "inter-textuality" (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011, p.86). These authors illustrate their argument by expressing concerns about the kind of reality that can be reflected through minutes of a meeting in an organisation. Although officially speaking they are the written (synopsized) memory of all the issues raised and debated, as well as a living record of the variety of views held by the participants and the actions they believed should be taken, this in itself may not be sufficient in establishing an underlying social or organizational reality. They argue this is because of the implied readership of those minutes, which has repercussions on what will eventually be written down. Since the document in question is likely to be scrutinized by others, this eventuality will frame the final wording. They believe that as a result some valuable information may be deliberately omitted. Disagreements may be scrapped out, while actions to be taken may have been favoured following a desire to show that crucial issues (from an external perspective) are being addressed, rendering such a choice artificially constrained by the expectations of the outside world. An excessively cautious outcome may ruin any chances of obtaining a 'transparent representation' of an underlying organizational or social reality. It is in this sense that Atkinson and Coffey claim that: "we cannot… learn

through the written records alone how an organization actually operates day by day. Equally, we cannot treat records – however "official" – as firm evidence of what they report" (2011, p.79). These authors present documents, including electronic and digital resources, as having a distinctive ontological status, which they also refer to as "documentary realities" (2011, p.78), implying that they form a separate reality, one that is caught between the expectations of the outside world and the priorities and status of the organisation as well as the anonymity of the writer. While not denying the value of documents, these authors recommend supporting the findings with another research method. This was achieved through the use of semi-structured interviews, a choice of method I shall explain below. Documents are texts that have been written with specific purposes in mind and cannot be taken for reflecting social reality on their own. While their value is undeniable, Atkinson and Coffey (2011, pp.79-80) warn us that documentary sources "are not surrogates for other kinds of data" (p.79).

3.6.5 The interview process

As argued above by Atkinson and Coffey (2004), a document analysis alone is not sufficient in order to capture the underlying organisational or social reality. They suggest that there are different realities which must be sought and compared. One needs more than a thorough investigation of official documents released by HEIs, the DES, the EC, the HEA and the OECD in order to uncover the subtleties involved in the process of differentiation as developed in Ireland. Such a task required me to gather in-depth data through the medium of semi-structured interviews. These interviews, which lasted roughly 45 minutes, were focused interviews (Merton, Fiske & Kendall in Yin, 2009, p.107) that nonetheless remained open-ended even though interviewees were asked a set of general questions prepared beforehand.

This primary source of information, collected from face-to-face interviews with various relevant stakeholders, exposed fine grained data. This type of interviewing is more akin to a guided conversation instead of structured queries, thereby giving prominence to the interviewee's own perspective and personal point of view (Yin, 2009, p.106). This contrasts with interviewing procedures in quantitative research where the interview very much reflects the researcher's own concerns. I wished to encourage my interviewees to speak as much as possible, even to go "off at tangents" (Bryman, 2008, p.437). Digressions of the sort were relevant because they gave an insight into the priorities and hierarchy of concerns in the interviewee's mind. The freedom offered by semi-structured interviewing also enabled me, when appropriate, to depart from my original guide and add new follow-up questions in the case of unexpected answers or when the interviewee was especially guarded, which was revealing of itself. This flexibility was important to my research since I was examining an ongoing process, one that could still take unexpected twists and turns. It was therefore paramount to be as open-minded and receptive to any kind of new information or reaction to a recent event, whether specifically Irish, European or international.

Bryman (2008) lists the main features of semi-structured interviews, which he contrasts to the more structured interviewing used mainly in quantitative research. One of the main advantages of semi-structured interviews is that they allow for more flexibility, responding to the direction in which the interviewee wants to take the interview. A semi-structured interview can lead to unexpected fresh insights being discussed and unpredicted departures from the topic to bring in new perspectives to the research (Bryman, p. 437). One of the goals of the interview process was be to examine to what extent participants have knowledge of the context and background surrounding differentiation and of how this may be implemented at institutional level as part of the Irish government's broader modernisation agenda for HE.

See Appendices A (Information letter and consent form sent to potential interviewees), *B* (Interview schedule for Irish participants) and *C* (Interview schedule for participants at European level).

3.6.6 Limitations of the study

In addition to the limitations of documentary evidence extracted from a selection of key policy documents discussed in section 3.6.4 (pp.104-106), there are other limitations to be taken into account. The 43 interviewees included in this study work for a variety of HEIs, agencies (HEA, SFI, Enterprise Ireland, etc.), national and supranational bodies (EC, DES), each with their own vested and sometimes competing interests. Therefore, I was aware that on certain controversial issues, such as the extent of 'drift' between HEIs, differentiation and the extent of EU influence on national and institutional policies there could be conflicting and potentially irreconcilable positions. This limitation meant that some differences of opinion were impossible to resolve on those issues. Another issue mentioned by Denscombe is the possibility of the interviewee not "telling the truth" (2014, p.200), either voluntarily or simply because the interviewee is making an incorrect assessment within the context of the interview settings. As argued by Denscombe, in cases where the researcher is concerned with gathering information of a factual nature, it is possible to have this information confirmed by other interviewees and other sources, such as policy documents as discussed in section 3.6.3 (pp.101-103), because official public documents are generally reliable and produce verified hard facts (although see section 3.6.4 on the limitations of documentary evidence). However, when the interview is focused on identifying emotions, feelings and experiences of the participant, it is hard to corroborate the information gathered (Denscombe, 2014, p.154). This

was particularly the case when discussing the interviewees' perceptions on 'drift', the accuracy of the binary divide and the extent of EU influence on Irish policy-making. In any case, Denscombe concludes that there is "no absolute way of verifying what someone tells you about their thoughts and feelings" (2014, p.154). Nonetheless, there are checks that can help the researcher have greater confidence in the interview data extracted from transcripts, including as mentioned above efforts to corroborate the interview data with other sources of information (see section 3.9.1, pp.113-117 on triangulation), checking the transcript with the interviewee, also known as "respondent validation" (Denscombe, 2014, p.154), to ensure it corresponds accurately to what the interviewee said. It also enables to ensure that the researcher has got the correct information. Checking the plausibility of the data is another crucial check and was ensured by selecting "key players" (Denscombe, 2014, p.154) chosen because of their specific position (academic staff, DES official, etc.) and their knowledge on the issues of interest. Finally, looking for recurrent themes emerging from a substantial number of interviews is crucial, because relying on solely one person's statements as the only source of what is real is problematic and will affect the validity of the data.

3.7 Research instruments

Interview schedule

The interview schedule was constructed on the basis of themes that emerged from the research questions and the literature review, which presented the idea of the university, the purpose of the university, the concept of differentiation, including its various sub-themes, the scholarly literature on national systems and EU policy in HE as well as on the Irish HE system. This framework inspired the structure of the questions. The latter were usually open-

ended questions as the "information gathered by way of the responses is more likely to reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent" (Denscombe, 1997, p.166). A second interview schedule was developed for interviews at the European level (Appendix C). However, it was generally consistent with the one used with Irish interviewees (Appendix B), with some minor variations with notably less detailed emphasis on questions that required extensive knowledge of the Irish context.

I wanted to extricate from the interviews how the institutional stakeholders viewed the government's insistence for more clearly defined differentiation between HEIs. I did not focus on seeking to establish causality as such, but instead on perceptions of causality from the perspective of my interviewees (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.26). I attempted to establish how these institutional participants made sense of this rather sudden impulse to clarify institutional missions through the implementation, on a system wide scale, of various forms of horizontal differentiation.

Breakwell noted that "the interview approach relies heavily upon respondents being able and willing to give accurate information" (1990, p.81). It was important to select a group of participants who are both knowledgeable (by their position, experience and personal background) and prepared to talk openly. This claim may assume that accurate information is out there, waiting to be discovered, in this case through simple conversation, which is to be understood as an uncomplicated exchange of ideas and opinions. In other words, "the interview conversation is a pipeline for transmitting knowledge" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p.68). Knowledge would thus be achievable through simple "observable verbal behaviour" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.17). However, this view is increasingly challenged. Indeed, it has been stressed that knowledge is "brought into being" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.17), rather

than simply conveyed through conversations. This is supported by other influential authors who point towards treating interviewing as a "social encounter in which knowledge is constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but is instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p.68) and points to the constructive nature of social interaction through the interview process and "the part played by active subjects in making sense of their experiences" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.17). To highlight this point further, Shotter describes conversation as "not just *one* of our many activities in *the* world. On the contrary, we constitute both ourselves and our worlds in our conversational activity" (1993, p.vi). The idea of conversation must be understood beyond that of observable verbal exchange, "where knowledge of an objective reality is described and discussed" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.17). It is our own personal imaginings that make real-life events intelligible and it is those individual understandings I wish to capture through the one-to-one semi-structured interviews that I will be conducting.

See Appendices B (Interview schedule for Irish interviewees) and *C* (Interview schedule for participants at European level).

3.8 Data analysis

Through the interview transcripts, I identified common themes related to the literature review and they will be addressed in detail in the Findings chapters (chapters five to seven). These themes included the binary divide, "mission drift", whole-of-system approach, diversity, differentiation and modernisation. There were two considerations with regard to selecting a theme. The first was that the theme be raised by at least four interviewees, or that the theme

was raised by a number of interviewees from across institutions and/or state agencies. This allowed me to identify themes that arose from interviews in a particular institution or type of institution but I was also concerned to identify themes raised by interviewees across a number of diverse institutions or agencies and in different managerial or academic roles. With regard to the document analysis, themes that emerged in a number of documents within a particular sub-set (national, European) were selected. Recurring themes were identified on a comparative basis between Irish government and EU documents.

Scholars have argued that undertaking one's own transcribing is an important component of data analysis (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, p.337). The researcher agreed with this viewpoint and believed it to be an important first step in the process of analysis.

Sarantakos argued that "qualitative analysis takes place in waves, each wave following the previous one and providing additional information" (1998, p.320). Subsequently to the transcribing, interview transcripts were scrutinised carefully several times in order to identify emerging issues and key themes. This process has been acknowledged by Braun and Clarke who purported that "it is ideal to read through the entire data set at least once before you begin your coding, as ideas and identification of possible patterns will be shaped as you read through" (2006, p.87). Thematic analysis was utilised for analysing the data collected both through interviews and documents. Braun and Clarke have defined thematic analysis as a "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (2006, p.79). Another advantage of thematic analysis is that it offers "an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data" (p.79).

According to Braun and Clarke, a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (2006, p.82). A sub-theme is defined by the same authors as particularly useful "for giving structure to a particularly large and complex theme..." (p.92). Braun and Clarke suggest that the purpose of a thematic analysis, and its attraction for the researcher is based on its ability "...to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (p.93). Data analysis is presented in Chapter eight (Discussion Chapter). Chapters four to seven presented the major themes.

3.9 Testing the quality of research design

The quality of a research design can be judged according to four logical tests (Kidder & Judd in Yin, 2009, p.40). These are construct validity (using multiple sources of evidence, establish chain of evidence), internal validity (pattern matching and explanation building to establish a causal relationship between differentiation in Ireland and the European agenda for HE), external validity (generalizing a specific set of results to broader theories of convergence/divergence of HE systems) and reliability (use of a case study protocol, developing a case study database).

3.9.1 Triangulation

Multiple sources of evidence

The choice of terminology is revealing when speaking of HE reform, since by using the term 'modernisation', a value judgement seems to have been made whereby previous or current established HE structures and HEIs were deemed obsolete, hence self-proclaiming the need

for vast reforms that could potentially cover all aspects of HE. Achieving triangulation through the use of different research methods helps to ensure validity and reliability. A combination of document analysis and interviews allowed for developing converging lines of inquiry. Data triangulation aimed at corroborating the same fact and enabled the evidence collected to be supported by more than a single source of evidence, making it more convincing and accurate (Yin, 2009, pp.114-116).

The use of multiple sources of evidence is nonetheless a heavier burden on the investigator than the use of a single source of evidence. It is more expensive and time-consuming. Within the scope of this thesis, several visits to the five subunits of analysis in my embedded single-case study design were required. I also became fully acquainted and proficient in using two different data collection techniques (Yin, 2009, p.117).

In order to assess what changes had occurred, and the underlying rationale for HE reform, I examined in a first phase a number of official public policy documents. These documents had multiple sources, including national ministries (DES) and/or related agencies (HEA), European and international institutions and/or organisations (EC, OECD). In a second phase, I interviewed key policy-makers in the HE arena, exploring their interpretation of the documents while analysing their current translation into national HE policy-making. I believed it was necessary to interview those stakeholders most closely involved with the process of differentiation at national, European and international level (DES, HEA, EC, OECD), and the representatives of those institutions were directly affected by its implementation (Universities, and IoTs). The Irish HE system provided the case study for further reflection on differentiation and its system level implications, considering initiatives which may mark a departure from Ireland's traditional binary HE system established in the

1960s and that may bring it into a new phase (Trow, 1973), or develop into a new organisational model (Kyvik, 2004).

3.9.2 The generalisability of the case

Among the key common characteristics of the case is its unusual aspect, often combined with it presenting a specific challenge to the established body of knowledge. A case is usually puzzling and requires further reflection to engage with. A case requires a solution and however unique it may be, it can be related to other cases. Therefore, the challenge one is confronted with in the case is to "acknowledge and uncover its specific meaning, while extracting generalizable knowledge actually or potentially related to other cases" (Vennesson, 2008, p.226).

As opposed to a survey of European HE systems, the focus on one particular case involves a "trade-off between the likely generalisability of the information obtained on the one hand and the detail and likely accuracy of data about particular cases on the other" (Hammersley, 1992, p.188). The findings derived from the single Irish case may not be easily or necessarily generalizable to a wider European landscape. One might deny that case studies are intended to be either representative or typical in the same way as findings resulting from surveys. However, generalizing the findings to a larger population can be of the essence for some case studies, as reported by Hammersley (1992). To illustrate his point, he points to the work of Punch (1979) who sought to "base general statements about policing in the inner city areas of modern Western societies" on the findings he extracted from a study of police officers in the single Warmoestraat area of Amsterdam (Hammersley, 1992, p.189). In other words, the findings collected through case study research may legitimately lead to empirical

generalisation although one must keep in mind that wherever this is the primary goal, it will be weaker than the type of generalisability resulting from other approaches. Nonetheless, this does not mean that generalisabilty must equate with the use of statistical sampling. On the contrary, Yin (2009) distinguishes between what he characterises as "analytical generalization" and "statistical generalization" (p.38). The latter is less relevant when dealing with case studies but is instead more common when dealing with surveys or analysing archival data. It is appropriate when researchers have access to quantitative formulas "for determining the confidence with which generalizations can be made, depending mostly upon the size and internal variation within the universe and sample" (p.38). However, under "analytical generalization", whether in single-case or multiple-case studies, previously developed theory provides a template with which to compare and contrast the empirical results of the case study (p.38). This type of generalisation will be used within this thesis.

Although positivists typically choose a large number of cases with a view to achieving maximum generalizability while underscoring the sources of variation, interpretivists select cases on the basis of their inherent interest. Interpretivists do not select cases based on their representativeness to a specific category but instead for "what they tell us about complex social processes" (della Porta & Keating, 2008, p.29). The emergence of differentiation in role and mission between HEIs is a complex process, wherever it occurs, because of the variety of high profile actors it involves, often with competing interests (political leaders, government departments, HEIs, HE agencies, European and international entities). The current economic situation in Ireland and the effect this has had on HE makes it a relevant case to study. Initiatives for educational reform in Ireland must be seen in the previous context of the global financial crisis and in the wake of the resulting economic difficulties.

Recent events and their considerable impact in Ireland, such as the global financial crisis in 2008 as well as certain original, if not controversial, HE policy choices, such as the decision to create a TUs have created fertile grounds for examining the underlying motives driving the policy of reform in HE and its implications for differentiation. For the last decade, serious doubts and reservations about the size of the system and in particular the number of HEIs embedded within it have been expressed (OECD, 2004; Goodbody Report on the Economic Impact of a University for the South East, 2005). This has led to a general reflection about the size and possible rationalisation of the system, and whether mergers and/ or strategic clustering were required. The process of restructuring HE in Ireland is under way, making it an important site for HE researchers interested in such issues, indeed a possible epicentre for policy change. The external validity, or generalisability of the findings, if possible at all, will not necessarily provide a definite pattern applicable to every Member State. This is due partly to the very nature of HE, which still remains one of the bastions of state sovereignty where EU intervention has traditionally been limited. However, the analysis of the data captured from the Irish case may indicate generalisable implications for small European countries with a binary system and intent on increasing their competitiveness on the global stage. In any case, generalisability was not the primary purpose of the study, which was more concerned with the rationale behind the present structural developments in the Irish HE system, and how the EU's modernisation agenda may have translated effectively into implementing a more sophisticated and sharper policy of differentiation in Ireland.

This research purported to locate the Irish HE system within the wider debates on globalisation, particularly Vaira's (2004) characterisation of the converging-diverging thesis and Kyvik's discussion on whether Western European countries are converging towards a

common structural model for the organisation of their HE systems, either binary or unified (2004).

3.10 Ethics

The ethical guidelines laid out in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin Handbook, together with those of the British Education Research Association (BERA) were followed and the nature of the project, the information given to the participants and the consent asked of them was cleared by the School's Director of Research.

3.10.1 Informed consent and voluntary participation

With regard to my first method of data collection, namely policy document analysis, because of the public nature of these documents, which makes them almost universally accessible, few ethical considerations needed to be taken into account, except from making sure to steer clear from pure speculation.

However, at the interview stage, attention was given to the rights of the interviewees. The principle of voluntary participation was fully respected before and during the interview process. All the research participants were adults and professionals either working for the government and other related agencies, HEIs, or the EU. Participants were made fully aware of the purpose of this study through email, namely that of tracing and linking the origins and drivers behind differentiation in the Irish HE system, whether as a response to specific external pressures or as more of a long-term feature of the development of national HE

systems, or a combination of external and domestic pressures, prior to them accepting to engage in the interview stage.

All participants were sent a first email outlining the nature of the project asking whether they wished to participate in an interview of approximately 45 minutes. Confidentiality arrangements were included in this first email, stressing that at any time participants could withdraw from the process, and that all the information that they had provided would be deleted and shredded should they wish to do so. After agreeing to participate, the prospective participant was then sent a second email with a suggested time and place for the interview to be held and an outline of the questions and topics that would be discussed during the interview. A consent form, under the form of a separate attachment, asked the participants to confirm that they had been informed of the nature of the research and that they understood the roles and responsibilities of the parties to the research. Upon return of the consent forms, these documents were then sent back to them again in soft copy format, asking if they had any questions before the interview stage began. Participants' answers that were quoted in the findings were sent to them for approval and cross-checking prior to completion of analysis of the findings.

3.10.2 Confidentiality

Confidentiality ensured that the privacy of the interviewees was guaranteed. Every effort was made to protect their anonymity. Their identity was not be revealed in any of the study's findings and the data was only used for the purposes of this project. Participants' names and any other identifying information were not communicated to anyone that is not directly involved in the research, including other participants and does not appear in the final thesis.

The transcripts were made anonymous during the transcription process, and no transcripts exist that have original names. Only the name of the institution or agency a participant works for will appear below a particular quote or piece of information divulged by the latter individual during the interview, as well as a general job title (e.g., senior manager, HEA; policy officer 1, EC, etc.). In the case of a HEI, the latter is anonymised according to whether it is a University or an IoT (i.e., University 1 and 2; IoT1, IoT2, IoT3).

Audio files of the recordings were kept in an unlabelled file on my computer, which was password-protected and the back-up digital record was stored in a locked office in TCD. These records will be destroyed within twelve months of the final print of this thesis. Contemporaneous written notes from the interviews were kept in the same locked office.

Participants who accepted to engage in the research project were at no risk of either physical or psychological harm, the interviews taking place in various closed offices in government or related agencies, as well as in the premises of the selected HEIs.

CHAPTER FOUR

Document analysis of national and EU policy documents - Findings

4.1 The Regional Technical Colleges

According to Harpur (2010) and Walsh (2014), the foundations of the Irish binary system date back to 1969 and the establishing of the first RTCs that would in 1998 be redesignated as IoTs. Three decades later, 13 RTCs (now IoTs and excluding DIT which can trace its origins to 1887 and the artisan movement of that time) had appeared in the Irish HE landscape, the latest one opening its doors to students at the turn of the millennium (Blanchardstown IT). In order to better understand the Irish binary system it is of crucial importance to understand the rationale and original purpose of the RTCs. These colleges were similar in intent to the German *Fachhochschulen* (p.58) and the 24 English Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATS), ten of which were subsequently upgraded to university status in 1966 following the recommendations of the Robbins Report. A senior manager in the IUA stressed that the production of graduates "in a more focused sense" was a key difference distinguishing a university education to the more vocational education offered by the IoTs, in very specific areas that were not offered by the universities:

> And I think as well the other factor is that if you look at IoTs, the origins were quite different, in the sense that universities produced graduates in a broader sense, whereas IoTs were producing graduates in a more focused sense, they were more like the *Fachhochschulen* in Germany, which were producing talented people in very very specific areas, DIT is the best classic example, where people became opticians, or Photography, certain things which simply would not be done in a university, but which were needed, and for which a relatively high level of qualification was needed for that as well (senior manager, IUA).

The creation of the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) in the late 1960s was celebrated as

proof of government's determination to bring technological education into a new space and make it attractive to students:

> That the Government is aware of this technological and technical gap is evident from its decision to establish nine regional technical colleges (HEA, 1969, p.9).

According to the report of the Steering Committee on Technical Education, published in the late 1960s, the original (and "main long-term") purpose of the RTCs was to provide a new type of graduate:

> We believe that the main long-term function of the college will be to educate for trade and industry over a broad spectrum of occupations ranging from craft to professional level, notably in engineering and science but also in commercial, linguistic and other specialties. They will, however, be more immediately concerned with providing courses aimed at filling gaps in the industrial manpower structure, particularly in the technical area (1967, p.11).

The link towards the trade and industry manpower needs was obvious and blunt. The colleges offered a narrower spectrum of subjects than the universities, focusing on educating "notably" in technical subjects in Engineering and Science, but also in Commerce and Applied Languages. It is interesting to note that from the start some Social Science subjects were integrated into the core teaching mission of the colleges although the focus was to be "notably" on Engineering and Science. In any case, the courses offered by these colleges were to provide the "industrial manpower structure" with the graduates it needed to fill in the widening gaps appearing in the quickly evolving technical areas.

Furthermore, some flexibility in the development of course offerings was foreseen from the start. This is crucial because it implies that members of the Steering Committee were aware that HE is not static. By purposely neglecting to include any "artificial limitation" (e.g., legislation) that could undermine developments in the scope of course offerings or level, the members of the Committee implicitly stated their preference for allowing enough leeway for RTCs to adapt to the social, economic and technological changes that they would

undoubtedly incur:

> We do not foresee any final fixed pattern of courses in the colleges. If they are to make their most effective contribution to the *needs of society and the economy*, they must be capable of continuing adaptation to social, economic and technological changes. Initiative at local and national levels will largely determine how far this vital characteristic is developed. We are concerned that the progress of these colleges should not be deterred by any *artificial limitation* of either the scope or the level of their educational achievements (emphasis added, Steering Committee on Technical Education, 1967, p.11).

The government followed this recommendation. A former president of the UL was critical of this decision, the outcome of which he/she contrasted to that of the American HE system where a clearly and legally delineated three tiered system (university, state university and community college) is in place:

> After the regional colleges were established, there was no legal limit to their aspirations (former President, UL).

Chapter 6.4 (pp.213-214) will deal in greater detail with this participant's view on the perceived lack of legal instruments and its consequences with regard to "mission drift" and ultimately the binary divide.

Perhaps the first case of the adaptation envisaged by the Steering Committee was noted in a report on "Higher Education in Dublin: A study of some emerging needs" published by the HEA in 1979, only nine years after the establishing of the first RTCs. It was remarked that the nine RTCs had evolved rapidly to the point where the Leaving Certificate had already been phased out in all of the colleges bar two. Although this had been "envisaged as happening when the need for such second level provisions became less acute" at the time the colleges were established, it is unlikely that the need evaporated within less than a decade (HEA, 1979, p.36). This may have been the first manifestation of a desire from the RTCs to establish themselves firmly into third-level education and phasing out the Leaving Certificate from their course offerings was the first stepping stone, while also being a reflection of

changing societal and educational patterns.

As new institutions, the RTCs were ideal candidates for change and development. The weight of history and tradition was not as present as in some of the more established institutions. Their survival was dependent on their capacity to adapt to their local and regional environment. Without harnessing themselves to both the social and economic needs (Steering Committee, 1967, p.11) of the region they would be at risk of closing down.

Another finding of the 1979 report was the visible broadening of course offerings in the RTCs, apparently due to increasing numbers of students:

> The RTCs have also expanded the range and level of third-level courses beyond what was envisaged by the Steering Committee in 1967. This is related to the fact that the RTCs now have larger enrolments than was initially anticipated (HEA, 1979, p.36).

It should be noted again that there was not any legislation in place that would have limited or prohibited the colleges to act as they saw fit to respond to the increased demand for HE that came as a result of the growing massification of HE (Trow, 1973), which of itself shows their strong capacity to react and to adapt to regional needs. However, it was noted that the broadening of course offerings had not always been met with great success:

> As was intended the RTCs are strongest in the applied technical area and in business studies. Their attempts to develop complementary studies (a combination of the humanities and social sciences) have not so far met with great success. They offer no major courses in the humanities or in the social sciences (HEA, 1979, p.36).

This quotation is informative in that it implies that the fact that the RTCs had not developed a curriculum in the Humanities and Social Sciences was not for lack of trying, implying that there were no legal obstacles preventing such courses to be offered by an RTC in the first place, but instead was due to a lack of success in developing sustainable programmes in those areas. However, this is not necessarily the case anymore, and several IoTs have quite strong

course offerings and presence in the Humanities; e.g., the School of Humanities in WIT (see section 6.4).

4.1.1 The upgrading of technological education

A few years after the concept of RTCs first emerged, it was believed that technological education had "not yet found its proper level" (HEA, 1969, p.9). There existed a consensus whereby a strong signal needed to be sent by government to answer the "well-established demand and in some areas a long-felt need on the part of industry and of actual and potential technological students for further and more advanced technological and other specialised third-level courses" (HEA, 1969, p.6).

It was therefore deemed necessary to upgrade both the content and scope of technological education, while bringing it into mainstream third-level education by attracting more young students graduating from the post-primary education cycle. To this end, the technological and higher level technician roles were to be clearly defined and become "status-carrying in their own right" (HEA, 1969, p.9), allowing for students to earn national qualifications through the setting up of a Council for National Awards (CNA). The first published report of the HEA on "A Council for National Awards and A College of Higher Education at Limerick" (1969) admitted that unifying the system, with the universities awarding degrees, diplomas and certificates to students of technical colleges could possibly offer a superficial solution. However, it ultimately rejected this on the basis that both universities and technological institutions have different primary functions, thus upholding the core foundations for the emerging binary system:

> Whereas the primary function of a university is the pursuit of knowledge, that of a

> technological educational institution is the combined development, based on scientific knowledge and method, of intellectual and practical skills, with a view to the practical application of these. Many technological courses can, it is true, compare in content and standard with similar university courses – our own Colleges of Technology produce architects, engineer and science graduates, as well as occasionally providing post-graduate courses in some specialised fields for their own and university graduates. Nevertheless, in view of the difference in genesis and purpose between a university and a technological education institution, for the latter to have its curriculum and methods conform to the requirements of those of a university would be a departure on its part from its *raison d'être*. It would, as well, be very difficult, if not impossible, for it to cast itself adequately and properly in such a new role (HEA, 1969, pp.9-10).

From this one can infer that the distinction between a technological and a university education was enshrined in the mind of policy-makers in the late 1960s. This report laid the conceptual foundation for the binary divide in Ireland by clearly stating the fundamental role and function of universities and IoTs. As a result of this difference, it was not considered appropriate for universities to be the awarding bodies for the RTCs, because this would lead to the latter's curriculum and methods to align to the requirements of a university degree, which would gradually erode the purpose and distinction between technological and university degrees and ultimately the binary structure. With regard to this distinction, reforms happening in the UK had a strong impact on Ireland, according to three interviewees (official, TUI; college officer 2, University 2; senior academic 1, IoT3). Following the Robbins Report (1963) that recommended that university places be made available to all students that were suitably qualified and thus called for immediate expansion of universities, two complementary steps were taken in the UK; the setting up of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and the further development, upgrade and expansion of the CATs and polytechnics. Through the mechanism of the CNAA awarding body, the CATs and polytechnics were able to attract more students seeking to gain a nationally recognised qualification. The success of the CATs and polytechnics can be attributed to this and may be evidenced from the increasing numbers of British students taking CNAA degree courses, from 4,000 in 1965 to 16,000 in 1968 (HEA, 1974, p.10). This would provide the blueprint for HE reform and expansion in Ireland with the foundation of the National Council for

Educational Awards (NCEA) in 1972 and the two NIHEs in Limerick (1972) and Dublin (1980). These new institutions would enable greater access to HE and cater for the increasing diversity of students wishing to enter HE by combining:

> ...the prestige of degree-earning courses of various kinds with an extensive provision on a scale and in a manner not open to a university (that is by way of full and complete courses at technical level) for that very large number of its potential students who would not have satisfied the precise conditions of university entry or for some reason would not desire to pursue a university course but nevertheless would wish to continue their education beyond Leaving Certificate level (HEA, 1969, p.11).

While this was the rationale given by the HEA for the foundation of NIHEL, it is unlikely that either the UL or DCU would see their mission as the above today. Indeed, both have demanding entry requirements that are similar to those of the 'traditional universities', and in particular in the case of UL, offer the same broad spectrum of courses, including both Law and Medicine. Therefore, they cater for the same type of student that enrols into the older universities. Their mission developed and expanded to the point where they were upgraded to university status, following a favourable recommendation from the International Study Group on Technological Education (1987) which was given legislative effect in 1989. Interestingly, the Report recommended that the title "technological university" should not be used, but instead NIHEL should be redesignated as the UL and NIHED as either the University of Leinster or DCU (Hyland & Milne, 1992, pp.452-453).

4.2 Contemporary policy analysis: establishing mission differentiation as government policy

The Hunt Report is considered from a government perspective to be the central document setting the blueprint guiding Irish HE policy-making:

> The National Strategy for HE, the Hunt Report is clearly an important part of, in fact it's *probably the central piece of policy-making* that we're working on and by which we're

guided (emphasis added, senior manager, DES).

> So I think it's [international advice] been really important in 2004, like I say the OECD had a set of recommendations, did a review, but probably the National Strategy in 2011 would have represented probably a *more standing on our feet time* (emphasis added, senior policy officer 1, HEA).

This requires investigating the vision for the Irish HE landscape set by the latter document and in particular the role for differentiation. The Hunt Report is committed towards delineating the IoT sector from the university one, and it encourages mergers and alliances within the same sector, subject to this delivering "greater institutional quality":

> Alliances and mergers within the institute of technology sector on the one hand and within the university sector on the other will be supported where they can deliver greater institutional quality. However, formal mergers between institutes of technology and universities should not in general be considered: this would be more likely to dilute the diversity of the system (Hunt et al., 2011, p.99).

However, going back to the earlier policy documents discussed in 4.1 and 4.1.1, and this is a crucial point in favour of the development of the RTCs, it should be noted that they were created with the implicit understanding that they would evolve and develop in a way that would best respond to the needs of their immediate environment (i.e., regional needs), leaving a large margin for interpretation as how to fulfil those needs:

> In proposing the RTC as the model for the Dublin colleges we include the expectation that they will also develop to meet the demands that they will individually encounter. Therefore what is conceived for them now should not necessarily be binding on them later on (HEA, 1979, p.39).

Therefore, it seems that the RTCs were expected to adapt to their local and regional needs, whatever these may be. In the case of Sligo for instance (see pp.216-218), the regional need was for more archaeologists, because they were essential in advising on the building of roads at "a time of massive road development" (senior policy officer 2, HEA) and at the "height of the building boom" (senior policy officer 2, QQI). The 1979 HEA document also underlined that whatever their original purpose, institutes should not be limited to it. Yet codifying the role and mission of RTCs and including legal boundaries setting in black and white print

what they can or cannot do was not favoured by policy-makers – a perspective still shared by HEA officials (senior policy officer 2, HEA) because, according to the latter, restricting the RTCs in such a manner would have probably hindered Ireland's economic development.

In Chapter 4 of the Hunt Report devoted to research, under heading 4.5 "Priority for higher education" one finds a sub-section entitled "Diversity of institutional mission" (2011, p.70). Diversity within the system is first and foremost achieved through the need to delineate different research missions for the different HEIs. The focus in the National Strategy is on "systemic diversity" (Stadtman, 1980, p.97) and refers to the kind of diversity found among institutions of different types (e.g., research intensive universities versus liberal art colleges) but also in size and control:

> In building a sustainable and responsive research system, Ireland needs a diverse set of higher education institutions with different research missions (Hunt et al., 2011, p.70).

The focus here is on the research mission, and in particular what type (basic or applied), intensity and level of research that is carried out within a particular institution. The outcome of this differentiation process in terms of research activities undertaken by the various institutions will lead to a diverse set of HEIs within the Irish HE system. This objective is further refined:

> Some of our higher education institutions should be highly research-intensive; others should focus almost entirely on teaching. In the former, a large majority of academic staff should be research-active and productive; in the latter all academic staff should be abreast of the latest scholarship as a means of ensuring that their teaching is relevant and up to date. The spectrum between these poles would include institutions with excellence in research in some disciplines only (Hunt et al., 2011, p.70).

Differentiation therefore has a key role to play in fostering diversity between institutions and should result in a type A HEI focusing on basic and applied research and a type B HEI geared towards teaching that is nonetheless infused by the "latest scholarship" (HEA, 2011, p.70). In between, one might find HEIs that have managed to strengthen their portfolio of activities in

specific or niche areas with a proven record of 'excellence'. Only in these niche areas will these institutions be encouraged and permitted to engage in research at all levels of the NFQ. The research role for each type of HEI is distinguished on a sectoral basis in the Hunt Report, with universities expected to focus on basic research and some applied research, while IoTs are supposed to concentrate on applied research only (Hunt et al., 2011, p.70; see p.131). Table 4.1 provides detailed data on the research activities in the Institute sector, and can be contrasted to Table 8.3 (p.268).

Table 4.1:

Name of Institution	Research intensity								
	No. of PhD graduates per 10 academic staff	PRTLI funding 2010	Web of Science documents per academic	Relative citation impact	FP7 income received 2007-2010 per academic staff	IRCSET funding 2010 per academic staff	IRCHSS funding 2010 per academic staff	SFI funding 2010 per academic staff	TSR funding per academic staff 2010
Athlone IT	0.2	0	N/A	N/A	0	106	0	0	1, 125
Cork IT	0.2	2, 401	N/A	N/A	2, 004	269	0	0	904
Dublin IT	0.3	2, 157	0.7	0.9	2, 168	299	189	1, 152	699
Galway-Mayo IT	0.1	0	N/A	N/A	637	99	0	0	1, 635
Letterkenny IT	0.0	0	N/A	N/A	746	166	0	0	1, 434
Limerick IT	0.0	0	N/A	N/A	3,033	351	0	0	104
Tralee IT	0.0	0	N/A	N/A	292	358	91	0	299
Waterford IT	0.2	2, 963	N/A	N/A	20, 605	461	151	3, 237	1, 463

Table 4.1: Sample of IoTs and their research agenda (December 2013, HEA)

To support and justify such clear top-down demarcation in the research roles of HEIs, the

Hunt Report refers to the OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland:

> This is broadly in line with the recommendation of the OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland that the research mission of the universities and the institutes of technology should be distinct but complementary (Hunt et al., 2011, p.70).

The OECD was clear on refusing to redesignate WIT as a university, whatever their status as a "regional Gateway" for the South-East region, and emphasised that the latter IoT needed to preserve its applied focus on all courses, because it was that focus that differentiated the institute sector from the university one and it was in that applied focus that the institute would best serve its regional needs:

> We do not believe that location in a designated regional Gateway provides a justification for the transfer of an institute to university status; indeed we think it is essential that the applied focus which their current differentiation of mission prescribes for their role in regional Gateways is preserved and utilised to the full (OECD, 2004, p.20).

Certainly the Hunt Report is consistent with earlier recommendations of the OECD:

> One of the strengths of Ireland's tertiary education system is the extent to which a diversity of mission has been maintained between the university and the institute sectors, as well as within the sectors...We believe that it is critical to maintain that diversity even if (see below) some of the organisational factors change. We are particularly impressed by the extent to which the institutes see themselves as different from the universities (OECD, 2004, p.20).

In Chapter eight of the Hunt Report, entitled "Developing a coherent framework for higher education in Ireland", the system's needs as a whole are at the forefront of government thinking. The overall overarching context for policy-making is set out from the start. If the HE system is to be successful as a whole, from a macro perspective, in meeting the ever growing needs of Irish society then:

> A coherent framework must be established, in which the different institutions and types of institution have distinct and well-defined roles, responsibilities and interrelationships (Hunt et al., 2011, p.96).

This desire to establish a clearly defined and delineated HE system is visibly at the core of the Hunt Report. Differentiation in the mission of HEIs, both between and within the

university and IoT sectors, is a tool to deliver the goals of the Strategy that will enable policy-makers to redefine the Irish HE landscape. This concern is not only at government level. According to the Hunt Report, bottom up developments are already occurring since "institutions are already seeking to define their roles more precisely, and to reposition themselves in response to Ireland's innovation requirements" (2011, p.97). The Strategy foresees that "organic bottom-up development within and between institutions" (2011, p.97) should be the first stage through which any consistent and effective strategic re-positioning should take place. Therefore, there is a stated understanding that top down proposals will only work in conjunction with bottom up initiatives instigated by HEIs. It is not clear that these initiatives would always be voluntary because they would be launched in a context of a "coherent framework" (Hunt et al., p.96) where strategic direction of system is set by the government in order to avoid a "free for all and everyone doing everything that they want" (senior policy officer 2, HEA). The declared role of the Strategy is to instigate a response from the institutions, one that builds on the existing positive initiatives and hopefully encourages further and deeper developments.

Although policy documents such as the Hunt Report may use directive language "universities should specialise" (Hunt et al., 2011, p.70); "a coherent framework must be established" (Hunt et al., 2011, p.96), participants within the HEA and DES were keen to stress they were not trying to impose a top down vision for the system as a whole on every HEI:

> I wouldn't like to give the impression I suppose of what directed diversity, that it's some kind of state planning of HE and that the HEA or the DES says: "Now X institution you will do this and you will do this only" and "Y you will do this". The way it has to be done is that you have to look at where the institutions are now, what are their strengths, how can they build on those strengths and how can they utilize those strengths as part of an overall system to meet national objectives (senior manager, HEA).

The HEA argued that mission differentiation would enable students to make a more informed choice about where they wish to study based on readily available and transparent information.

With clearly distinct roles and missions for Irish HEIs the system as a whole would be able to respond more accurately and efficiently to the diverse needs of students (e.g., mature learners and so on). The vision expressed here in the Hunt Report is one of a rationalised HE system made up of a smaller number of larger institutions that are clear on their mission, offer different things and cater for different students with different needs.

This binary vision is replicated in a report on "system reconfiguration" (2013), where one can see that this distinction between the two sectors is still of concern to the HEA since a "key objective is to build on the diversity that already exists within the system, as reflected for instance in the distinctive roles and missions of universities and institutes of technology" (p.5). The same report warns HEIs and policy-makers that any reforms must conform to this distribution of roles and missions between the two sectors:

> Any attempt to develop a more coherent system of higher education in Ireland must, as a starting point, support and develop the mission differentiation that already exists, as reflected in the two broad sectors: the universities and the institutes of technology (HEA, 2013, p.9).

This focus on the binary nature of the Irish HE system disregards an earlier report made on behalf of the HEA by an international panel where the latter recommended a number of mergers both within the university sector and across the binary divide in order for Irish HEIs to reach "critical mass" as a way of ensuring "that each institution will be of a sufficient size to sustain a comprehensive range of offerings and research programmes, with the flexibility and responsiveness to adapt to changing regional, national and international needs" (HEA, August 2012, p.19). Strikingly, mergers across the binary system were proposed. The merger proposals included all Irish universities and included in most cases mergers across the binary divide with neighbouring IoTs and the creation of a multi-campus National University of Technology with campuses in Dublin, Waterford and Carlow, Athlone, Letterkenny and Sligo

(HEA, August 2012, p.25). Significantly, this report proved much too radical for Irish policy-makers and was immediately shelved, with both the HEA and the Department distancing themselves from it but the theme of critical mass was taken up again in the report on "system reconfiguration" (2013, p.5).

Regardless of the international panel's report published a year earlier, the basis of any proposal for reform must therefore integrate the binary concept according to the HEA's report on "system reconfiguration" (2013). The main precepts enshrined in the binary divide are further detailed by this HEA document which admits that although there are considerable differences between institutions of a same sector, broadly speaking, key sectoral differences remain. Attention is drawn to the provision of Certificate and Diploma level courses in the IoT sector, as opposed to the universities who focus on Level 8 Bachelor degrees and postgraduate education:

> Institutes of technology are dominant in Levels 6 and 7, and are stronger than the universities in part-time and flexible provision. They also have a larger proportion of mature and disadvantaged entrants, are involved in less research activity in a smaller number of focused areas, and are significantly involved in industry support and regional engagement. Universities, on the other hand, generally focus on Level 8 at undergraduate level, are more active at postgraduate level and in international education, and have a higher proportion of research activity and a much higher proportion of national and international research funding (HEA, 2013, p.10).

With these delineations in mind, exploring the perspectives of policy-makers, policy analysts, civil servants, academics and administrators was essential to get a more concrete and up-to-date picture of whether the system can still be considered binary (1) and how does differentiation manifest itself on the ground (2). While policy documents containing aspirations on how the system should be structured in order to create a coherent framework are important, they only offer a top down insight and should be coupled with fresh insights from the people who either contributed to or are expected to implement the substance of these documents. The vision or framework expressed in national policy reports may not always

reflect the reality on the ground.

4.3 The EU's 'modernisation agenda' for higher education systems and higher education institutions

The EU's official stance on the extent of its responsibilities in HE is well put in two Communications (2003; 2011), first in "The role of European universities in the Europe of Knowledge" (2003, p.9) and second in "Supporting Growth and Jobs – An agenda for the modernisation of Europe's Higher Education Systems" (2011, p.3). The latter reiterates the central role of the Member States with regard to HE and introduces the EU's modernisation agenda for HEIs while placing it, as was the case in 2003, within the context of common European challenges that require common policy responses that transcend national borders:

> *Responsibilities for universities lie essentially in the Member States at national or regional level.* The most important challenges facing the universities, by contrast, are European, and even international or global. Excellence today is no longer produced or measured at the national level, even in the biggest European countries, but at the level of the European or world community of teachers and researchers (emphasis added, EC, 2003, p.9).
>
> *The main responsibility for delivering reforms in higher education rests with Member States and education institutions themselves.* However, the Bologna Process, the EU Agenda for the modernisation of universities and the creation of the European Research Area show that the challenges and policy responses transcend national borders (emphasis added, EC, 2011, p.3).

It should be noted that a growing trend towards differentiation between HEIs had already been acknowledged by the EC in its 2003 Communication. The latter identified a move away from the traditional Humboldtian model of a university that integrated both teaching and research, towards more specialised HEIs focussing on a core set of chosen activities and not necessarily both, depending on identified strengths:

> European universities have for long modelled themselves along the lines of some major models, particularly the ideal model of university envisaged nearly two centuries ago by

> Wilhelm von Humboldt in his reform of the German university, which sets research at the heart of university activity and indeed makes it the basis of teaching. Today the trend is away from these models, and *towards greater differentiation*. This results in the emergence of more specialised institutions concentrating on a core of specific competences when it comes to research and teaching and/or on certain dimensions of their activities (emphasis added, EC, 2003, pp.5-6).

Furthermore, the Communication (2003) argues that concentrating research funding in a small number of institutions and areas, as occurred later through the Excellence Initiatives in both Germany (2006-2007; 2012) and France (2011) would offer a welcome boost to the EHEA and encourage the existing trend of European HEIs focusing on their areas of strength, whether research and/or teaching oriented. The EC has put forward a modernisation agenda seeking a more differentiated HE system, involving greater specialisation by HEIs and a more diverse mix of institutions, performing different missions and defined by a different balance between teaching and research:

> The concentration of research funding on a smaller number of areas and institutions should lead to increased specialisation of the universities, in line with the move currently observed towards a European university area which is more differentiated and in which the universities tend to focus on the aspects situated at the core of their research and/or teaching skills. *While the link between research and teaching naturally continues to define the ethos of the university as an institution* and while training through research must remain an essential aspect of its activity, *this link is nevertheless not the same in all institutions, for all programmes or for all levels* (emphasis added, EC, 2003, p.18).

Yet the differentiation advocated for here between those HEIs that are research active and those that are not or should not be is very similar to the Hunt Report's recommendation that "some of our higher education institutions should be highly research-intensive; others should focus almost entirely on teaching" (2011, p.70). The EC's quote (2003, p.18) is informative in that it advocates for the type of vertical differentiation that is based on concentrating resources in a small number of HEIs judged of 'excellence'.

The same discourse can be found in a document entitled "Completing the Landscape Process for Irish Higher Education" (January 2013) where a focus on horizontal differentiation is

emphasised, as well as a concentration of resources in a smaller number of HEIs the rationale for which is "critical mass":

> At present there are 39 higher education institutions in receipt of over 1 billion annually in core grant and grant in lieu of fees, serving around 170,000 students. System reconfiguration is aimed at creating a *reduced number of higher education institutions of more significant scale and critical mass* in the best interests of students. A key objective is to protect the distinctive roles and mission of universities and technological institutes within the Irish system while delivering the quality outcomes in teaching, research and engagement for students and stakeholders envisaged in the National Strategy (emphasis added, HEA, January 2013, p.1).

The link between research and teaching made by the EC (2003, p.18) refers to the Humboldtian model of a university that is a "landmark of the European tradition" (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2007, p.5). Integrating teaching and research is acknowledged here, although it is little more than lip service to the ideal, because there is no action line to support it and in any case the communication makes it clear that the link between research and teaching should be conducted at different levels by HEIs, depending on their respective strengths.

According to the EC, system diversity is key, and that diversity is based on individual institutional missions:

> Europe needs a wide diversity of higher education institutions, and each must pursue excellence in line with its mission and strategic priorities (2011, p.2).

The EC expects HEIs' "missions and strategic priorities", as well as all aspects of performance concerning the institution to be clear, transparent and most of all accessible to students and policy-makers alike (2011, p.10). The HEA's "Profiling Irish Higher Education" (2013) enables for such objectives to be met, with particular emphasis on the research activities of all publicly funded Irish HEIs (see section 4.4).

4.4 Assessing the common discourse in EU and national higher education policy documents

EU influence on national policy may not always be acknowledged by national policy-makers (see Chapter five), but key policy documents from HEA/DES mirror EC approaches, without necessarily acknowledging this common ground.

Irish policy documents under review make few references to EU Communications. The HEA's "Profiling Irish Higher Education" (2013), presumably one of the central documents in setting the basis for a clear reading of the Irish HE system, includes only one EU reference in its entire bibliography; the EC's Communication on "Supporting Growth and Jobs: An Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's Higher Education System" (2011). Furthermore, upon closer inspection it is not clear where the EC reference belongs to in the 215 pages document. Nevertheless, key elements of this HEA document with regard to differentiation mirrored the earlier EC Communication (2011). This does not necessarily mean that one is inspired by the other, but underlines that they share the same discourse. This oversight could also perhaps be indicative of the attitude of Irish policy-makers towards the EU in an area like HE, where the role of the supranational EC is perceived (with considerable validity) as secondary to national policy-makers and/or because, as stated by policy officer 1 (EC) it is always difficult to admit that a good idea came from Europe.

Yet a comparative analysis of policy documents issued by the EU and the HEA/DES since 2003 suggests a more nuanced picture involving a great deal of common ground between the EU's agenda for the modernising of HE systems and HEIs, since the latter started releasing Communications on this topic since 2003, and official Irish pronouncements since the advent

of the economic crisis which often mirror the concerns expressed by these European policy documents.

The importance of measuring the activity of HEIs in a realistic way is a priority for the EU, reflecting the Commission's wider concerns to promote employability of graduates and ensure that HEIs meet labour market needs. The EC's Communication on "Supporting Growth and Jobs – An Agenda for the modernisation of Europe's Higher Education Systems" states that:

> The Commission will focus on improving the evidence base for policy-making in key areas. The available information on the performance of higher education institutions focuses mainly on research-intensive universities, and thus covers only a very small proportion of Europe's higher education institutions: it is essential to develop a wider range of analysis and information covering all aspects of performance – to help students make informed study choices, to enable institutions to identify and develop their strengths, and to support policy-makers in their strategic choices on the reform of higher education systems. Evidence shows that a multi-dimensional ranking and information tool is feasible and widely supported by education stakeholders (EC, 2011, p.10).

While this statement explicitly points towards developing a ranking of European HEIs based on all aspects of performance and not just on research, it also underlines the importance of gathering strong and reliable data to enable policy-makers to make informed decisions and where necessary, reforms of their respective HE systems. It appears such a recommendation was taken on board by the Irish government, since the HEA's document on "Profiling Irish Higher Education" was released in December 2013 and contains extensive data on numerous institutional aspects of performance. One of the latter's objectives is to create greater transparency and clarity on institution mission in order to assist both policy-makers and HEIs in making informed and coherent strategies. Its rhetoric is similar to the HEA document:

> Institutional profiles have been developed which encompass the increasing range of roles and responsibilities which higher education as a whole must fulfil, and provide an initial basis for evaluating institutional performance against performance indicators that are reflective of the mission diversity of Irish higher education institutions. The development of these profiles within a broader performance evaluation framework represents a new

> approach within the HEA to the presentation and organisation of data which is intended to support strategic planning at institutional and system levels. The design of these profiles has been informed by an appreciation of the breadth of the higher education mission, as well as by sensitivity to the limitations of the vertically stratified rankings of institutions which have proliferated in recent years in the international higher education arena (HEA, 2013, p.8).

This had already been pursued in previous EC Communications that had stressed the importance of readily available and transparent data to be made accessible to policy-makers on the mission and strategic priorities of every single HEI:

> With more transparent information about the specific profile and performance of individual institutions, policy-makers will be in a better position to develop effective higher education strategies and institutions will find it easier to build on their strategies (EC, 2011, pp.2-3).

Moreover, this common discourse between European and national policy-makers in reform in HE makes explicit reference to the finite public resources available and the need to concentrate resources and prioritise research funds to HEIs that have a proven track record of academic excellence, a situation that seems to have pre-dated the global financial crisis and would make this recommendation even more urgent post-2008:

> A combination of the absolute need for excellence, the effects of the precariousness of resources and the pressure of competition, forces universities and Member States to make choices. They need to identify the areas in which different universities have attained, or can reasonably be expected to attain, the excellence judged to be essential at European or at international level – and to focus on them funds to support academic research. This type of policy would make it possible to obtain appropriate quality at national level in certain areas, while ensuring excellence at the European level, as no Member State is capable of achieving excellence in all areas (EC, 2003, p.18).

The Hunt Report makes similar points in more diplomatic language, and justifies concentration of investment in research based on international experience:

> By international standards, Ireland has a relatively large number of third-level institutions, offering a very rich provision of learning, teaching and research. Approximately 40 higher education institutions are in receipt of some degree of public funding; of these, seven are universities, fourteen are institutes of technology, seven are colleges of education and the remainder are small independent institutions (many with fewer than 500 students). In some institutions, the range of programmes provided is extensive for the relatively small number of students enrolled, and there has been growing duplication of provision over recent years, with concomitant cost implications. There are now opportunities to become more efficient in how we deploy resources – by

> realising greater economies of scale, and by rationalising programmes and offering them in fewer institutions. In the area of research, international experience shows that the concentration of investment in research and development is important in advancing research innovation... and the next phase of economic development will require an even greater concentration of resources and expertise (Hunt et al., 2011, pp.41-42).

In another Communication from the EC on "Delivering on the Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation" (2006) differentiation between HEIs, leading to external or institutional diversity (Stadtman, 1980, p. 98) was explicitly encouraged:

> Europe needs universities able to build on their own strengths and differentiate their activities on the basis of these strengths. While all institutions share certain common values and tasks, not all need the same balance between education and research, the same approach to research and research training, or the same mix of services and academic disciplines. Research should remain a key task of the systems as a whole, but not necessarily for all institutions. This would allow the emergence of an articulated system comprising world-renowned research institutions, plus networks of excellent national and regional universities and colleges which also provide shorter technical education (EC, 2006, p.4).

This approach towards fostering greater mission differentiation, with particular focus on differentiation in the research mission between HEIs is replicated in uncannily similar terms within the Hunt Report (Hunt et al., 2011, p.70; see p.129). The need to differentiate between HEIs based on different research missions and a different balance between research and teaching as expressed by the EC is also reflected in the Hunt Report.

Moreover, the Hunt Report seeks to outline how differentiation in terms of mission and functions – key EU objectives since 2003 - are best achieved in context of the traditional binary system:

> While both universities and institutes of technology may be active across the spectrum of research and innovation activities, they should have different emphases. While all institutions will be expected to maximise the impact of their activities on business, the public sector and the wider community, universities should specialise in basic and applied research, and institutes of technology should concentrate more on applied research and closer-to-market development and enterprise support, with a critical regional support dimension (2011, p.70).

It is apparent that EU officials and national policy-makers share a common language and similar objectives regarding enhanced differentiation between HEIs: not only do they agree about many aspects of the nature of EU influence on national HE systems, but perhaps more significantly, they are operating on the basis of a common discourse incorporating key priorities such as the necessity to measure institutional activity; greater concentration of resources to achieve critical mass and enhanced differentiation between institutions in terms of the type of research undertaken and in the balance between teaching and research.

Evidence extracted from the Hunt Report (2011), the 2013 "Profiling Irish Higher Education" (HEA) and various EC Communications (2003; 2006; 2011) indicate a common discourse between the European and the national policy-makers with regard to HE reform. Focus on differentiation is explicitly referred to as part of the broader modernisation agenda for HE systems and their HEIs at the EU level, while at the national level, differentiation is part of a rationalisation agenda geared towards concentrating public funds in a smaller amount of HEIs, and in particular research funds (Hunt et al., 2011, p.41).

CHAPTER FIVE

EU influence on Irish higher education policies and the national higher education system - Interview findings

Thrift (2008) argues that "under the influence of the European Union, European governments are busily engineering national research elites (explicitly in the case of Germany), designing regions with universities – or collections of universities – as central nodes, composing charters for researchers, setting up a European Research Council, even trying to broker a European Institute of Technology that will somehow ape MIT, in a generalized bid to become the United States" (p.18). This chapter seek to explore the influence of the EU on Irish national HE policies seeking to achieve a more differentiated system of HE.

5. 1 The EU's modernisation agenda for higher education: Views of participants – EU officials

There exists a tension between what is understood and accepted by both the Member States and the EU that responsibilities for HEIs remain with the states but that nonetheless, HEIs must increasingly operate within a European and global context. With this dichotomy in mind, a strict distribution and limitation of competences was confirmed at the European level by policy officer 1 (EC) who stated that HE was entirely the competence of the Member States:

> Here at the European level we have both the advantage and the disadvantage perhaps of, *higher education, as all levels of education are entirely the competence of the Member States,* so there's a limit to what we can do actively, or to what we would want to do. We can intervene specifically in mobility issues between countries because that's clearly something we can do better than countries can do alone, there's clear added value for the EU there (emphasis added).

This quote is revealing in that it expresses a clear awareness from the European level that HE is a sensitive issue for which Member States are entirely responsible. This was confirmed at senior level by another interviewee in the same institution who declared that he/she "would not insult your intelligence by reminding you that there is no competence at EU level in education" (senior manager, EC). Nonetheless, beyond that blanket statement seemingly excluding any EU competency or role in HE, policy officer 1 (EC) was eager to identify what may at first appear to be a residual role for the EU in two areas including firstly anything to do with mobility issues and secondly in advocating for specific policy approaches. Indeed, the lack of legal competence does not preclude influence of the EC, either through the common European approaches such as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), or new procedures such as the European Semester or EU funding of research.

Indeed, there is a rationale for EU involvement in mobility issues, based on "clear added value". This was confirmed at senior level and extended to quality assurance because of its inherent "European dimension":

> And then beyond that there are some European level issues no? If you talk about mobility, it's a European level issue, if we talk about quality assurance, it cannot be, no matter what the UK says, it cannot be a purely national, today, maybe in the thirteenth century, a purely national issue. It isn't a purely EU issue but it does have an EU dimension otherwise it makes no sense no? And we see it even more with the level of mobility and so we see more and more that we need some sort of common understanding of what quality assurance is (senior manager, EC).

From this it can be concluded that wherever the EU has "clear added value" and/or an issue has a particular European dimension (and this is increasingly the case because of the nature of the European project constantly advocating for the removal of barriers to the free movement of capital, goods, people and services), then the EU does have a strong basis to get involved.

On the other hand, the rationale for the EU pushing for a specific policy approach is because of its experience in "dealing with other countries and Member States and enabling countries to learn from each other's approaches and what seems to work and what seems not to work" (policy officer 1, EC). This refers to the OMC tool for cooperation that was also identified by senior policy officer 1 (HEA) as one of the two ways the EU influences education policy-making in Member States.

Policy officer 1 (EC) goes further in giving us examples of areas where the EU is active in advocating for specific policy approaches:

> ...also we can intervene to advocate specific policy approaches... and that field of activity if you like is something that we pursue quite actively e.g., regarding the *diversification of higher education institutions* and the role of government in supporting those institutions because here you have to remember that our primary interlocutor is usually the government level (emphasis added).

According to the interviewee, diversification of HEIs would fall within the remit of the EU's OMC, based on its experience in dealing with a variety of Member States and enabling them to come together and share best practice.

Policy officer 1 (EC) was of the opinion that whatever involvement occurred had to respect the competencies of Member States as defined by the Treaties:

> We engage with institutions and with students, and with employer bodies but usually most of our messages, are to governments to say: "you should think about doing more in this area, or evidence shows that you need to increase your higher education attainment levels, or performance related funding done like this seems to work well, can it be transferred to your system" and talking with stakeholders helps us to achieve this, *but we have to stop short of interfering with country systems because that's not our role* (emphasis added).

EC officials were concerned to emphasise that in no way is the EU supplanting the Member States' authority in HE policy-making.

Senior manager (EC) concurred with policy officer 1 and underlined that the EU did not want to invade Member States' HE space beyond what role the Treaties gave it but that nonetheless, a positive change was happening in the attitude of Member States towards EU involvement in education:

> What has changed recently is that we have left behind teleological discussions about subsidiarity, no subsidiarity and so on, and we have started working together with Member States. And it's very clear that we don't want to go beyond the Treaties and at the same time it is very clear that we can have *added value* and Member States are more and more accepting, accepting that, that it's useful for them, that we put on the table issues for the day which are very much common to all Member States. So that's the first point (emphasis added).

The senior EC official identified the Commission's influence mainly in terms of setting policy goals and the greater use of the OMC:

> How do we have an impact in general, going beyond Ireland? How do we think that we have an impact in general? Well first of all it's through setting policy goals through the modernisation agenda etc., and then through what we call the Open Method of Coordination, that you have heard of most likely, which is a new way of working. Some years ago for pure Europeans so to speak, it was like anathema, it was offered to do that because it didn't follow the EU method and so on. Now they have understood that in some areas like employment, like education, etc…, like social inclusion where you can't have the hard law and the hard way of doing things then that's a good way of acting together with the Member States. That's the second point.

The senior manager also mentions the EU's "added value" while arguing that Member States are becoming more accepting of the EC's role in education, regardless of the general principle of subsidiarity. The interviewee believed that because Member States share the same challenges with regards to HE, it is useful to have the EU placing those common issues on the table to be discussed. Beyond setting the agenda to be discussed, he believed that concrete impact was achieved through two different ways, first through setting specific policy goals through the modernisation agenda and second through the OMC. This parallels both opinions expressed by policy officer 1 (EC) and senior policy officer 1 (HEA) on the vital role of the OMC in areas where the EU cannot rely on "hard law" such as directives. It also

echoes policy officer 1's (EC) stance on the EU's role in advocating "specific policy approaches" because of its experience of dealing with Member States.

The focus of this research is on the EU's agenda for the modernisation of universities, to be understood as encompassing all HEIs (EC, 2011, p.2). The modernisation agenda has moved well beyond the initial goals set out in Bologna and the EU is currently addressing a plethora of issues such as how to fund a sustainable HE system, the ranking of European HEIs according to a broad set of criteria and the profiling of HEIs:

> But I think the modernisation agenda and the specific action lines that come out of this agenda, such as the U-Multirank initiative and the mapping study which allows institutions to look at themselves and say well "OK what am I doing, which areas do I seem to be comparing with my peers well on, which areas am I really not performing very well against and how can I incorporate that into my organisational strategy; what does it tell me about me, my performance and how can I use that to kind of plan ahead". These are specific examples of direct outputs of the EU strategy which can help for that [establishing a European trend of HE reforms] (policy officer 1, EC).

The theme of common issues facing all countries in Europe and beyond also emerged through interviews at European level (policy officer 1, EC; senior manager, EC). Policy officer 1 (EC) identified the student learning experience, a high quality education and its relevance to the job market (through the employability of graduates) as priority challenges for everyone:

> But if you look at the messages that came through in those Communications many of them find resonance also in here [EC Communication, September 2011] and if you look at the challenges faced by higher education in Europe or for that matter around the world many are challenges that have always existed. It's how to make sure that students have the *best learning experience* while they're there, how to make sure that the *higher education delivered is high quality*, that it's *relevant to their needs when they actually leave university*, it's not something that we invented in 2011, it's clearly always been an issue (emphasis added, policy officer 1, EC).

These three areas are not unrelated to the process of "massification" and "universalisation" since the increasing number of students participating in HE exerts pressures on the delivery of both the student learning experience and a high quality education (e.g., through appropriate student-staff ratios) and ultimately the attractiveness of graduates to employers.

This broad agenda for the modernisation of European HEIs places specific emphasis on mission differentiation. This is because of the perceived unrealistic pursuit of comprehensiveness from all HEIs, which is detrimental to 'excellence' as recognised by research oriented world university rankings because only "comparatively few [HEIs] have the capacity to excel across the board" (EC, 2011, p.2). Instead, the EC advocates against comprehensiveness and institutions "trying to be all things to all people" (senior manager, HEA) which is a tendency that was identified amongst Irish HEIs within the HEA at senior level.

This priority was further highlighted through policy officer 1 (EC) who believed "knowing what you're good at" to be vital for a HEI:

> So I think in terms of differentiation and specialisation, knowing what you're good at, adopting a strategic plan, and then government enabling you to get there if that's what something government thinks is important to do for the country is very much the policy line of the DG.

The EU favours horizontal differentiation, while being more open to vertical differentiation (EC, 2003, p.18; see p.140) than Irish policy-makers. Irish participants were keen to emphasise that horizontal, rather than vertical differentiation would be more appropriate for the modernising at system structure level of Irish HE, because there is a fear of ending up with a two or three-tiered HE system with first rate and second rate HEIs:

> The diversification *we want to see is horizontal mainly*. And in terms of the motivations, and I think a HE system has to be a highly motivated, you need a highly motivated academic community. It's quite important that our system of HE wouldn't feel very vertically differentiated. We need to value all approaches to learning, we need to value all missions but at the same time we need to consolidate investment in specialised facilities, investment in high-end research. We just don't have the resources to invest so we do have to prioritise. We have to prioritise in the locations in which we invest research money and we have to prioritise in the fields of study and general areas. But *we seek to promote primarily a horizontal differentiation*, but coherent vertical pathways for students as well. It's a messy answer, I'm looking for nuance on purpose because it

> would be very undermining if things were seen as third-rate, second-rate, like a three-tiered system, too hierarchical (emphasis added, senior policy officer 1, HEA).

> I think the *horizontal one* is the one that we would be most familiar with in the HEA and the Irish system which is very clearly that the institute sector and the university sector having quite different roles. Vertical differentiation we wouldn't, I suppose vertical differentiation brings you to things like rankings and league tables within groups and institutions and that's not such a focus for us because I suppose there's a conflict there between what the institutions might want and what the system needs (emphasis added, senior policy officer 2, HEA).

> I think the pursuit of diversity is one of the real underpinning parts of the Strategy and we've always said *we want horizontal differentiation* rather than vertical differentiation so of course, in the history of Ireland's higher education there's always been this fear that you end up with a two-tier higher education system and you'd have the universities here and the IoTs here (emphasis added, policy officer 1, DES).

However, at senior level in the HEA, there was a desire to combine both horizontal and vertical visions and include the benchmarking of HEIs as a necessary tool in evaluating and driving 'excellence':

> In some sense, *definitely you want to see horizontal differentiation* in the sense of different institutions doing different things and each being respected for what they do, but certainly the idea of comparing, *benchmarking institutions' performance against each other* is absolutely the kind of space we want to be in, and we want the institutions to be in. But not just benchmarking themselves against Irish institutions, but we also expect them to select European, or American or Australian or whatever, certainly institutions internationally that are comparable maybe in terms of size and mission and benchmark their performance against those. So I would see benchmarking of institutions as being an extremely valuable instrument in driving performance and driving excellence in the institutions (emphasis added, senior manager, HEA).

The latter view combining both elements of horizontal and vertical differentiation seems to have permeated new funding mechanisms in Ireland since the establishing of mission-based performance compacts (July 2013) between Irish HEIs and the HEA, because in the forthcoming years up to ten per cent of the core grant received by HEIs will be allocated annually as performance related funding.

5.1.1 The EU's policy tools to implement its 'modernisation agenda'

Since responsibilities for HE reforms remain with the Member States (EC, 2003; EC, 2011) it is crucial to understand how the EU can promote its agenda, beyond policy documents, and what mechanisms it has at its disposal to enable for this agenda to trickle down to national policy-making. To this purpose I will briefly examine two instruments that were mentioned by participants and will be discussed in greater detail in 5.4.2; both the OMC (senior policy officer 1, HEA; senior manager, EC; policy officer 1, EC) and the European Semester (policy officer 1, EC; senior manager, EC; policy officer 1, DES).

Since "there is no competence at EU level in higher education" (senior manager, EC) directives cannot be used by EU institutions in the HE arena. Article 288 of the TFEU stipulates that:

> A directive shall be binding, as to the result to be achieved, upon each Member State to which it is addressed, but shall leave the national authorities the choice of form and methods.

However, the OMC is the EU's way of cooperation in areas where it does not have a Treaty-based competency, and it consists of countries coming together and sharing their own objectives, comparing data while also identifying common objectives and European aspirations:

> And then the Open Method of Coordination which is their way of cooperation in areas where they don't have directives and that's just where countries come together and share their own objectives, they identify common objectives, they identify European aspirations and then they share data. And that's been very good (senior policy officer 1, HEA).

The EC has established an annual cycle of economic policy coordination known as the European Semester. This new governance architecture was approved by Member States in September 2010. However, to avoid duplication with the conditions set out by the joint EU/IMF Programme, Ireland only fully entered in 2014. The process was set up as a response to the global financial crisis and its principal objective is to strengthen the surveillance of

national budgets and to ensure they are aligned with European targets set out under agreed European policies such as the Stability and Growth Pact and the Europe 2020 Strategy. The Europe 2020 Strategy has five headline targets, of which Education is a central node. The European Semester is an annual process that culminates every July in the adoption by Ministers at the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) of binding Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) indicating what is needed to increase growth and jobs (Department of Finance, *European Semester and EU Governance*). It is still a new process for Ireland and was mentioned by only one Irish interviewee (policy officer 1, DES; see p.166).

5.2 The perceptions of institutional participants on EU influence in Irish higher education policy

On 21 July, 2000, only months after the European Council in Lisbon which approved the Lisbon agenda, Irish Tànaiste Mary Harney declared that:

> As Irish people our relationships with the United States and the European Union are complex. Geographically we are closer to Berlin than Boston. Spiritually we are probably a lot closer to Boston than Berlin.

This quote is worth mentioning because it was relayed by several interviewees (senior manager, IOTI; college officer 2, IoT3; policy officer 3, EC) and suggests a level of ambiguity towards Ireland's relationship with the EU. College officer 2, IoT3 described it as basically equivalent to saying "we're really more like the next state in the US rather than Europeans which was an unfortunate statement at the time as she had to eat her words some time later". This Irish "Boston-Berlin sort of view of the world" was also highlighted by a senior manager in IOTI, who stressed that Ireland most often compared itself to Britain and the US but also, if the need occurred and where and when it suited the government, to a

comparably sized European country. Policy officer 3 (EC) also highlighted the strong ties between the US and Ireland based on emigration and college officer 2 (University 2) gave a concrete example of how he/she felt Ireland was caught between two HE models (American and British):

> I mean since Ireland joined the EU, and embraced the euro, coming to live here 20 years ago, I really felt like I was living in a European country here, in a way that I didn't when I lived in the UK. And I thought that was really good, and just really simple things, like just the variety of stuff that you could buy in the shops and things in a way that you couldn't in England. And also I think Ireland also looks very longingly towards the States, very often. And again because of the history of the relationship between the States and immigration and all that. But the difficulty with the States is that, people pay loads of money to go to college. So on the one hand, it seems to me that what we want here is the British model in terms of funding, even though the British model has gone the other way, but the American model in terms of choice and you can't actually have both. And that's where Ireland gets stuck all the time, because it's such a small sort of population base that you can't necessarily do what you want to do with public money, because there isn't enough of it.

It is interesting to note that although college officer 2 (University 2) believed that living in Ireland felt more like living in a "European country", its principal source of inspiration at HE level was either Britain or the US. This discrepancy may be because Ireland, as reported by policy officer 1 (DES), "had inherited basically the UK system I suppose in lots of ways" and in particular its degree structure. A senior academic in the IoT sector suggested that Ireland still suffered from a "colonial hangover" tending to imitate the UK example and follow UK policies with regards to HE, which "pretty much ignores Europe" (senior academic 1, IoT3). A TUI official also mentioned the "old saying that what happens in the UK in terms of policy generally filters down to Ireland and happens as a ten year lag" although he/she believed that since Ireland joined the EU (then the European Economic Community) back in the 1970s Ireland had begun to look increasingly to Europe and to "European legislation". According to the same interviewee, this new European outlook was influential when deciding to maintain the Irish binary system, following its abolition in the UK with the upgrade of the polytechnics in 1992, and in the early implementation of the Bologna degree framework for example.

Notwithstanding, this common history with regard to HE between Ireland and the UK is a reality, partly because "we didn't really reform our education system when we got independence" (senior academic 1, IoT2). Moreover, as suggested by senior academic 2 (University 2) when attempting to identify the drivers behind national HE reforms, historical precedent is extremely important in shaping current HE policies and policy preferences:

> Well it's a European solution [rationalisation] brought to an Irish context, I would say that. I mean I do think in some ways, actually Ireland is quite clued into the European Union... But if you go across Europe, I mean certainly the country I know most about is France, it's always the same issue with higher education, *it's the history actually, it's all in the history*. The way higher education was set up even originally, the way it evolved. You end up with historical precedents, they are quite difficult to unpick. And that's one of the challenges of all national governments it's to try and deal with that history (emphasis added).

A majority of interviewees in University 1 were of the opinion that the EU had little if no influence in Irish HE, although college officer 1 did express his belief that the Bologna degree framework had been taken on board, as well as other Bologna issues dealing with mobility (ECTS), but no specific policies such as mission differentiation between HEIs. Both college officer 1 (University 1) and the official from TUI agree that the Bologna degree architecture had to be translated into the Irish context. This is in flat contradiction with the view expressed by a policy officer in the DES that the Bologna standardisation was modelled on the Irish system. This interviewee expressed his/her opinion that the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) represented an impressive architecture which was central to the HE system before concluding that Ireland was always 'very ahead with Bologna' (policy officer 1, DES):

> I suppose in lots of ways the Bologna standardisation was modelled on our system and then our current secretary general in his previous role as the head of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland brought in the National Framework of Qualifications, with this amazing architecture which allows for all kinds of the sort of reforms that we've been talking about that would be utterly impossible without it, it's like this infrastructure in the system. So Ireland was always very ahead with Bologna.

However, most European countries have their equivalent to the NFQ and it cannot be

assumed that Ireland was a trailblazer with the Bologna Process on the basis of having a national framework which was compatible with the European Qualifications Framework (EFQ). The NFQ is itself arguably the result of transposing nationally European aspirations clearly expressed in 2000:

> (2) The Lisbon European Council in 2000 concluded that increased transparency of qualifications should be one of the main components necessary to adapt education and training systems in the Community to the demands of the knowledge society (EU, 2009).

Establishing a clear and transparent way of assessing qualifications was already high on the European agenda prior to the launching of the NFQ in 2003, since it had been accepted by all EU governments at the Lisbon European Council, while the European Council in 2002 called for "closer cooperation in the university sector and improvement of transparency and recognition methods in the area of vocational education and training" (EC, 2009). Furthermore, the Berlin Communiqué (February 2003) also encouraged governments "to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile" (p.4). Therefore, to say that the Bologna standardisation was simply modelled on the Irish system is inaccurate and oversimplified.

College officer 1 (University 1) also declared that whatever changes were happening in his/her university he/she: "might be naïve, but perhaps some of the structures within this institution are already moving in the direction that they [the EC] would like". This attitude that whatever direction we are moving towards is probably the way the EU would want us to go anyway is not unlike the "chicken and the egg" dilemma proposed by senior policy officer 1 (HEA) who pondered whether it was Ireland that was influencing European thinking, or if European policy-making referred to the Irish model in the first place. In either case, Ireland was presented as a trailblazer in wider European developments and official interviewees often

did not perceive significant influences stemming from new European policies or initiatives. This view was reinforced by interviewees in University 1.

University 1 was the only HEI where the staff included in this study overwhelmingly declared the EU to have little if no influence on Irish policy-makers. College officer 2 (University 1) bluntly stated that: "the short answer to that is no. I don't think, I can't see any impact at all. I think they may have influenced the rhetoric, but I don't think they influenced any of the practice" before pointing towards a far greater impact from the OECD. A senior administrator within the same university elaborated on this point:

> Well, in my view, and I can't speak for the institution directly because they may have other communications that I'm not aware of. I'm not aware of in my role of an EU influence directly, I don't feel that what we're doing is because of an EU directive or policy. It may be that the Minister at the moment is listening to a lot of policies and saying yeah well Europe is saying this but he hasn't been saying that to us, he's been saying: "Look we have so much money to spend, why do we have seven Italian departments?" Just from my perspective I don't see it as an EU thing, I see it very much more from an Irish government level.

A similar view was expressed by another interviewee holding a similar position in University 2, where the participant made it clear that he/she believed the EU lacked coercive ways to implement its strategy, therefore making its influence negligible:

> Well, very little, urging people to do things doesn't necessarily mean that they will do anything. If there are some consequences for actions taken, good consequences and poor consequences that's what will change the behaviour. Issuing papers from the EU does not really have much of an impact apart from lip service, in my perspective. I'm being very blunt here (senior administrator, University 2).

This senior administrator (University 2) believed that general policies that were not backed up with any implementation strategies lacked concrete influence because, in his/her words: "if you have got a policy that doesn't tie anything down, it's just words. You know what they say, strategy without implementation is hallucination". However, as conceded by policy officer 1 (EC), the nature of EC Communications is to remain broad and refrain from

dictating to one Member State that "you have to do more of this, you have to do more of that". Senior administrator (University 2) argued that broad policies are not taken on board by national governments and HEIs because they are not specific enough and are not accompanied by a case by case implementation strategy with rewards and sanctions. But there is also general unease at HEA level with the EU "getting more directive on education" (senior policy officer 1, HEA).

The views gathered from University 1 contrasted with the perceptions of the academic staff within University 2. College officer 1 (University 2) believed the EU had been influential: he/she referred mainly to the Bologna Process as a tangible example of EU influence, although the Bologna Process is not led by the EU (see below):

> I think we would certainly follow, and we would attend the conferences in Europe and be involved in those discussions and you know the Bologna Process has been a crucial thing in I suppose standardising, making it easier to transfer, like we would again with our global presence have students travelling on semesters or year-long exchanges and bring in more, but also you know through the work of the OECD you would find very good policies being conducted that would very much influence our own institutional policies.

It is interesting to note here that college officer 1 (University 2) underlined the strong influence of international organisations (OECD) and European institutions on institutional policy-making. College officer 2 (University 2) also referred to Bologna as a way of attracting more international students but with regards to the influence of the EU, gave a more instrumental point of view which did allow for a strong EU influence only through funding:

> Yes, if there is money with it, but I do think and that sounds awfully cynical but I do think that that is always part of the issue... even somebody as kind of ridiculously satiric as me sitting here in the Arts building would be keeping an eye on what they are willing to pay for and what they are not and I do think that the, and again this sounds terribly cynical but I think it is true that the EU here is largely seen as a funding provider. I mean the notion of us becoming part of Europe and informing Europe and using our own principles to inform the way that Europe develops doesn't seem to be very far towards the top of the agenda, it is more kind of what can we get money for to improve standards

> of living and you have to be practical too but I do think it is a bit one sided from that point of view. So things like Bologna, I mean with Bologna in particular, it was "well if we do this we will do better in bringing in international students, everything will be easier" (college officer 2, University 2).

However, in contrast to this pragmatic view that depicted Irish HEIs as having a strictly instrumental approach to the EU as a funding provider and not interested in shaping policy, a senior manager at IOTI (supported by a senior manager in Forfás) pointed out that while the EU did have an influence, it was not a one way relationship and Ireland contributed to European policy as much as it was the recipient of these policies:

> So yes, the answer is Europe yes, does have an impact but we're part of the formulation of those European ideas so it's not something that is handed to us from Europe that we are unaware of; "oh let's do that because they've told us to, we've actually been in there sort of" (senior policy officer, IOTI).

It is interesting to note that three out of four college officers in both Universities 1 and 2 referred to Bologna when asked about the influence of the EU on national HE policies, as did several other interviewees in the IoT sector (senior academic 1, IoT1; senior administrator, IoT3). The EC is officially only one of the 47 members engaged in the Bologna Process, as policy officer 1 (DES) was keen to emphasise by playing down its role because the "Bologna Process wasn't led by the European Commission but it was very tied up with this idea of the EHEA". It is revealing of the limited level of awareness of people working within Irish HEIs on EU involvement in HE to observe that several interviewees were keen to highlight Bologna above all when asked about any potential influence the EU may have on Irish policy-makers. College officer 2 (University 2) was the only college officer from either university to specifically bring in EU funding into the equation.

Yet EU funding was also identified as a significant driver of reforms at home by both university and IoT participants. Four interviewees (college officer 2, University 2; college officer 2, IoT3; senior academic 2, University 2; senior manager, DES) agreed that external

funding has an impact on how HEIs behave. Indeed, college officer 2 (IoT3) made a similar point to that of college officer 2 (University 2) about the funding line stemming from the EU. According to college officer 2 (IoT3), with government funding decreasing and EU funding research increasing, a new relationship is on the point of being forged between Irish HEIs and the EU:

> Well in actual fact the European Commission and the European programme is having an effect on the Irish government in a roundabout way in the sense that what's actually happening is that they see what will arise in 2020 as a displacement... Now what's happening is with the change in our economic fortunes the Irish government is looking towards Europe as a way of bringing additional funding into education so in a way its more our response to our own need as opposed to our response to drivers coming from Europe so if we didn't have an economic crash I'm not too sure whether we would pay too much attention to Europe because that famous statement about whether it's Boston or Berlin...

The prominence of research as a criterion used in rankings, and the perception of basic research as an attribute of universities (Hunt Report, 2011, p.70) also increase the appeal and perhaps the necessity of being awarded substantial research funding won on a competitive basis. If an ever increasing chunk of those funds can now only be attained via the EU, because of dwindling national resources, then the disbursement of research funding is potentially a key area of influence by the EC in determining the research agenda and research priorities, in accordance with its EU Strategy for 2020. With the EU's Horizon 2020 budget at 79 billion EUR for the 2014-2020 period, the attraction of EU research funding may have a potentially far-reaching impact on both Irish HEIs and policy-makers concerned to make sure that the HE system and its institutions maximises its chances of success in obtaining these funds.

In contrast to the dichotomy in views on whether the EC had influenced the Irish policy-maker that emerged from the university sector (with participants in University 1 believing it had not, whereas interviewees within University 2 believed European influence had trickled

down into the consciousness of the Irish policy-maker), interviewees from IoTs agreed for the large part that the EU had exerted significant influence on Irish HE policy-making, in particular through research funding and the European Social Fund (ESF), although the degree of such influence varied. In IoT3 for example, college officer 1 opined that European policy had more weight and authority than OECD policies or recommendations, because of the inherently advisory nature of the latter. However, he/she did warn that they were complex documents and that people had a habit of selecting only what they wanted from them. Similarly, an academic with an elected college role in IoT2 who believed that the government "cherry picks" what it needed, something college officer 1 (IoT3) also admitted to in an institutional context: "if I want to make a case to my academic council that we have to do something, I will look for evidence to support it".

A senior administrator (IoT3) believed the EU had influenced policy-makers, although he/she emphasised this once again through the Bologna Declaration and the standardisation of course offerings. The participant also believed the EU had an impact in helping to "modernise education… even down to the level of setting the criteria for the technological universities" (senior administrator, IoT3). The interviewee also thought that at least with regard to the latter point, and following the Marginson Report (2011), influences beyond the EU were at play because "they are setting standards that have prevailed elsewhere so it's even beyond the EU" (senior administrator, IoT3).

Conversely, senior academic 1 (IoT3) stood apart from the other three interviewees in IoT3 by expressing his/her cynicism at any government attempt to take on board only European policies that suited national goals, because of Ireland's "parochialism":

> I don't think so, I think it's there and to a certain extent it informs things but I don't think the Irish case, the push towards rationalisation in the Irish case has been driven at all by the European context other than the austerity context. I don't think so and I think Ireland is very resistant to European thinking because of its parochialism...These things aren't really taken that seriously when they don't align with what we want to do nationally.

This more sceptical analysis of the use of EU policies and recommendations found an echo with an academic serving on the Academic Council in IoT2 who stated that "EU policies are important but I think they have been cherry picked to make the case of the likes of the Hunt Report".

Interestingly, a senior academic in IoT2 believed exactly the opposite:

> Oh I would say so yes, I would say the EU has a very strong influence on Ireland, much more so than on England for example. I think where the EU leads we follow. It's a tradition and I think obviously the difficulty we've had since 2007/8 where we've been caught up with IMF funding etc., when they say jump and we say how high so I would say there's a very strong influence but that's not to say I'm putting that negatively. I think some of the European models of higher education work extremely well, I would be particularly supportive of the model in Germany where there is a very distinct difference between Arts education and Science education and the two are equal and I've always felt that that's something we don't have. We don't value the technical grades, you only have a full education if you come out with your Level 8 Honours degree whereas in fact the technical education for the technical skill may not actually require that. But we never had that ability to see the two as equal (senior academic 1, IoT2).

The contrast in opinion between two participants holding the same role within different institutes is worth noting because it denotes the volatility in perceptions with regard to such a complex issue. The view expressed by senior academic 1, IoT2 was broadly shared by a majority of interviewees, including a majority of IoT participants.

The dominant view among IoT managers, senior academics and administrators was that the EU has had a strong influence on national policy-making in Ireland, as purported by senior academic 1 (IoT2) above (supported by senior academic 1, IoT1; college officer 1, IoT1; senior administrator, IoT1; college officer 1, IoT2; senior administrator, IoT2; college officer 1; IoT3; college officer 2; IoT3; senior administrator, IoT3; senior manager; senior

representative, IOTI). The more sceptical view that the Irish government only cherry picks what it needs from the EU was shared by only two interviewees in the IoT sector, the senior academic in IoT3 and a member of the academic staff in IoT2. Therefore, I would conclude that the majority of participants in the IoT sector believed the EU to be very influential in contributing to national policies. This may reflect in part the origins of the sector, particularly the fact that the RTCs were initially established with funds from the ESF as mentioned by two other interviewees, an official in TUI and a senior official at IFUT:

> I mean the RTCs were established primarily because of the availability of money from the European Social Fund...It's because there was big money available from the European Social Fund, the ESF (senior official, IFUT).

The official in TUI argued that for top-level aspirational objectives to be implemented, some sort of "hard currency, in particular in terms of funding" was vital:

> Because the policies were put in as aspirational objectives that needed to be implemented they needed some kind of hard currency, particularly in terms of funding...The European Social Fund was a big driver. Because it directly funded the IoT sector and the university sector, for specific types of programmes and courses (official, TUI).

It was suggested by college officer 1 (IoT1) that although he/she believed the EU to have a huge influence in policy developments in Ireland, regarding the qualifications framework, developing links between HE and industry and HEIs' engagement with local communities and student mobility, staff in Irish HEIs were perhaps not the best placed to be aware of any direct EU influence in institutional or national strategies because this was understandably not at the "top of their agenda":

> If you go back to something like the European Standards and Guidelines it's hugely influenced our thinking here, the papers in terms of mobility, in terms of quality, in terms of cross standards, in terms of links to employment, in terms of the broader engagement agenda I think they've been a huge impact. Now, it might be in the School of Education, or in our School of Engineering, or in the School... It might be at the actual ground level, I think the individual lecturer, may not be hugely aware. I'm not talking about any individual place but that may not be top of their agenda, but I can certainly tell you that at the policy level, and at the sort of institute steering level it's got a huge impact.

While this may be true at the level of the "individual lecturer", an academic with an elected role in college (either as college officer or Academic Council member) is more likely to be aware of EU policies, because HEI strategies are necessarily set in a local, national, European and international context.

A large majority of interviewees in the HE sector, apart from three out of four interviewees in University 1, were of the opinion that the EU did exert an influence on policy-makers, although several considered that this was only through the EU involvement in the Bologna Process focused on increasing mobility and harmonising national degree frameworks across Europe. While in the university sector, there was a distinct split in opinion between interviewees depending on whether they worked for University 1 or 2, the staff in the IoT sector overwhelmingly believed the EU to have a strong influence on the Irish policy-maker. Participants perceived that the EU exerted influence through funding – especially the ESF and increasingly research funding since 2000, rather than by formal regulations.

5.3 The perceptions of national policy-makers on the extent of EU influence

According to a senior manager in Forfás, the HEA or the Department were the best placed to be able to gauge the influence of the EU on Irish policy-making in HE. He/she believed that EU influence was "probably not significant", although he/she admitted that it was difficult to evaluate what that precisely meant because EU outputs (e.g., Communications,) are in the unusual position of both having been shaped by Member States while also applying to them because they are the primary target audience of such documents:

> My own sense is *probably not significant*. Now what not significant means, I don't know, in the sense clearly European documents, we both contribute to them and we are also recipients of them as member states and you look at the overall thrust of these

> documents is. And they tend to set out a broad vision. They don't, for the most part, tend to be overly prescriptive as to how one does things, and unless there is money involved, when you have programmes with money which clearly drive policy in that institutions and member states align themselves to benefit clearly as much as they can from European funding possibilities. But broad policy proclamations are clearly taken account of but I wouldn't have thought it was the major driver here. I suspect the drivers are much closer to home (emphasis added).

However, it should be noted from the start that for a participant working within the EC, it is "always difficult for people to say that something, a good idea came from Europe" (policy officer 1, EC). This view was confirmed at national level with senior policy officer 1 (HEA) contending that it was difficult to gauge who exerted influence on who, alluding to the familiar 'chicken or egg' causality dilemma in the context of who came up with the policy first:

> In an awful lot of ways, Ireland and the EU, the EU policy advice in higher education rarely presents difficulties for us in Ireland. Now, I'm not sure why that is. I think the EU has paid a lot of attention to the UK/Irish models which are kind of similar to Scandinavian models at some level. I don't know, we've never been offended by EU policy recommendations because they tended to correspond with our own instincts. So it's harder, maybe chicken and egg, I'm not sure. Do we have a huge influence in the policy formulation, or does Brussels refer to the Irish/English models, I'm not sure how that works.

The HEA interviewee left little space for any independent and direct EU influence through this good humoured comparison since it is either one of two cases. Either Ireland directly influences the policy formulation of the EU agenda or this agenda refers to the Irish/English models. Either way, it implied that either Ireland is the main driver of this agenda, or that the EU is copying the Irish/English models. Moreover, senior policy officer 1 (HEA) emphasised the primacy of national policy-makers: "But it's important to say that in the area of education, the nation states have total authority in terms of policy and practice".

This official perspective of "Europe referring to us" was also echoed by DES participants, particularly in the argument presented by DES officials that the "Bologna standardisation" was modelled on the Irish system. This effectively meant that the participant (policy officer 1,

DES) was of the view that changes may have occurred, but mainly elsewhere and predominantly in other European countries, because Ireland's degree framework was the model of reference.

Three out of four interviewees within the HEA were not convinced that the EU had a major impact on policy-making in Ireland (senior policy officer 1 and 2; senior manager) and the fourth member who did, a member of the HEA Board, contextualised the EU's role through economic recovery and competition between regional blocs. It should be noted at this stage that interviewees' answers perceived very little direct EU influence, through policy documents or legal requirements. These participants generally concurred to downplay any direct EU role in HE and to characterise European institutions' role as either "peripheral" (senior manager, HEA) or in a debutante phase, at the initial stage of "finding their feet" in the education arena (senior policy officer 1, HEA):

> I think a number of things probably had an impact. They [the European Commission] may well have had some but it's probably peripheral (senior manager, HEA).
>
> Yeah I don't want to be too hard on the EU but they're only recently involved. What the EU say is comfortable for us and I think they're finding their feet in a way. And it's funny they don't have any jurisdiction in education policy, but I suppose there's two different ways they've started to influence. They do because of the Common Market. They have a focus on the skill base of the workforce and qualifications and that has kind of brought them into education. And then the Open Method of Coordination which is their way of cooperation in areas where they don't have directives and that's just where countries come together and share their own objectives, they identify common objectives, they identify European aspirations and then they share data. And that's been very good…and it works very well. *But we wouldn't be comfortable with the EU getting more directive on education* (emphasis added, senior policy officer 1, HEA).

A senior manager in the HEA shared his/her belief that there are common problems facing all developed countries, such as the massification of HE with continuously increasing student numbers and targets for HE attainment. This senior manager (HEA) believed that the European agenda "may well have had some [impact]", but was "probably peripheral",

because it was secondary to the common challenges of massification, universal access and sustainable funding.

Senior policy officer 1 (HEA) also gave a sceptical appraisal of any great role for the EU in influencing Irish policy-makers, contending that the EU's involvement was recent and that in any case, what the EU is saying is "comfortable for us". This implies that the EU's modernisation agenda for HE systems and institutions is compatible with the Irish agenda for its HE landscape and coincidentally happens to fit with Irish goals. Although the lack of a legal basis for the EU in education policy is underlined, according to this participant some EU influence has "started" to seep into the making of national HE policies through two mechanisms. Firstly, this is happening through the Common Market and a "focus on the skill base of the workforce and qualifications" (senior policy officer 1, HEA), reflecting both national and EU level concern with the theme of employability and the effective functioning of the Internal Market enabling for the free movement of persons as based on Article 26 of the TFEU. This comment about the focus on the skill base of the workforce, which is necessarily linked to the quality of HE, is indeed strongly reflected in EU documents. The link between education, and HE in particular, and the creation of jobs, economic growth and prosperity is a connection that the EU is keen to emphasise (EC, 2011).

Secondly, the interviewee mentions the OMC as an important tool for Member States to share experiences, identify common objectives and "identify European aspirations". This seems to confirm that there are common European objectives with regards to HE. The interviewee is keen to stress once again the lack of any sort of hard law available to the EU in the HE arena. The participant welcomed the OMC but believed it to be non-binding and generally secondary to either national policy-making or statute-based EU policy-making in any area of

their jurisdiction because, in contrast to directives, it was "just where countries come together" to share. By virtue of its informal and seemingly voluntary nature, the OMC is more akin to a useful forum for exchange than a direct way of creating an impact on policy in Member States. This approach is in line with the same interviewee's sentiment that the HEA would be uneasy with the "EU getting more directive on education" (senior policy officer 1, HEA) implying that as things currently stand and through the OMC the situation is good and works well enough.

This opinion was shared by policy officer 1 (DES) who made the same observation about the lack of hard law or directives available to the EU in HE:

> The EU influence on higher education, the EU doesn't have any influence really, directly. Now certain aspects of the reform agenda now in Europe, with the European Semester... The European Semester is now part of the European Parliament where they tell countries what their education priorities should be. This is completely new and some countries have resisted it. You basically get told, right say for example: "Hungary your retention lines are absolutely appalling you need to focus on this" and then they will try and link structural funds to that.

The DES representative acknowledged, however, that absence of statutory instruments did not preclude exercise of influence more indirectly through other mechanisms:

> And now of course they don't have a statutory basis, you know it's not like Agriculture or something where you have to do, if a directive, you know you have to, that supersedes your law. Education isn't in the same space. Education has traditionally been on the European level about sharing experience, sharing best practise, thematic working groups, peer learning. Now they are beginning to become a little bit more directive, but it's not the same as you saying they have this direct influence, they don't really, I mean you could quite well ignore what they're saying (policy officer 1, DES).

The DES policy officer's assertion that ultimately national policy-makers could decide to "ignore" EU recommendations reflected a consistent theme across almost all Department and HEA interviewees, who tended to downplay the influence of the EC, without discounting it completely, while emphasising the dominant role of national policy-makers.

There appeared to be a degree of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of EU documents. For example, senior policy officer 2 (HEA) stated that:

> The EU have been fairly explicit I think over that timeframe, of saying students have to pay a bigger share of the cost of higher education and that didn't really have any impact at all until the financial crisis came in and we had to actually look for more…

It is striking that the only specific policy that was attributed to the EU was perhaps the only one that they have not directly advocated for. Making students pay a bigger share of the cost of HE is not an officially EU stated position, not least because, as stated by the participants in the HEA (senor policy officer 1), the EC does not have the authority to issue such a statement. It was vehemently denied by EC officials (policy officers 1 and 2, EC; senior manager, EC). The senior manager from the EC argued that all they had done was to put the issue on the table and propose to look at alternative ways of funding alongside public sources, because the issue of funding and tuition fees is after all a "very ideological debate" and there cannot be a one size fits all situation:

> And then this again we are not saying that fees are good or bad, we're not saying that private investment is good or bad, we're just saying that universities will have to look at that…and then you have very different situations, you have the UK who still have fees and then you have the Nordics who are maybe starting to introduce them and it's a very ideological debate and what we are trying to do there is to help providing that evidence about how things are going and then allowing Member States to discuss amongst them and try to learn from each other knowing of course that you cannot transpose Ireland to Greece, or Greece to Portugal or Portugal to Sweden but through the successes and the failures of other reforms those who have to launch reforms at home can learn a bit so that's the big picture (senior manager, EC).

However, this view that the EU did not have much of a direct influence on policy-makers was not shared by all interviewees involved in national policy-making. A member of the HEA attributed to the EU a huge impact on Member States' HE systems, including and beyond Bologna:

> Yeah, this is interesting, I think certain moves at a European level have had huge impacts at national level across Europe and beyond, including Bologna, I think you know, that has probably been the one area that has had a very big impact (member of the HEA).

This participant's view was rooted within the larger context of regional blocs competing in a global environment, testifying to an EU influence going beyond Bologna, with specific focus on the Lisbon Agenda (2000) and enabling for Europe to compete internationally against other regional powers:

> Other areas including say the Lisbon Agenda and the constant cry that we need to gain competitive advantage against America and Japan and now you know the up and coming BRIC countries and Europe, I think it's probably more of a reflection of Europe struggling with Europe's position geopolitically into the future and a little bit like your question about you know investment in higher education boosting economic recovery, I think Europe is struggling with the question of what kind of higher education does Europe need to plug into its future and what is its future anyway (member of the HEA).

This contribution couches the education reform debate within the context of economic recovery, one that is common to all Western countries. It is an important view in that the interviewee believes the EU has significant influence but more due to the Lisbon Agenda and economic activity promoted by the European project than any specific policy initiative in HE.

> ...so from an Ireland perspective, we've always been a little bit like the pick and mix counter, we have always worked with those where we appear to be you know a bit like *the good student in the classroom* and yeah we're doing really well on that, look at what we've done, look how much money we have drawn down from the framework programme, we're above the EU average and then when it comes to 3% of GDP on R&D we kind of maybe just leave to the side that we're only at 1.3% or whatever it is and that was even in the good times you know that we're way, way behind (emphasis added, member of the HEA).

Nonetheless overall, there was a general sense from participants at the national policy-making level that the EU played second fiddle to other influences. The senior manager in SFI was very much a lone voice in suggesting the need for greater influence:

> I am sure that European policy definitely influenced national policy and it should. I mean if it doesn't there is a problem. But the question is how deeply and so on and one would hope and I believe that, you know, it's an intelligent look at that obviously there are important modernisations to be done to the higher education system across Europe.

No direct reference was made to any specific EU policy document in the interviews, and there are many dealing with the specific HE issues Ireland is currently dealing with. This in itself suggests a lack of awareness of EC Communications on the modernisation of HE that

may be due to the fact that little attention is paid to documents that lack the force of law. Instead participants were of the view that there were drivers "closer to home" (senior manager, Forfás) and that there were common issues for all developed countries such as the massification of HE (senior manager, HEA) that were really driving reform. The reasons put forward by interviewees for the absence of a strong and direct EU influence were twofold: either the EU recommendations were too broad (senior manager, Forfás) or the EU was unable to use any binding legal devices to support its agenda, because it had no competence in education matters beyond the supplementary role assigned by the Maastricht Treaty (policy officer 1, DES; senior policy 1, HEA). However, the European Semester (policy officer 1, DES) and the OMC (senior policy officer 1, HEA) were two frameworks in which the EU could intervene, although the latter is entirely consultative. Policy officer 1 (DES) was the only interviewee in Ireland to mention the European Semester. This can be explained by the fact that although in place since 2011, Ireland only participated in its first European Semester in January 2014, to avoid the duplication of measures imposed under the EU/IMF Programme of External Assistance. It is therefore still too early to analyse the impact of the European Semester, but because of the binding nature of its CSRs, one may expect a more visible EU influence to emerge.

5.4 A common discourse

Although the EU has few legally binding instruments supporting its modernisation agenda, I will now examine the tools that it uses to have an impact, at least according to interviewees from the HEA (senior policy officer 1) and the DES (policy officer 1). Policy officer 1 (EC) gives valuable insights into the intricacy of this type of informal policy-making, concurring with the views expressed by senior policy officer 1 (HEA) and senior manager (EC) on the

centrality of the OMC in advancing the European agenda for HE in an area that does not legally fall within the direct competency of the EU:

> We are trying to bring countries together through peer learning and exchange whereby we have a work programme agreed with Member States on focussing upon specific thematic areas linked to the EU strategy on the modernisation of higher education and say to counties "OK we are going to hold a peer learning on this so countries we want you to come together to share your experience e.g., on things like performance-related funding mechanisms: how do you do it, why do you do it that way?...Basically locking countries in a room together and saying "OK Finland tell us about why have you and the Netherlands come up with a similar performance-related funding approach and how do you do that or Ireland tell us about how you do it and what are the hurdles that you found or the things that have worked really well" and then of course a report is produced after that so that the findings can benefit more than just the countries involved (policy officer 1, EC).

The interviewee was very clear on emphasising the variety of voices and the fact that everyone brought something to the table. Learning through sharing enables Member States to see what works and what does not. With 28 Member States and even more HE systems (the UK and Belgium for example harbour at least two separate HE systems), there is naturally a plethora of voices and policy approaches. This is not unlike the kind of beneficial diversity between HEIs that enables one HEI to learn from the experiment of another, even if it is unsuccessful.

Within the OMC, every Member State brings something to the table. Policy officer 1 (EC) gives a detailed account underlining that the EC has an influential role in setting the agenda for discussion by Member States since it is the Commission that teases out some of the issues that it thinks should be discussed at the events (from the work programme agreed upon at directors' general of HE level) organised within the framework of the OMC:

> We have a technical working group on the modernisation of higher education, they, well at directors' general of higher education level the work programme is agreed and that work programme will set out the action lines here, the themes that they want to work on, and the Commission then tries to tease out some of things that we think might be interesting to look at. We develop a series of questions or a kind of profile for an event, we then invite countries to express an interest in who thinks they either want to learn something about this or who thinks they have something in particular to share.

The EC therefore takes the lead within the OMC on HE issues, by deciding what issues are put on the table and convening Member States to work together on those identified themes or action lines. The role of the EU as convenor is clear, and its role in choosing what challenges are to be given precedence is central to achieving the objectives set out in the modernisation agenda of 2011.

Not only does the EU have a central coordinating position within the OMC, but it also either chairs or co-chairs with the host country those events it has convened and whose *ordre du jour* it has largely shaped. The Commission occupies leadership positions at every step in the process leading up to the OMC (by proposing an initial work programme, including priority themes from the work programme determined at directors general level) and during the OMC (by chairing or co-chairing):

> Generally, what we do is we draft up the work programme to start with, in line with this (the modernisation agenda document, 2011). We then discuss it with the countries which have decided they want to prioritise working together on higher education topics outlining "these are the things that we propose could offer the most potential for peer learning on and these are the things that we think of, those themes that we should focus on in particular". That work programme is reviewed and possibly revised by the Directors General of Higher Education who meet twice a year, so all of the EU countries together. Then we agree the work programme which usually spans two or three years and you take one (peer learning) event by one event, usually two or three of these events per year and as I say the countries sign up if they're particularly interested in the theme (policy officer 1, EC).

When asked whether the EU had greater Treaty-based competences with regard to vocational education, the interviewee believed it did, in particular because vocational education is closely linked to employment:

> There is some specific competence in vocational education and training linked to the Treaty articles on employment which specifically focus on what we can do there, but as an area of Member State subsidiarity, in higher education it's more about trying to learn from each other's experience, and coming up with some tools which can be useful at the European level, things like the ranking initiative, U-Multirank; ECTS, the credit transfer and accumulation system; the European Qualifications Framework, again another transparency tool which is to help countries to organise to get the best out of their higher

> education systems, in addition to the specific role we have in supporting cross-border learning mobility (policy officer 1, EC).

The Commission interviewee emphasised that the EU's role in HE is more about "trying to learn from each other's experience" and not about imposing any policy on Member States. The image of a benevolent, friendly EU that is only trying to help is one the EU is keen to uphold, while also providing countries with the necessary tools (ECTS, U-Multirank, research framework programmes) and fora (through the OMC) to enable common European objectives to be reached.

However, beyond the OMC, the EU may advocate specific policy approaches within the context of the EU 2020 Strategy and set European targets for Member States (e.g., reduce early school leaving and increase participation in HE) as part of the process towards achieving this Strategy, as a senior Commission official noted:

> And then this [the impact of the EU on Member States] has been even more reinforced in the education area by two elements. First of all, the link between education and the overall EU 2020 process so as you know we have five benchmarks at EU level, one dealing with employment, one with climate change, one with research, one with social inclusion and with education with the question we have on the one hand the commitment to reduce early school leaving below 10 per cent by 2020 and on higher education to reach 40 per cent. And this has had an impact, if only because it has meant that prime ministers and heads of states have signed to this commitment. Whether they feel personally bound by it or not is different but they have accepted that this will be reviewed annually and they have accepted to fix national targets to translate the 40 per cent at EU level except the UK, which hasn't done it for other reasons, because they don't like to be controlled by the EU so to speak. And that has put into motion a new dynamic of discussion between the Member States and they accept that we have views on that.

By signing and committing themselves to these specific targets, heads of states have given their permission for these goals to be implemented. The process includes both external annual reviews of how well Member States are performing in reaching these targets and translating internally these agreed objectives into their own national context through the European Semester (policy officer 1, DES; policy officer 1 EC). This also initiates further dialogue between the Member States and between the Member States and the EU, thus creating "a new

dynamic of discussion" (senior manager, EC). Furthermore, the European Semester creates the prospect of a stronger impact of the EU's modernisation agenda for HE:

> Secondly, what has even more changed and you know things about that in Ireland, is all the economic governance process, and the balance procedure etc., what we call the European Semester, because even though if it's basically about economics, of course education and economics are linked, if only because there are investments in education and if only because its more and more commonly admitted that education, a good education would have a positive impact in growth and therefore in prosperity and well-being (senior manager, EC).

While official participants generally rejected the idea of significant EU influence on national HE policies through the Commission's 'modernisation' agenda or specific Commission policy documents, several Irish interviewees did acknowledge a wider impact on the part of EU institutions on national policies. Two senior managers in the HEA and the DES gave prominence to the impact of the EU on national HE systems and institutions, the former because of the alleged increase in economic activities exerted by virtue of EU membership and the latter because of the funding made available to HEIs on a competitive basis through EU programmes such as the new Horizon 2020 (senior manager, DES). Senior official participants therefore believed that the EU is exerting influence both through funding mechanisms and common approaches within the Community context especially linked to shared economic objectives.

A senior manager (HEA) made the point that beyond EC Communications on HE policy, the EU indirectly exerts considerable influence by virtue of the economic pull it creates, which increases economic activity and thereby requires more skilled workers, who will inevitably be drawn from the HE system:

> But if you get away from the idea of documents in a way and look at what really influences higher education, I'd be inclined to argue that it has to be the EU. Because what really influences higher education is the importance of higher education and highly educated graduates and the knowledge that they produce through HE systems and research systems, the impact that has on the economy...The big pull for all of that of

> course is economic activity. And one of the reasons why we have stronger economic activity is our membership of the EU. So that in a way I think there's a dynamic there that the EU creates in a sense the circumstances for more economic activity, more economic activity draws out the need for more skilled workers, and more skilled workers can be found through the education system. Rather than any direct power the EU has, or any reports or anything, I think that dynamic has to be really quite informal. Now, OK we're members of the OECD and that's the world's rich club I suppose and you could argue the same and I think the economic influence of the EU is very important in what we do (senior manager, HEA).

This is consistent with the EC Communication (2011) that had previously made a link between HE and not only research and innovation but also in providing for the highly qualified graduates Europe needed to increase economic growth and prosperity:

> Higher education and its links with research and innovation, plays a crucial role in individual and societal advancement, and in providing the highly skilled human capital and the articulate citizens that Europe needs to create jobs, economic growth and prosperity (p.1).

The EC's focus on increasing economic activity and the employability prospects of graduates was echoed by a senior policy officer of the EUA, within the same context of higher targets for participation in HE and the massification of HE, previously identified by a senior manager (HEA) as a common challenge for all countries:

> There has been a push towards qualifications, skills and training which clearly shows, at least here in Brussels from the European Commission, that there is a strong influence also from Employment into the Education part...so you find a lot of things said and written today which some years ago, academics would have been up in arms and would have protested against and today this is acceptable. But I think this is also, there is a point there that we can no longer ignore, if when we set a goal of 40 per cent of the age cohort in going into higher education, or Ireland I think is 60 per cent then we need some answers of what that means for the employment prospects afterwards. So I think this is really the change that has taken place or is in the process of taking place. When you on the one hand side open up for broader participation into higher education for massification if you want so, then you can't just say well half of them will be employed at the university and most who will not they find jobs elsewhere (senior policy officer, EUA).

Specific targets serve to focus the debate and initiate a response from Member States, who will have to implement a Strategy to achieve those targets. The fact that these targets are clearly stated in EU policy documents and EC Communications demonstrates that EU policies are not simply broad statements. Since EU targets were accepted by national

governments, greater pressure is then on governments not only to achieve those targets, but also to make them meaningful for the ever increasing cohorts of students enrolling in HE, because it is simply not enough to increase the number of graduates without anticipating in a realistic way labour market requirements. The same issue arose in Ireland after the government doubled the number of PhDs. Senior academic 2 (IoT1) commented on this unfortunate type of short-term policy-making by observing that:

> They [the government] realised in Ireland that doubling and trebling the number of PhDs has no meaning, because the Irish economy, the way it was set up and the structure and the type of industries that were there, didn't need them, didn't want them and wasn't looking for them. It was looking for something different.

While these efforts to increase HE attainment are laudable, they must go hand in hand with a comparable growth in jobs requiring those skills otherwise there will be a serious mismatch between qualified job seekers and employment prospects.

According to a senior manager in the DES, the EU's involvement in HE policies was both "soft" through the evaluation of country policies (through the OMC for example) but also "hard" because of the various funding instruments, such as the ESF and in particular more recently the new Horizon 2020 research funding scheme:

> Articulation of policies and high level goals and ambition is an important part of managing the overall HE system. But in a way, that's the sort of soft side of the equation. The hard bit of it is to move to align the funding with performance outcomes. This is happening in the European context and one example is the *research budget under Horizon 2020*. That in a direct way, even though maybe not too visible now, will have an impact on how institutions behave because they are going to have to collaborate to make the bids. The Commission have tried, and partly with the help of the Irish Presidency, to align their funding lines behind stated priorities, so we're going to see that plays out in the next few years (emphasis added, senior manager, DES).

Ireland's objective of reaching €1.25 billion out of Horizon 2020 is indeed ambitious, seeking to double what they achieved under the FP7 programme, where Irish HEIs had punched above their weight in accessing those funds according to policy officer 1 (HEA). However,

no Irish HEI seems to have performed exceptionally well, since none were included in the top 50 participant organisations in the Interim Evaluation of the FP7 Programme (2010), which included several universities and HEIs from some of the other relatively small European nations such as Belgium (Catholic University of Leuven), Denmark (University of Copenhagen; Technical University of Denmark), Sweden (Karolinska Institute; Lund University; Royal Institute of Technology) and Switzerland (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne; Swiss Federal Institute of Technology of Zurich; University of Zurich; University of Geneva). The same interviewee indicated that the new target would have implications for HEIs, who will need to rethink their "behaviour":

> So yes, you're absolutely right, to actually achieve those targets [1.2 billion from the Horizon 2020 programme] which is a big ask will require changed behaviour, that's really what I'm trying to get (senior manager, DES).

It is certainly striking to see that at senior level in both the HEA and the DES, there is an awareness of a more complex process where the picture is more nuanced and that while specific EU documents may not have had an obvious impact, there are other and less directly quantifiable ways EU influence seeps into national policy-making. This marks a striking convergence of view with senior officials in the EC and the EUA.

The very nature of EC Communications that are addressed to the 28 Member States dictates that they have to remain broad and avoid one 'fit size fits all' statements:

> But I think that's quite, from a European perspective it's quite dangerous. From a country perspective it's much easier to do. Whereas if for example if you take STEM, if I look at Engineering and I look at employment outcomes in Spain on Engineering, Spanish engineers have a better, a much better chance than an Arts graduate let's say in Spain at finding a job. If you go to the UK, the reverse is true. So, we have to, at the European level at least, we have to be very careful about putting out messages which go for all because just as there is differentiation within a country across Europe between the different countries there is huge differentiation and what works in one country might not necessarily work in another …

In contrast, OECD reports are done on a country basis, on invitation, and as remarked upon by a member of the HEA, the OECD does not need to care about EU issues such as the principle of subsidiarity. It is more acceptable for the OECD to make blunt recommendations based on the huge amounts of quantitative data they collect and analyse:

> I think it's because the OECD maybe calls it, it just calls it straight out and I think the European Union because of the whole issue of subsidiarity is always maybe slightly more circumspect about what it says and will never seek to kind of turn to the member state and go right lads, you know don't do that, do this, whereas the OECD just looks, takes the data it uses and you know produces conclusions (member of the HEA).

For example, after advocating for diversity of research missions the Hunt Report acknowledges that this is "broadly in line with the recommendation of the OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland that research missions of the universities and the institutes of technology should be distinct but complementary" (2011, p.70). So while the impact of the OECD is visible, no mention of the EU is made. Similarly, senior policy officer 1 (HEA) highlighted influence of the OECD, but was careful to depict the Hunt Report as an indigenous creation. While the participant highlighted the fact that Ireland was traditionally open to external advice, greater reticence is apparent with regard to EU recommendations for HE system structure and the reform of HEIs. This primacy of the OECD in terms of influencing Irish policy-makers is justified because they were actually "invited to come in and give their assessments" (senior policy officer 2, HEA), whereas the EU was not. Submitting oneself voluntarily to the possibility of external criticism seems to be generally more accepted than being directly told what to do.

Another issue put forward by policy officer 1 (DES) is worth commenting further on. Ireland's relatively young population serves as an even stronger push on the demands from and for HE than in other developed countries. The "massification" (senior manager, HEA) or "universalisation" of HE is a particularly strong phenomenon in Ireland because it has the

youngest population in Europe and because it has one of the highest participation rates of school leavers. Both national and European policy-makers are in agreement that funding of a HE system that caters for such a large proportion of the population needs to be rethought in order to maximise its benefits in a context of decreasing public funds but increased international competition (senior manager, HEA).

In contrast to the European perspective presented by staff working in key posts in the EC, senior policy officer 2 (HEA) emphasised that the OECD played a bigger role than the EU in influencing Irish policy-makers. Indeed three out of four participants from the HEA attributed to the OECD a bigger role than the EU (senior policy officers 1 and 2; member of the HEA) in influencing Irish policy-makers. The remaining interviewee (senior manager, HEA, p.8) was more ambivalent but certainly believed the OECD to be an influential actor. Senior policy officer 2 (HEA) was of the view that reforms were already in the pipeline because Irish policy-makers knew that the system needed to be reformed in the years building up to 2011, in part because the report of the OECD (2004) had already brought to the fore many of the issues currently being discussed:

> I think there's a general sense that, it comes up in future questions about not just the EU but in things like the OECD...I think we were very open to those sort of influences a number of years ago. So the EU documents didn't quite have as, I think they were noticed and they were relevant and we did, as I said we did know coming up to the Hunt strategy we needed to reform a system, so I think they were permeating into the consciousness. But the OECD review in 2004 would have been a much sharper perspective because they actually were invited to come in and give their assessments. So we asked for it ourselves.

Here we see a concrete example of a national policy-maker preferring to highlight the tangible influence of the OECD Review (2004) when asked about the influence of EU policy documents on HE. This pariticpant significantly downplays any EU influence, while also justifying having recourse to it only as so far as they were "relevant" to Ireland. This position seems to echo the first two interviewees from the HEA (senior policy officer 1 and senior

manager) who attributed to the EU a secondary role in HE. Senior policy officer 2 (HEA) gives us a valuable insight into the conviction of policy-makers that reform of the HE system was necessary which eventually led to the Hunt Report in early 2011.

5.5 Conclusion

There seems to either be a lack of awareness or a reluctance to admit EU influence from the part of national policy-makers. Nonetheless, within HEIs, EU influence was considered to be important on national policies, in particular from participants in the IoT sector, underlying the importance of the ESF and funding instruments in creating policy impact. This provided for a pragmatic recognition that EU funding confers influence and shapes national and institutional strategies. Whatever the greater official reticence about acknowledging direct or significant EU influence on Irish policy documents, a shared agenda incorporating EU priorities is manifest in recent Irish national policies.

Moreover, the reticence of several official interviewees about recognising potential EU influence on national policies refers mainly to the impact of EC Commission policy documents, which were perceived as much less important than shared economic objectives such as employability; collaboration through such mechanisms as the OMC and particularly the impact of EU funding, both through the ESF and more recently research funding through the previous research framework programmes and the new Horizon 2020 programme.

CHAPTER SIX

Findings from interviews on the binary model

This chapter aims to gather interviewees' perceptions on system structure, especially the binary division in the post-2000 Irish HE system and I will analyse whether one can still see a strong separation or whether convergence between HEIs missions and roles is breaking down the divide or at least blurring it to some extent.

Nearly all interviewees highlighted the small size of Ireland as a particular challenge for the funding of its HE system and/or the diversity of HEIs within. According to senior policy officer 1 (HEA), size has consequences for the level of diversity and specialisation required from each HEI:

> And the importance of diversity I would think is even more significant given the size of the country. We're a small country of five million people, with a small amount of institutions and it's important I think that they each specialise in areas of strength to serve some extent. So the diversity of mission is very genuine. And in Ireland when you think about it, a lot of countries, the UK, Scandinavian countries have moved in recent decades to refer to all higher education institutions as universities for instance and to try unitary systems and in our estimation, *the broadly binary nature of Irish higher education is a strength*, in terms of the diversity and its one that international reviewers and national policy-makers seek to preserve (emphasis added).

Yet the counterview to this position, supported by a majority of interviewees, is that the "broadly binary nature of Irish higher education" (senior policy officer 1, HEA) is compromised by several factors including what was referred to as "mission drift" by those interviewees who identified 'drift' in the Irish HE system. One of the aims of this thesis is to discover whether this constitutes "policy drift", "academic drift", "institutional drift" or "drift in curricular emphasis", as characterised in the literature review by Neave (1979, p.155). The reported "mission drift" identified manifested itself mostly through IoTs moving into areas

that would have traditionally been taken care of by the university sector and vice versa:

> Well my own view is that those distinct roles are increasingly being blurred and I think if you even look at more modern policies, though I'll come back to the particular question, if you look at opening the opportunity right for TUs, and holding that carrot in front of the IoTs, it's actually encouraging them to become more university like than they would otherwise have been (college officer 2, University 1).

These two contrasting personal opinions, the first from senior policy officer 1 (HEA) and the second from college officer 2 (University 1) are not unlike two opposite poles at each end of a complex debate. They stand for the two opposite views on the issue of Ireland's binary structure but it is necessary to understand there is a large perceived grey zone in between with different understandings and nuances.

One of the most nuanced opinions was given by a senior policy officer in IOTI, who believed that while one could certainly state the obvious examples of course offerings one finds at the extreme (i.e., Philosophy and Classics in universities and Culinary Arts in the IoTs), there are many instances where the binary breakdown is ambiguous:

> See, there's a rhetoric of diversity and there are examples of diversity, but there are also lots of areas where that breaks down. So it's ambiguous, I think. I mean I think it's undoubtedly ambiguous. And then there are areas then of overlap. I mean, you know, Business I think is an area where I think most higher education institutions, certainly all the universities, all the IoTs are offering degrees. To what extent there's a binary divide there, I'm not really clear on. I mean one element that would have been part of the IoTs that is increasingly becoming part of the universities, requirements are, some element of internship, on the job training...and I think arguably at policy level, European and globally, yes there is a sort of convergence happening anyway. So again it's a tricky one. You can also quote I suppose examples from the extreme. So Philosophy departments or Classics departments in UCD, Trinity at one end, and Culinary Arts in the IoTs. But there is an awful lot in between and everyone I think inhabits some of the middle ground (senior policy officer, IOTI).

6.1 Mission differentiation and the binary divide: perceptions of policy-makers

The binary divide, to be truly effective, requires strong mission differentiation between and within sectors. Without such differentiation, it loses its substance and is binary only in name.

Therefore, another central purpose of this research is to evaluate the importance attached to reasserting or preserving differentiation between and within sectors in the context of the broader rationalisation agenda for HE, both as an organic process stemming from the institutions and as a government policy to achieve its objectives for the Irish HE system as a whole. The findings associated with this section will focus first on whether differentiation in mission and role of HEIs is indeed a strategic priority at both governmental and institutional levels and second whether actual implementation is visible in the Irish HE landscape, or whether instead "mission drift" is threatening Ireland's binary divide.

> You do need differentiation and given the size of Ireland and given financial constraints, but I think more importantly given the size of the country, we need probably quite a small number of institutions who are elite institutions who are competing on an international basis, at the very top. That is not to say you have first rate and second rate. You just have institutions that are fit for purpose for what they are supposed to do. And I think that's lost in the discussion here in Ireland. There is a view that unless something is called a university, it probably can't be good (senior manager, Forfás).

At one end of a wide spectrum of opinion, a senior member of Forfás believed that the early 1970s was the first and last time Ireland's HE system was truly differentiated and binary with clearly distinct sectors. The original regional role of the RTCs was stressed, as well as its specific enterprise mandate:

> I think you would say that it was certainly differentiated in the past. The role and functions of RTCs when they were set up, which then became IoTs, were very specific. They had obviously both an enterprise mandate and a regional mandate and they were quite enterprise and business focused, whereas the university is more of an obviously Newman-type approach to higher education, so I think that distinction definitely existed (senior manager, Forfás).

Furthermore, the same interviewee made it clear that he/she believed the decrease or blur in mission differentiation was an undesirable development because institutional isomorphism or convergence is not a good thing for the system, at least from the perspective of an enterprise agency such as Forfás:

> In the past there was a clearly differentiated role, no question. RTCs, IoTs had a very defined purpose. They played in a space that was largely around 6 and 7 in the NFQ.

> That has been eroded over time and there has been a number of pressures that led to that. The extent to which that was driven by policy. It isn't. I don't think it is policy driven. And in fact from the perspective of an enterprise agency it's not necessarily a good thing either. You want differentiation and you want for these institutions to be doing what they're supposed to be doing. And we don't want them to all look the same (senior manager, Forfás).

This was reiterated by a senior official from IFUT who believed that mission differentiation between the vocational and university sectors had "blurred a lot", in particular when compared to when the RTCs were set up, and that the binary nature of the Irish HE system had been constantly converging toward a unitary system:

> I think it's blurred a lot, I think that the only time when you could say that there was a clear differentiation in terms of binary system was, when the regional technical colleges as they were then called, were first established, which from memory was 1970 or thereabouts. Then they introduced this concept of institute of technology to satisfy Waterford, as soon as Waterford got it, Cork had to have it, and when Cork had it, everybody got it. And now they are saying every IoT wants to be part of a technological university. *So the trajectory has been about a narrowing of from a binary into a unitary system*...So it's a good example only in a negative sense of what can happen with mission drift and lack of coherence (emphasis added, senior official, IFUT).

Another interviewee holding a senior management position in SFI offered a contrary view that institutional growth in the IoT sector was a natural and welcome development that was happening on a global scale. He/she believed that the aspiration for IoTs to become universities and to converge towards the university model was visible everywhere and was laudable in the sense that it was ambitious, and ambition is good. However, that needed to be put in balance with the importance of mission differentiation, because HE systems must provide and cater for a whole range of needs:

> Well I think it is always the case in all situations around the world that everybody wants to climb the so-called ladder or the gradient that they perceive is there, whether it is there or not, so almost all around the world institutes of technology want to aspire to be universities and some of them do it well. So Massachusetts Institute of Technology is one of the world's leading universities, it is called MIT; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology but I don't think that people would associate MIT in the same league as for example some of the IoTs in Ireland. So it is an absolute international phenomenon that people will always aspire to do bigger and better and greater and more stretching things, and that's good OK? Isn't it good that people want to better things? However, against that backdrop you need to look at how things are differentiated and that is to do with mission, it may also to be with focus, what subjects people focus on, etc. So I think this

> delicate balance between constraining people's natural ambitions along the lines I have just spoken about and making sure that the eco-system is well served with people providing across the whole range that's needed (senior manager, SFI).

Within Enterprise Ireland, a more nuanced view with regard to convergence or isomorphism was expressed by the interviewee who believed it was the possibility for redesignation as TU that was acting as an incentive for institutes to replicate the standards found in universities:

> There's definitely a blurring where some institutes of technology see themselves as technological universities, as you know from the HEA, recent policy strategy documents, there is now a route if you want for a institute of technology to become recognised as a technological university and certainly there is at least I would say a third to half of them are committed to going that route. And it's having an influence on all of them would be my impression (senior manager).

With regards to the possibility of redesignation as TU a senior manager in IFUT gave an even more alarming prediction that within five years of the establishing of the first TU, there would be no IoT outside of a TU, leading to the disappearance of the IoT sector as such.

In contrast to these four views from interviewees drawn from three state agencies responsible for research funding and IFUT, who did not believe the system was sufficiently differentiated along the binary model, two interviewees working for QQI (senior policy officers 1 and 2) were keen to emphasise the binary nature of the Irish HE system with two differentiated sectors:

> It is differentiated in the sense that if you look at the overall profile of higher education institutions, they are quite different. For instance, in IoTs staff has far fewer doctoral qualifications, the capacity of institutions is very different. There is an overlap between what both sectors are doing. However, if you stand back from it all they are different institutions (senior policy officer 1, QQI).

He/she believed that there were differences in the "overall profile of higher education institutions" in terms of key indicators such as the percentage of staff holding a PhD qualification. For instance, the percentage of full-time academic staff with a PhD qualification at CIT is 20 per cent as opposed to 66 per cent at UCC and compared to a national average of 75 per cent in all universities and associated colleges (HEA, December

2013, p.51). While he/she did admit that there was an overlap in what the two sectors were doing, this was not the same as saying they were becoming similar institutions.

However, senior policy officer 2 (QQI) did agree that, in the case of the NIHEs, drift had occurred because both the Dublin and Limerick institutions had quickly evolved into universities. Although these two institutions have specific characteristics, like stronger links with industry, they share a lot of the same aspirations as the "historic" universities:

> ....but the NIHEs, although they were intended to have a more applied mission and more multi-level mission in fact drifted rather quickly and rather swiftly into a more *standard university template*. So although there was still some differentiation, you can see some differentiation between DCU and Limerick from the traditional universities, historic universities, there is a lot of overlap in their aspirations, there are other factors which drive them to be somewhat differentiated, so stronger links with industry, probably less active research, although they have research they are less actively research engaged than Trinity or UCD (emphasis added, senior policy officer 2, QQI).

In contrast to perspectives of participants from research agencies, significant differences in key indicators (e.g., research funding, programme offerings, number of postgraduate students) between the sectors were highlighted by government officials in the DES and the HEA, supporting the views expressed by participants in QQI:

> The work that was done on the Strategy showed that there were significant differences between universities and institutes of technology; in programme offerings, for example, most of the research funding, particularly the SFI funding goes into the university sector, most of the postgraduate students are in the university sector, nearly all of the PhD students are in the university sector. So there you had significant differences. Where there is considerable overlap is at Level 8 in the NFQ, so the honours offerings of the institutions is where there was significant overlap. Because the IoTs were originally formed to provide sub-degree, Level 6 and Level 7 education" (policy officer 1, DES).

The key area of overlap identified here by the DES is at the honours bachelor degree level (i.e., Level 8). This might seem at odds with the seemingly clear distinction whereby "institutes of technology are dominant in Levels 6 and 7... Universities, on the other hand, generally focus on Level 8 at undergraduate level" drawn by the report on "system reconfiguration" (2013, p.10). The activities of HEIs are not as clear cut and defined as policy

documents imply they are.

The view of the DES is shared by a majority of interviewees from the HEA. It should be noted however that there was a lack of unanimity within the HEA on whether Ireland's HE is a good example of a clearly differentiated binary system. Three out of four participants did agree that there was some lack of clarity in the respective missions for universities and IoTs but not to the point of fundamentally changing the binary nature of the system. Nonetheless, these three participants shared the view of the DES and the QQI that there was, overall, sufficient distinction between the two sectors.

Within the HEA, at senior management level, it was felt that very distinct differences exist between the IoTs and the universities:

> If you spoke to my colleague who is Head of Policy, they have recently done... profiles of all of our, all of the institutions we fund. And they do it in, I'll describe this badly now, they do it as a kind of spider web. So if you're strong in that direction it pulls the way in that direction and if you're weaker...so, I think they give a very good sense of the way in which you can have diversity across the system...so what that shows is, it shows that in fact there is a very distinct difference between the IoTs and the universities currently, just in terms of those kinds of indicators. And then also within the university group and within the IoT group there are distinct differences between them (senior manager, HEA).

However, the same interviewee qualified his/her answer further by warning that growing institutional homogeneity needed to be halted, and that without some form of official intervention, blurring could occur:

> **LH: So you wouldn't agree with the statement that there is growing institutional homogeneity in Ireland?**
>
> Oh I would, I would accept it's growing, but I wouldn't, what I'm really trying to say is, it has happened and without something stopping it happening it is likely to happen more and more but it hasn't been overwhelming just yet, there are *still two very distinct sectors* if you look at the indicators for the sector. But certainly there is a tendency towards homogeneity in the sector with a lot of the institutions *trying to be all things to all people.* And if that increases year on year you will get very significant homogeneity (emphasis added, senior manager, HEA).

A senior policy officer 2 (HEA) was more emphatic about the distinctiveness of the two sectors, based on the "disciplinary mix" and the levels offered by the two sets of institutions, regardless of the increasing overlap at Level 8:

> It's pretty good actually despite what... you know the sort of blurring that has happened and the concerns that have happened... if you look at the big picture, I think there are some things that stand out. This is some of the work that the HEA has done in the last few years in profiling the system. So if you look at some important things here for example, in terms of the undergraduate portfolio. The universities do very little at Level 7 and very little below that. The institutes do far more. So if you want to have a Level 6 or 7, you go to an institute of technology essentially. And that's the way the system was designed and it still works. Now if you looked at a time analysis, this is declining and in the institutes Level 8 is increasing but still there is differentiation there. I think if you were to look at the disciplinary mix, so this is fairly high level, but the institutes are more in the sort of vocational areas, obviously the Humanities and Arts, there's a big difference between the institutes and the universities (senior policy officer 2, HEA).

This perception of a distinction between the two sectors was supported by another interviewee in the HEA who stated that although there is a lack of clarity on what the missions of the university and the IoT sectors should involve, undisputable factual evidence exists based again on key indicators that there is a visible divide, whether with regard to student numbers (undergraduate and/ or postgraduate) or research funding:

> Ok, I think it's not clear [the distinction between institutional missions] at all and I think in a kind of a modern I suppose 'knowledge based economy' if we are going to use that horrible phrase it's a little bit of a nonsense that's my opinion but if we actually look at what exists on the ground, you can see if you combine all of the institutes of technology and all their data in terms of student numbers, student type, programme type, research all of that, staff numbers, all of that together and you do the same with the universities, you see a big divide (member of the HEA).

Three out of four interviewees from the HEA, both interviewees in QQI and both interviewees from the Department believe Ireland still has a binary division with very distinct features marking out the two sectors, based on their interpretation of factual evidence and key indicators that are now readily available in the "Profiling Irish Higher Education" report (HEA, 2013). This is the official government position that permeated both through the interview stage and the document analysis.

However, there was a more nuanced, in-depth view within the HEA, although broadly speaking, the interviewee did believe that Ireland still had a binary system. Nonetheless, senior policy officer 1 was not convinced that the Irish HE system was sufficiently differentiated, and that the loss of mission differentiation had occurred particularly in the years between 2000 and 2008, which he/she attributed principally to the expansion of research activities in the IoT sector:

> No, you couldn't say it's clearly differentiated and the roles are insufficiently distinct. The profiles are blurring to some extent. There is evidence in recent years, well hold on I think in the last two years there has been a focus on distinctiveness and differentiation but I would say between, in the good times, between 2000 and 2008 there was a very considerable loss of differentiation in the system and that was apparent in the, I suppose in the expansion of research in the IoT sector. Now research is entirely appropriate in the IoT sector, but their focus on technology got diluted I think by a broader I think... everyone tried to pursue comprehensiveness in provision which leads to homogeneity and leads to mediocrity I think as well because the rise of Arts and Humanities in the IoT sector you know was a little bit inconsistent with the *regional economic development needs* I think in many cases. The move up the value chain as such, the determination to move into postgraduate and even PhD education, from all quarters undermines the differentiation (emphasis added).

Here we see that the "rise of Arts and Humanities" is of particular concern to senior policy officer 1 (HEA), because according to the latter this does not match the regional economic development needs in most cases.

Senior policy officer 2 (QQI) was keen to emphasise the "regional remits" as an attribute of the IoT sector:

> The other differentiator is around the regional remits so stronger, more articulated regional remits for the technological sector institutions, even though Irish HE is intensely regional, very very little outside catchment, draw, and only recently being softened by the internationalisation push which is still in most institutions a somewhat marginal activity, rather than core.

However, senior policy officer 1 (HEA) makes a direct link between the "regional economic development needs" and the course offerings in the IoTs that should match those needs, thereby couching the mission of IoTs in a largely utilitarian perspective. Without a clearer

definition of what the regional role/needs/context or remit means more precisely, it is open to interpretation from all sides. Notwithstanding, it is also noticeable that in a period of dwindling public resources, the economic needs of the region seem to trump the social needs of the regions according to senior policy officer 1 (HEA).

The blurring of the binary divide seems to have been a relatively recent phenomenon according to senior policy officer 1 (HEA), occurring between 2000 and 2008, due both to the financial largesse brought by the Celtic Tiger years and the institutions' "pursuit of comprehensiveness", through the expansion of course offerings. This reflects the senior manager's position that there has been a "tendency towards homogeneity in the sector with a lot of institutions trying to be all things to all people". The latter institutional objective of expanding course offerings was also identified as detrimental by senior manager (HEA). However, senior policy officer 1 (HEA) clearly identified the year 2008, coinciding with the global financial crisis, as the moment when differentiation suddenly reappeared on the agenda. When prodded further about the drivers behind this convergence, the interviewee felt that institutional homogenisation was a particular threat:

> I think, in good times, things tend to, homogenisation is a grave danger in times of increasing investment, because there isn't the same ruthless selection, there isn't the same sort of motivation for prioritisation of investment, and I suppose people, there probably isn't the same emphasis on strategic development in times where you're getting plus three or four or five per cent per annum and people are just thinking: 'Oh, where will I grow next?' within their own individual institutions. It's unfortunate we didn't have more of a system perspective when we had money (senior policy officer 1, HEA).

The lack of an overarching system perspective is an issue often brought to the fore by civil servants and policy-makers. The blurring of the binary divide is identified by this interviewee as occurring during periods of economic growth. Conversely, differentiation may be intensified when the need for "prioritisation of investment" becomes more acute, because of dwindling resources. Following the global financial crisis of 2008, there was a growing

financial emergency that led to a more stringent use of public resources. This context has provided justification and given legitimacy to reforms, including a renewed emphasis on mission differentiation that is explicitly included in the Hunt Report (Hunt et al., 2011, p.70). Policy officer 1 (DES) confirmed the strong impact the global financial crisis and the resulting deteriorating economic climate had in guiding the review of public service provision that includes HE:

> I started working on it in September 2008, I think there had been some preliminary work before then and it was finally published in January 2011. But there were very good questions that were being grappled with and there was by no means any consensus on how the system was going to move forward. But again this Strategy Group operated against the backdrop of an economy that was plummeting you know and I remember one member at one point saying you know "don't waste a good recession, don't waste a good opportunity", because things that would have been unthinkable to suggest in the good times suddenly weren't unthinkable anymore because the public service as a whole was really radically reviewing the way that it operated and in particular staff conditions, all of these things, very traditional things that had operated in the HE sector. It was like things were coming up for grabs again that you might not necessarily have had. So yes the financial crisis certainly impacted, you couldn't be operating in any area of government at that time without it being absolutely front and centre in everything that you did, but the reform process was certainly on a roll before that happened, it gave it a bit of a nudge.

The importance of the availability of funds was emphasised by a senior manager (IUA) who concurred with senior policy officer 1 (HEA) on the role played by the Celtic Tiger years and the abundance of funds in encouraging the expansion of course offerings in the institutes:

> And I think as well the other factor was, in times where there was plenty of money, students were going to IoTs expanding the courses that they offered, and they started to provide courses in areas which they wouldn't have provided traditionally, in fact they would have provided courses in areas which would have been traditionally done by universities. That was fine when there was a big system, and there was a lot of money but as time went on, after the economic recession, people were taking very clear decisions, it wasn't a sensible thing to do say Law and Politics in a small IoT, when you should really be picking a university which had a lot of background, a lot of research...and people were far more discriminating in terms of what they were doing, to where they were going (senior manager, IUA).

Participants working at senior level for bodies representing the interests of both the universities (IUA) and the IoTs (IOTI) believed that there were elements that pointed towards a less clearly differentiated binary system, but agreed that, broadly speaking, the binary

system was still a reality:

> It's not as differentiated as it would have been say 15-20 years ago by all means. It has changed dramatically over time, not least the fact, since 1980 you have two new universities, with Limerick and DCU (senior manager, IUA).

The latter participant believed the decrease in mission differentiation had occurred 15-20 years ago, earlier than the timeframe offered by senior policy officer 1 (HEA). The focus on these two 'new' universities deserves further investigation.

Both institutional participants in the IUA and IOTI characterised DCU and UL as the "new universities" (senior manager, IUA). Their status as universities since 1989 has implications in shaping the borders of the binary divide because according to a number of interviewees including senior policy manager (IOTI), they are, in some areas, closer to larger institutes than to some of the more established universities:

> But then, the newer universities like DCU and UL, I mean in some senses, in some areas, they are arguably more like IoTs than Trinity or UCD. And I think my take on it is, that what you see are institutions, individual institutions pitching for spaces, trying to define their own institutional mission. And if you look at it closely, if you look at strategic plans, they'll take elements from traditional higher education values and some elements from across the binary divide. And I think arguably at policy level, European and globally, yes there is a sort of convergence happening anyway. So again it's a tricky one. You can also quote I suppose examples from the extreme. So Philosophy departments or Classics departments in UCD, Trinity at one end, and Culinary Arts in the IoTs. But there is an awful lot in between and everyone I think inhabits some of the middle ground.

These two new universities were added to the existing five in 1989. By virtue of being fully integrated into the 'university club' and being a member of the IUA, they can fully influence what attributes and characteristics those members identify to and what characteristics and attributes those from the outside perceive to be of university status. If, as purported by senior policy manager (IOTI), they are in "some areas", arguably more like IoTs than TCD or UCD, then they may well have diluted the cohesion of a traditional university sector that was made up of five universities who can trace their roots back to the nineteenth century or earlier.

There is evidence that when DCU and the UL were upgraded to university status, the Irish university sector found itself not only considerably enlarged (five to seven institutions) but to some extent redefined. DCU and UL, because of their youth, brought in a new kind of "ethos" (senior administrator, University 1) that included closer links to industry and a focus on work placements.

Government policy with regards to promoting diversity was not considered by college officer 2, University 1 to have been particularly helpful in enabling for HEIs to cultivate their specific mission. On the contrary, according to this interviewee, it has led to a decrease in diversity:

> It's not clear to me that if you look at what policy has done in relation to institutions, it has allowed institutions to become considerably less diverse then they would have been. I'm thinking of, if you take the traditional universities, the *newer* universities ourselves and Limerick and more particularly the IoTs, they are less diversely focused now than they would have been 10 or 15 years ago, and even more so then they would have been 25 years ago (emphasis added).

A senior administrator in the same institution also felt there had been a decrease in diversity in the same timeframe and that in the case of DCU and UL this was particularly damaging because both institutions had from the start shared a different ethos and were more dynamic. He/ she argued this was because of their relative youth, coupled with their ability to attract new funds from industry because of their different ethos and closer partnership with industry and enterprise than their more established counterparts (senior administrator, University 1).

However, the view that HEIs are not converging to a single model and that the binary divide is still relevant was reaffirmed by another interviewee, this time in the DES:

> I think that institutions are ambitious, and I think that's completely inevitable and also desirable. So institutions, particularly you can see the larger institutes of technology get to a certain size. But what they're ambitious towards is greater recognition, greater esteem, all of those kinds of things that they feel coming from the context of the binary

> system that they haven't had, that they've always been perceived you know as second rate, or perceived in second level. So in that way yes, they're ambitious, but does that mean that they want to ape exactly what Trinity is doing, what UCD is doing? The evidence seems to show that isn't what they're doing, because the more successful ones don't look like, DIT doesn't look like UCD, its very very distinct in lots of different ways (policy officer 1).

This DES official did not believe that there was growing institutional homogeneity between IoTs and universities which was a view shared by the majority of interviewees in the HEA. He/she argued that institutional ambition (for greater status or recognition) should not be confused with institutional homogeneity. According to this participant, the context of an unequal binary system led those larger IoTs to consistently push for greater recognition and their growth did not involve deliberate aping of the more established universities (e.g., TCD, UCD). The participant was keen to stress that even the largest IoT; namely DIT, was still very distinct from a university.

At European level for instance, recognition as 'university' is increasingly available to IoTs because, according to a senior policy manager at the EUA, the latter non-governmental organisation changed its membership policy in 2008, opening up to non-university members, accepting HEIs that do not necessarily award doctorates, or are not allowed to award doctorates.

While DIT may not be aiming at aping a particular university such as UCD, as contended by policy officer 1 (DES), it is targeting technological university recognition, which is a position that does align itself with the official interviewees' perception that IoTs are trying to attract greater recognition and greater esteem. If this is the case then there is evidence to say that there is at least significant potential for convergence to occur, because, as implicitly indicated by a senior policy officer (EUA), if a strong research record is considered to be the characteristic synonym to university status, a *laissez passer* to integrate the 'university club',

then it is in the interests of the HEI concerned to focus on increasing its research portfolio. This in turn could be detrimental to institutes' teaching activities, in particular course offerings at Levels 6 and 7 that might be neglected in order to focus dwindling resources into research oriented activities thereby losing the distinctive mission IoTs were originally set up to deliver – this view was argued by a minority of interviewees including an official in TUI.

A senior policy manager in IOTI provided examples of clear differentiation and contrasted them to cases that disavowed the binary divide (i.e., Shannon) in what he/she categorized as an "undoubtedly ambiguous situation". This represented a third view on the question as to whether the binary model is still representative of the structure of the Irish HE system. Indeed, three distinct schools of thought emerged from the interviews; one broadly agreeing with the continuing existence of a "broadly speaking" (senior policy officer, HEA) binary model, one believing that the binary distinction has been almost completely eroded and one suggesting that elements of both binary and unitary systems are present simultaneously (senior policy manager, IOTI):

> Well, there are elements of it that are binary. For example, you know, a number of the institutes do provide education and training. They do some provision for the national apprenticeship. I mean the apprenticeship is clearly a vocationally oriented qualification, the apprentices do some phases of education on campus and then they do on-the-job training with firms, you know... There are other areas that the institutes work in again that none of the universities would really work in - Hospitality and Tourism. There are elements maybe in business that might go into that spirit, but you know, the institutes of technology, a number of them, seven of them have Tourism and Hospitality departments and they will do, you know, Culinary Arts. DIT as well are affiliated to IOTI, but part of the broader technology sector. They teach Cookery and those kind of things and there's a lot of skills-based training in that, and then they do more academic stuff on Business then around that.

Senior policy manager (IOTI) emphasised the type of vocational work done in the IoTs and differentiated it from the type of activities found in universities, for example Hospitality and Tourism to be found only in the IoT sector, including DIT, with the notable exception of Shannon.

However, and beyond this seemingly clear division based on course offerings in Hospitality and Tourism, the same interviewee also remarked upon the ambiguity of the binary divide and elements of a unified system, because there are also areas of overlap in the area of Business Studies for instance and the increasing popularity of work placements as a compulsory requirement towards completing a degree:

> See, there's a rhetoric of diversity and there are examples of diversity, but there are also lots of areas where that breaks down. So it's ambiguous, I think. I mean I think it's undoubtedly ambiguous. And then there are areas then of overlap. I mean, you know, Business I think is an area where I think most higher education institutions, certainly all the universities, all the IoTs are offering degrees. To what extent there's a binary divide there, I'm not really clear on. I mean one element that would have been part of the IoTs that is increasingly becoming part of the universities, requirements are, some element of internship, on-the-job training.

Business is not the only area singled out as one where blurring is occurring because of a lack of distinctiveness and overlap of course offerings in both sectors. The interviewee also questioned where the difference lies in the areas of Science, Technology and Engineering because in "many ways, that is the common ground" (senior policy officer, IOTI) between universities and IoTs. Therefore, the interviewee was of the opinion that while there were some binary elements in the Irish HE system, the latter had developed (because HE is not static) beyond what would be considered in the literature as a straightforward binary system. Instead, the Irish HE system revealed a more complex, diverse pattern, with significant differentiation in some areas (Hospitality and Tourism as an attribute of the IoT sector, with the notable exception of Shannon) but convergence in others (Business, Science, Technology and Engineering). The quote from IOTI also indicates some level of blurring, also sometimes referred to as "mission drift" by interviewees in terms of courses offered by the two sectors (e.g., Business) and internship opportunities. This has implications for because a lack of mission differentiation between the two sectors will translate in a less differentiated binary system of HE.

6.2 "Mission" drift in Irish higher education

Whether "academic" and/or "institutional drift" had occurred in Ireland and has undermined mission differentiation between HEIs on both sides of the binary divide was perhaps one of the most contentious questions asked during the interviews. The question got various and sometimes conflicting answers whether the interviewee belonged to the IoT sector, the university sector, a lobby group (e.g., IFUT, IOTI, IUA, TUI), the national government or the wider public sector.

A majority of officials and representatives of state agencies except for participants in the DES agreed that some "mission drift" had occurred, even though some interviewees were reticent to characterise it as such, preferring to refer to it as "mission evolution" (member of the HEA, HEA).

The position of the DES on whether or not mission drift had occurred was unusual as both interviewees emphasised the positive amount of mission differentiation between HEIs:

> But another reality is that we don't want to have, and haven't constructed, a set of institutions which are *identical* and *replicated* them in various sites. There are *significant differences* between the existing institutions but I think we would like to see more. And as part of the work we're doing on the strategic dialogue and performance frameworks in this area, a major part of that is around *mission differentiation, specialisation, building scale, reducing duplication, eliminating fragmentation* (emphasis added, senior manager, DES).

Here the interviewee underlined the key overarching objectives. Specialisation, reducing duplication, building scale and eliminating fragmentation all require significant differentiation between the mission, character and activity of institutions. Specialisation in key institutional strengths for instance may enhance differentiation. Reducing duplication

aims at pushing HEIs to collaborate and coordinate their course offerings. Through building scale and by eliminating fragmentation, the objective is to create larger and stronger Departments/Schools with a demonstrated track of excellence in research and teaching and in geographical areas where student demand is the greatest. However, the interviewee remarked that she would like to see "more differences" emerge between the various HEIs. In any case "significant differences" between HEIs were noted and relayed by another interviewee within the DES, to the point where neither interviewee agreed that mission drift had actually occurred in Ireland:

> What's happened is, then there was lots and lots of accusations of mission drift and all of the rest of it all flying around the place. The work that was done on the Strategy showed that, as (senior manager, DES) said, that there were significant differences between universities and IoTs (policy officer, DES).

According to the policy officer, factual evidence gathered during the work of the Strategy Group did not support the alleged reality of clear mission drift:

> I don't really, as I explained before when you actually look at it [mission drift] it's not as strong as people think it is. But that is, it's at that Level 8 of offerings where our concerns would be about. Too much duplication and all the rest of it (policy officer, DES).

Within government agencies charged with funding research, the perspective was more critical. A member of SFI reported that in his/her opinion, "mission drift" was a global phenomenon and Ireland was no exception to the trend:

> Absolutely and it's a reality everywhere else. Ireland is not an exception. I mean mission drift is inevitable so get used to it and plan for it and by the way if you don't have mission drift it is a hell of a big problem because it means people aren't ambitious. So although there are issues and problems that come with mission drift I personally think that's the good end of the problems to have. I think if everyone was complacent and say 'you know something we are just doing this and we have no aspiration to be any different', that would be terrible. Who the hell would want to go to an institute like that? I wouldn't (senior manager, SFI).

Similarly, a senior manager in Forfás identified "mission drift" in the Irish HE system:

> As I've said, there was definitely mission drift. I don't know now if it is being addressed.

> It's not being made worse by anything that's being done at the moment OK. I think the consolidation should help. The state has kind of held the line I suppose on universities and it hasn't redesignated IoTs as universities.

Concurring views with the senior manager in Forfás were shared by participants in both Enterprise Ireland and QQI.

Notwithstanding the DES view, various types of institutional development were identified by all four participants within the HEA. However, three of these interviewees were careful to give a nuanced picture of "mission drift", either characterised as such or as best explained as the result of another phenomenon:

> *So there has been some.* I think there has been a degree of duplication of programmes across the sector, there has definitely been some mission drift but I think there is a still a significant distinctiveness between the two sectors (emphasis added, senior manager, HEA).

> Well mission drift has been a phrase bandied about for quite a while, it's a very value-laden term, it's value-laden in the sense that there is a negative connotation associated with it and if we talk maybe, or we maybe frame it around the shifting requirements of regions in terms of how they grow then you would naturally come up with the conclusion that *of course institutions had to evolve with the requirements of the regions in which they are located* (emphasis added, member of the HEA).

> Yeah, I think *there's definitely a case to answer whether it is mission drift or not.* It's hard to get into the detail, sorry it's hard to be as black and white when you get into the details of individual cases (emphasis added, senior policy officer 2, HEA).

Interestingly, none of these three interviewees were able to give a definitive type of answer to whether "mission drift" was a reality in the Irish HE landscape but they indicated that while "mission drift" undoubtedly occurred, it was not sufficient to compromise the binary nature of the system. Other arguments to explain the growth of an institute were offered, for example, the need for institutions to "evolve with the requirements of the regions in which they are located" (member of the HEA). Another argument put forward was the vocational nature of Liberal Arts subjects such as Archaeology and History (senior policy officer 2, HEA, see Sligo case, pp.216-218). In the same vein as DES officials who stated that there were "significant differences" between HEIs, one interviewee revealed that although there

had unarguably been "some mission drift" (senior manager, HEA), the distinctiveness of the two sectors and the diversity of HEIs within the two sectors had been maintained.

"Mission drift" was identified in more definitive terms by the same staff member of the HEA, who did not believe that the missions of Irish HEIs were sufficiently distinct, when asked how he would characterise blurring within the system:

> Yes, that's mission drift. There was a kind of, a chase up the National Framework of Qualifications, I suppose the simplistic idea that 8 is bigger than 7 and 7 is bigger than 6. So the levels were like, they are hierarchical in terms of learning outcomes, but everyone wanted to move into postgraduate education (senior policy officer 1).

This interviewee considered that both funding incentives and pursuit of higher status (identified as the capacity to offer higher degree levels) influenced the move by IoTs up the national framework:

> Yes it's funding, but it's status as well. It's a sense of self-worth, even institutionally, but in a way that's kind of unfortunate, we were seeing on the statistics side, you'd see very small level 9 postgraduate provision and sometimes single digit numbers of PhD students and we'd be very concerned about the student experience in that kind of environment, because so much of the student experience in the research area is the interaction with peers and colleagues and other students and it's entirely unavailable in an isolated environment like that (senior policy officer 1, HEA).

The "chase up the National Framework of Qualifications" is particularly worrying for this senior policy analyst, not least due to the very small numbers of postgraduate students found in certain institutes. This reflects official concerns (also noted by senior manager, DES) about lack of critical mass and fragmentation of provision, expressed in the Hunt Report and the Report on "system reconfiguration" (2013, p.8).

All policy-makers within the DES and the HEA, except for senior policy officer 1 (HEA), either rejected the occurrence of "mission drift" within the Irish HE system or felt that even though one could argue it had happened to some extent, it had not significantly affected the

Irish binary system (senior manager, HEA). Drift can lead to convergence or isomorphism, and thus have negative consequences for the state of diversity present in a HE system. In the UK for instance, the growing competition between the polytechnics and the universities, that was characterised by the clear "institutional" and "academic" drift of the polytechnics, coupled with a stronger vocational orientation in the universities, ultimately led to the breakdown of the binary divide and was replaced with a university unified system (Kyvik, 2004, p.403).

When the NIHEs were upgraded to university status this reduced the number of different types of HEIs in Ireland to two (universities and RTCs) and eventually, what made these new universities distinct was to some extent ironed out by virtue of belonging to the university sector. Several interviewees identified this redesignation as "mission drift" or "mission development" (college officer 2, University 2) in Ireland. Senior policy officer 2 (QQI) concurred with this point and was of the opinion that these two institutions 'drifted' rapidly from a more applied focus into adopting the full "standard university template", hence referring to "institutional drift" because occurring at the level of the individual establishment through the reorganisation of course structure on academic lines (Neave, 1979, p.155). A senior manager in the HEA also identified 'drift' from both institutions, and in particular the UL, towards "what you might describe as a classic university" (senior manager, HEA) and so did college officer 2 (IoT3) who described both institutions as having been set up as TUs before rapidly evolving into more traditional universities. It could be argued that there has been some "institutional drift" (Neave, 1979) if one compares this evolution towards a "classic university" (senior manager, HEA) to the rationale behind the establishment of the Limerick College of Higher Education that was to offer a "new and increasingly important form of higher education of which the primary purpose is the application of scientific

knowledge and method" (HEA, 1969, p.9) that would be distinctively different in mission and role to a university. The HEA's original rationale (HEA, 1969, p.12) suggests that both NIHEs were conceptualised originally as 'technological universities', a vision/view endorsed by five interviewees (college officer 2; IoT3; college officer 2, IoT3; senior manager, HEA; member of the HEA; senior manager, IOTI).

Nonetheless, accepting these developments as "mission drift" is true only if we assume a static view of HE with no possibility for HEIs to grow organically. Education is inherently a dynamic process. Two college officers in University 2 and IoT3 and a senior administrator (University 1) felt strongly about this:

> So again it goes back to this concept, what mission drift means, is that you take a static view of organisations or systems and you say, you stay there for life. The reality of organisations, the reality of society and the reality of the needs we are facing, is that that's not possible (college officer 1, IoT3).

> Look, any institution is going to want to aspire to, is going to want to develop and change. I mean they are dynamic institutions, education is a dynamic, well you would hope, is a dynamic process, of course it is going to...I mean things also have to change to stay the same, in order to provide the same service. I mean if I went in and started teaching a class of five year olds in a way that I was taught when I was five, there would be a riot and properly so, because our understanding of pedagogy has changed massively over the past forty five years, you know. So what you call mission drift and what you call development, again it's, you know, who is deciding what's inappropriate and what isn't? I start smirking unhelpfully when I hear phrases like mission drift, because one person's mission drift is somebody else's development (college officer 2, University 2).

> If you take for example we have a Nursing School which we got about five or six years ago, if you said to the president here, why did you drift your mission to take on a Nursing School he would say: "actually it's the complete opposite, we took it on to increase our mission, because our mission is to expand our offerings and to be more inclusive and to upgrade the nursing profession", so he wouldn't even see it as mission drift (senior administrator, University 1).

Another way of describing 'drift' was given by college officer 1 (IoT3), who preferred to refer to the "organic development of institutions". Nonetheless, one could argue that this concern with definitions and interpretation is equivalent to a smokescreen attempting to conceal the issue of isomorphism and gradual convergence of HEIs. If one sticks to a textual

analysis of reports issued by the HEA, it is unquestionable that both NIHEs moved beyond their original foundational mission. However, that is not to say this is a bad or undesirable development, and it could be argued that it was necessary because of the "regional remit" of HEIs and the predominantly regional catchment of Irish HEIs mentioned by several interviewees (senior policy officer 2, QQI; college officers 1 and 2, University 1; senior administrator, University 1; member of the HEA), although University 2 set out its stall as a national institution (college officer 1, University 1). In any case, there was no legal restriction preventing RTCs or NIHEs from expanding their course offerings and what level of degrees they offered. This had been the intention of the members of the 1967 Steering Committee in the case of the RTCs since they were to be able to "be capable of continuing adaptation to social, economic and technological changes" (Steering Committee on Technical Education, 1967, p.11). Nonetheless, a senior administrator (University 1) argued that this amounted to a lack of leadership at the national level, hence to "policy drift" according to Neave (1979, p.155), and that if the IoTs had been given a clear and limited mission from the start, there would not be so much confusion as to what HEI can or cannot offer a degree course (see the case of Sligo IoT, pp.216-218).

The tension between regional needs and institutional remits is an important one, especially in light of the 'Humanities' debate. It shows the limitations of a binary divide when placed in the context of meeting regional needs which go beyond the economic and also a model being predicated on a traditional notion of the student i.e., geographically mobile and aged 18-22.

The findings suggest that a flexible view has been taken by authorities within the binary context. There is a tension here between enabling RTCs to adapt to their local and regional needs by ensuring that they are not too heavily restricted while also creating a coordinated

and coherent HE system thus reducing duplication. That tension highlights the limitations of the binary divide in the context of meeting regional needs that go beyond the purely economic. It is noticeable that a number of institutional interviewees viewed regional needs through a broad lens, focussing on societal rather than simple economic needs.

The findings suggest that in Ireland, priority has traditionally been given to the former, while it is only recently, post-2008, that emphasis has been given to creating a more coordinated and coherent approach (senior policy offer 1, HEA) of "interlocking entities" (senior manager, HEA). "Directed diversity" (Boland, HEA, 2011) requires strong leadership, centralised mechanisms such as the performance evaluation framework, as opposed to the previous haphazard, more bottom up organic development of HEIs that led to the doubling of undergraduate programmes from 508 in 1998 to 1,016 in 2008 (senior policy officer 1, HEA). Engineering and Italian were two subjects identified by several interviewees as areas that were at risk of being rationalised because many (often neighbouring) HEIs were offering those courses:

> In a Dublin context people look at this and they say this about Engineering, that you have a large Engineering school in UCD, you've got Engineering in Trinity, you have Engineering in DIT, you have Engineering in DCU, and then if we start drawing it well you got Engineering in Maynooth as well, you've got the institutes of technology, you've got Blanchardstown and Tallaght as well. In a small geographical area does it make sense? But, more than whether it's UCD and Trinity or ourselves and NUIM, nobody really wants to rationalise because rationalise means well we're going to lose competence in that area (college officer 2, University 1).

> I think what the government is trying to do is say well let's have a centre of excellence potentially in Athlone or something, Italian is the bug-bear, there's a few very small Italian departments throughout the country and they're really saying look this is ridiculous we should just have one good Italian place in the country (senior administrator, University 1).

A senior administrator in IoT3 opined that the government was going to crack down on duplication and start telling HEIs what they could or could not offer:

> I think colleges will be told: "No you can't all do Nursing, you can't all do Architecture, you can't all do Mechanical Engineering. We are going to centralise or specialise those in certain areas of the country based on supply and demand and those areas will become specialists". So I think the short answer is that they are going to try and drive out duplication or oversupply in the system and I think the economic crisis will be used, as they will say: "Look we can't afford this, we can't have five colleges doing the same thing when there is only enough students for two colleges".

There is definitely duplication in the Irish HE landscape with both universities and IoTs offering a wide spectrum of subjects with little or no coordination in course offerings between HEIs. This is sometimes viewed as symptomatic of a system that has lacked strong leadership and a holistic and coordinated vision for HE expansion and concurs with views expressed by senior administrator 1 (University 1) and a senior official (IFUT). However, since 2008 (as purported by senior policy officer 1, HEA), there is a strong move towards rationalising and reducing duplication as was evident from interviews conducted within the HEA (senior policy officers 1 and 2, senior manager) and the DES (policy officer 1; senior manager). In order to achieve this objective of a more coordinated and coherent system that nonetheless respects institutional autonomy, an approach that includes both top down and a bottom up dimensions is necessary, as suggested by senior policy officer 2 (HEA):

> So ideally you'd like to have institutions having a degree of flexibility and autonomy because they are much closer to the market and they can see what's being required. The trick is getting them to do that in such a way that doesn't just lead to a free for all and everyone doing everything that they want...Because that would lead to a waste of resources and poor quality outcomes over time...But still it goes back to some elements of capacity and capability and making sure you're doing what you're well suited to do.

6.3 Mission differentiation: perceptions of institutional participants

Participants drawn from institutional stakeholders and the HEIs themselves were more explicit in identifying what they broadly described as "mission drift". As was the case with participants from the DES, the HEA and funding research agencies, this terminology seemed to encapsulate all types of drift, including "policy" "institutional", "academic" and "drift in

curricular emphasis" (Neave, 1979, p.155). This held particularly true with participants in the university sector, exemplified by both college officers in University 1 and both senior academics in University 2:

> But I do think there is definitely a mission drift within the institute of technology sector, when they were originally conceived, they were regional technical colleges who were supposed to be providing technical training to support the region. But after a while, one of the things that we have lost there is, I don't think there are enough programmes that are officially recognised courses in that intermediate step between the end of secondary school and the degree level courses. Because most of the institutes of technology have actually, they have stopped doing sixes or they do very, very few and there is almost no sevens. And if they do offer a Level 7, they also offer a Level 8 (*example of both academic and institutional drift*, college officer 1, University 1).

> I would look at the IoTs and while they vehemently deny it, I would have thought yes, mission drift, their mission has drifted very considerably and they're drifting into areas where it's not clear to me that they either have capabilities or there is an efficient or an effective use of resources. So they're trying to do things that make them like a university. And I can understand that from the perspective of individual academics within those institutions. However, I don't think, coming back to your particular question, is it an example of a differentiated system? No it's not (*example of institutional drift*, college officer 2, University 1).

> They [the government] want to 'vocationalise the academies and they want to academize the vocationals'. And they are very sensitive to charges of elitism. I mean Ireland is very sensitive to charges of elitism. So when these colleges, you see these institutes say: "we want to be like universities", no one is going to really say to them, stay and know your place, what do you think you are, you are not a university (*example of policy drift*, senior academic 1, University 2).

> Sure, absolutely. There's no doubt about it, I mean certainly we see institutes of technology offering academic courses, Language, Law, things like that which I would have always seen as being a true universities' role. And as I mentioned at the start in terms of research increasingly becoming more applied, I can see, you know our university is going to be doing a lot more technical/applied research, some of which could or should be done in IoTs or technological universities. Now that doesn't mean that universities should only do basic research either, I'm not suggesting that, but certainly the lines are blurred and the diverse, the twin institution track is less defined, and the danger with technological universities is that they will converge even more (*example of academic drift and blurring of the traditional distinction around research*, senior academic 2, University 2).

Perhaps unexpectedly, because it is the sector the most often accused of having 'drifted', "mission drift" was also identified by a majority of interviewees working within the IoT sector itself, with the notable exception of interviewees in IoT3. Some interviewees disagreed with the concept of "mission drift" and the common understanding of what constituted an

institution's mission, primarily in the IoT sector (college officer 1, IoT1; college officer 1, IoT3; senior academic 1, IoT3; senior academic 1, IoT2) but also in the university sector (college officer 2, University 2; senior administrator 1, University 1). It should be noted that concerns with the concept and the definitions associated with 'drift' were particularly acute in IoT3 (college officer 1 and senior academic 1), which can be categorised as one of the larger institutes. A participant from IoT3 (college officer 2) opined that "mission drift" was a natural phenomenon because of both societal and economic needs:

> Oh mission drift happens naturally. The point is because society is evolving very rapidly and the needs of society and the demands of the citizen for education and the demands of industry, mission drift is a natural part of what's going to happen.

Indeed, three out of four participants from IoT3 were keen to place the mission of their institution within the context of regional needs/remit, with an emphasis on both societal and economic needs, and not primarily economic as interpreted by senior policy officer 1 (HEA). This understanding of institutional mission undermines the case for "mission drift". This was further demonstrated by senior academic 1 (IoT3) who believed it was about "competing missions" and that it depended on whether the mission of an institution should be broadly understood as serving regional needs (societal and economic) in which case one could not qualify the expansion of course offerings as "mission drift", or whether that mission should be restricted to focusing on vocational education in which case there had been "mission drift":

> I think this is where it depends on how you define that mission and I think it does come back to competing missions. If there is a mission to serve the needs of a region and a mission to provide access to higher education invariably that need is going to express itself in demand for a breadth of programmes that aren't available in the region including Arts and Humanities and Business to a certain extent. If you define the mission as being predominantly about vocational education and training apprentices then definitely the mission has drifted by a long way but if you define it as answering regional need then we're still on course so it's competing missions I think.

This concurs with earlier views expressed by senior academic 1 (IoT1) who expressed his/her

dismay at the narrow and vocational approach given to the Humanities in his/her institute. With regard to preventing "mission drift", college officer 2 (IoT3) concurred with a previous point made by a former President of the UL that in order to prevent "academic" and "institutional" drift, legislation should have been passed to restrict the mission of the original RTCs. However, doing so would have been challenged by HEIs in both sectors because universities were not willing to admit the growing number of students wishing to enter HE with lower qualifications, and yet from both a societal and economic perspective there was a very real demand to cater for these students and enhance educational opportunities while responding to industry needs:

> It's a very, very difficult issue, if you do not want to have mission drift then you have to impose certain rules on the two organisations which both of them will probably resist. So for instance mission drift might not have happened if the universities were forced to respond to the large numbers of people who wanted to do degrees but as far as they were concerned, their primary function was to support their research and academic excellence. So the point is if you ask a university something blunt which is are you willing to take in a 250 point student because there's a demand for more Engineering students the answer is no and they've said that because they say that's undermining the excellence of our programmes (college officer 2, IoT3).

Two out of the three college officers interviewed in the IoT sector (IoT1 and IoT3) rejected outright the concept of "mission drift" while college officer 1 (IoT2) did not characterise 'drift' as such but did consider that overlap in course offerings was a natural phenomenon which he did not see as problematic.

> It depends what you define by mission! Has IoT3s' mission drifted? HEA will tell us we have, although that discourse is actually kind of ending now and with the realisation of technological universities, I think that will be...that kind of discourse I think is going to disappear out of Irish higher education, would be my sense. Was it a mission drift that IoT3 stood up to the plate and created jobs for the region? Would you define that as mission drift? Is our mission not to serve our community (college officer 1, IoT3)?

> This is often mentioned, and I take it maybe I'd be in quite a minority on this, I don't believe in it at all, I don't. Anything we've done here, we've done consciously. We don't 'drift' into anything and I don't know any of my colleagues that are drifting, I think they are changing, they are consciously changing and I think they are consciously reassessing their mission, and repositioning in light of their regions' needs, in light of the national needs. If I'm to interpret the question, and I don't put this at your door...because it comes up all the time, you're inheriting a question. If one were to interpret it, has there

> been a blurring of some notional binary divide absolutely of course there has and going back to my dynamic point earlier on, I think that will go on being the case, but drift no (college officer 1, IoT1).

However, and concurring with college officer 1s' (IoT1) own admission, a majority of interviewees from within the IoT sector agreed there had been at least some "mission drift" (senior academics 1 and 2, IoT1; senior administrator, IoT1; senior administrator, IoT2; academic with elected role, IoT2; senior administrator, IoT3; college officer 2; IoT3).

Therefore, it seems that on the ground, the majority of institutional participants genuinely believe that "academic" and "institutional" drift have occurred, in contrast to the previously stated opinions relayed from the HEA and the DES. This has implications for the binary structure because, even from the perspective of two of those interviewees that rejected the concept of "mission drift", the dynamic nature of HE, or the "organic development of institutions" (college officer 1, IoT3) has led to a progressive blurring of the binary divide (college officer 1, IoT1). Since the mission of an IoT is considered by those the most closely associated with the strategic development of their respective institutes to be to serve both societal and economic needs of the region (college officers 1 and 2, IoT3; college officer 1, IoT1) then there will undoubtedly be "mission drift" for the other school of thought that believes the mission of the IoT sector should be primarily vocationally oriented. I would argue that whether or not there has been mission drift therefore depends on which school of thought you position yourself in. Analysis of more specific variables, such as course offerings and research, is required to ascertain the extent of convergence and 'institutional drift'.

6.4 Differentiation based on course offerings – Humanities in IoTs

Today many IoTs offer courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences, often with entire

faculties devoted to those areas. Senior policy officer 1 (HEA) stated that there was a "rise of Arts and Humanities in the IoT sector" and a senior manager in Forfás regretted the increasing homogeneity in course offerings, due partly to IoTs allegedly striving "to be like universities" which he/she was concerned could lead to a situation whereby "we wouldn't have institutions serving the needs of regions and particularly enterprise within those regions".

These statements must be pitched against the report that concluded "...the RTCs have themselves grown beyond what was originally conceived for them" (HEA, 1979, p.39). It is apparent from this early report that the growth and expansion in student numbers and course offerings in IoTs is not a new phenomenon and can be observed within only years of the creation of the original RTCs. This is one of the first recorded instances of 'academic drift' in the Irish context:

> There has been a tendency (sometimes referred to as 'Academic Drift') for colleges of this type to become more like the universities and other higher level institutions than was initially planned (HEA, 1979, p.39).

Here we see that academic drift is already singled out as a "tendency", which would imply that it is occurring in at least several institutions to the extent that it forms a visible pattern. The negative externality of such "tendency" is reduced access. Indeed, the report concludes from this that "the result can be that those for whom the colleges were actually planned find it increasingly difficult to enter because the provision of higher-level courses and an increase in demand have resulted in higher entrance qualifications" (HEA, 1979, p.39). Access is still a priority for the current government:

> We've gone for a system which facilitates as much access as possible. So in other words, we haven't plumped for an investment in one or two institutions to move them up the rankings. We've invested in a series of institutions right around the country, so again that geographic accessibility. We've put a lot of effort into getting a wide range of good quality courses offered to as many students as possible in a reasonable number of

geographical locations (senior manager, DES).

Although framed through a geographical perspective, making HE as accessible as possible to an ever wider group of students is still high on the agenda, and access to HE may be reduced by higher entrance requirements, a "move up the NFQ ladder" (senior policy officer 1, HEA) in course offerings, or lack of geographical proximity to a HEI.

Table 6.1 gives a brief outline of IoTs with a School of Humanities, as of 2013. All but three IoTs could claim to have a School, Faculty or Department of Humanities, often found in association with Business Studies.

Table 6.1

Name	Institute Opened	Department/School of Humanities	Departments within the School/Faculty
Athlone Institute of Technology	1970	School of Humanities	Humanities; Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure Studies
Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown	2000	No	
Institute of Technology, Carlow	1970	School of Business and Humanities	Business; Humanities; Sport, Media & Marketing
Cork Institute of Technology	1974	Faculty of Business and Humanities	Accounting & Information Systems; Applied Social Studies; Education & Development; Management & Enterprise; Marketing & International Business; Sport Leisure, & Childhood Studies; Tourism & Hospitality
Dublin Institute of Technology	1887; 1978; 1992	College of Arts & Tourism	Art Design & Printing; Culinary Arts & Food technology; Hospitality Management & Tourism; Languages, Law & Society; Media; Music & Drama

Dundalk Institute of Technology	1970	School of Business & Humanities	Business Studies; Management & Financial Studies; Humanities; Hospitality Studies
Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology	1997	Faculty of Enterprise & Humanities	Entrepreneurship; Humanities & Arts Management
Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology	1972	College of Tourism & Arts	Result of the Hotel School and the School of Humanities merging in 2012
Letterkenny Institute of Technology	1971	Department of Law & Humanities	
Limerick Institute of Technology	1993	School of Business & Humanities	Business Management; Finance & Professional Studies; Humanities
Institute of Technology, Sligo	1970	No (to be noted: the unusual appearance of Archaeology in the Department of Environmental Studies in the School of Science)	(to be noted: School of Engineering and Design includes course offerings in Creative Design, Fine Art and Performing Arts)
Institute of Technology, Tallaght	1992	No	
Institute of Technology, Tralee	1977	School of Business, Computing and Humanities	Creative Media & Information Technology; Computing, Business; Hotel, Culinary & Tourism
Waterford Institute of Technology	1970	School of Humanities	Applied Arts; Creative & Performing Arts; Languages, Tourism and Hospitality
Total: 14		11/14	

Table 6.1: Institutes of Technology (including DIT) with Departments/Schools of Humanities in 2013

Humanities originated within Business schools in the original RTCs (senior academic 1, IoT1; senior academic 1, IoT3). In IoT1 for instance:

> The school started in 2001, so that's one thing that you know, I suppose, *it was a very large business school and it was simply split to make Humanities* and I was living overseas and I came back and I just took this job. And basically my attempts to have a more genuine approach to the Humanities have signally failed (emphasis added, senior academic 1, IoT1).

This quote implies that Humanities course offerings are not really present in IoT1. It appears that Humanities Schools in the IoTs do not really incorporate a "genuine" (senior academic 1, IoT1) emphasis on Humanities subjects, perhaps because they still have a strong "vocational orientation" (senior academic 1, IoT3). Indeed, the latter participant echoed senior academic 1's (IoT1) opinion on the limited scope of Humanities in the IoT sector:

> So it's interesting to look across the IoT sector and you will see that Humanities exists in almost all of the IoTs but only in a few does it exist as a separate school [see Table 6.1]. In many cases it exists as a wing of a School of Business with mostly things like Social Care and those kind of vocational courses (senior academic 1, IoT3).

By stressing the regional, even local intake of the institutes (senior academic 1, IoT1), upholding a policy of equal access to HE in a "number of reasonable geographical locations" (senior manager, DES) would require allowing for opportunities to engage properly in all areas of study, including the Humanities, and not just the areas where the government has identified a need for more graduates such as the technical areas in the late 1960s, or indeed today the STEM subjects. At present, senior academic 1 (IoT1) is firmly of the opinion that on the basis of what he/she can observe in his/her institute, this is not the case. While there may be a declared policy towards geographical access to HE at government level, this does necessarily not translate into allowing for the provision of general courses in the Humanities in geographical areas that are only served by IoTs such as the Midlands or the North-East although IoT3, which is also the sole HEI in its region, has a stronger offering in the Humanities (see senior manager, DES, p.210).

While there are HEIs spread out evenly all over the country, which would seemingly imply that access to HE is available to all, this is too simplistic a view because some geographical

areas do not benefit from the opportunity of a general curriculum in the Humanities or "general type courses" for which there is a demand as suggested by senior academic 1 (IoT1). According to senior academic 1 (IoT1), there is no such provision in the Humanities in his/her institute:

> I think Humanities has absolutely a role, if you take the regional role of the IoTs. The fact is that people come to IoT1, students, kids come from mainly from the local area. If you look at any of the institutes it's going to be, the main counties where people come from are local. And they're coming mostly from people who have never been to third-level, whose parents have never been to third-level, and they are going to IoT1, because believe it or not, they think IoT1 is the only place. It's about cultural capital, it's about the understanding of what's available to them, and now additionally it's about cost... And that is absolutely the apogee of what they would aim for, believe it or not. And the kids, I see what the kids do. They come, and they don't know what they want to do. The vast majority of students, and I deal with students all the time, they don't know what they want to do, very few, OK there are some that want to do Sports and that's it, or want to do Design. But by and large the vast majority don't know, want to go to third-level, want to get a degree, my friend is doing this so I'll do this. And so they want general type courses.

In a country where interviewees were keen to emphasise that students have a tendency to "shop locally" (member of the HEA) when choosing their HEI (senior academic 1, IoT1; senior administrator, University 1; college officers 1 and 2, University 1; college officer 2, University 2) and as evidenced by the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) maps on the geographical catchment of Irish HEIs there is, at least in some places, a mismatch between what types of courses are available in Irish HEIs and the regional/ local demand from students. Senior academic 1 (IoT1) stressed the limited provision for Humanities in his/her Institute. He/she gave the example of his/her institute where there is basically only the choice between Design and Social Care (neither of which would be housed in a School of Humanities within a University). The interviewee was of the view that this lacuna was damaging to the purported regional remit of IoTs, because they do not cater for the aspirations of their catchment area, beyond that of the rather narrow scope of the Humanities (Social Care or Design) the institute engages with:

> There would be a demand for a general type Humanities course, and I believe places like IoT1 should be offering it, if you take the regional remit of the IoT, and there is a very strong argument for that because really the intake is regional (senior academic 1, IoT1).

Based on this evidence it appears that the title of "School of Humanities" in IoTs is misleading when compared to their university counterparts. This view was confirmed by an official in TUI, who was keen to stress that the real difference between course offerings in both sectors resided in the delivery. He/she was of the opinion that growing similarities were only superficial (i.e., course titles, increase in the range of programmes) and did not translate into altering the substance of the programmes in question (i.e., the delivery of the programme, its applied focus):

> I suppose the main difference is that the institutes' focus is on employment, whether that's to do with employment with the profession, technical grades, that's their main focus and has been their main focus so they've stayed true to that. I suppose it's just in the shape of that provision, and in the range of programmes offered that *they've become somewhat similar in terms of the names of the programmes* but if you go to a university and you go to an IoT and you see how a similar programme is delivered, it's delivered in a completely different way. The IoT sector, as I say it is smaller classes with much, much more applied focus and the theory follows it, whereas the university was traditionally theory heavy with small amount of applied practice. Now, I think those scales are being rebalanced and the universities are becoming more applied, or are introducing more applied components to their programmes in order to enhance the theoretical base of their programmes (emphasis added).

Moreover, the government's policy of geographical access has not been fully implemented throughout the country because there are still relatively large areas (North-East, Midlands) in the state that do not cater for all regional needs, such as potential student demand for a broader curriculum in the Humanities, identified as a possible need by senior academic 1 (IoT1) and senior academic 1 (IoT3). With regards to the Humanities, there is evidence that suggests that student choice is restricted unless they move to either Cork, the Greater Dublin Area, Galway or Limerick which clearly implies that geographical access is not provided for as comprehensively as implied by government officials (senior manager, DES).

With this in mind, the first hurdle resides in understanding what areas and disciplines are

understood to fall under the encompassing catchphrase of "the Humanities" and why I have argued that this appellation is misleading in the institute sector when compared to the Schools of Humanities that one might find in the university sector. It was noted by senior academic 1 (IoT1) that the scope of Humanities in his/her institute is "quite applied". The participant voiced a concern about the meaning of Humanities in the IoT sector:

> It has, it's still the biggest school with 1,200 full-time students, full-time, it's the biggest in full-time numbers and it does have a big Humanities school, but Humanities, it's quite applied, it's mainly people doing Social Care, Hospitality, Tourism, Leisure, Sport and Recreation, those kind of courses, Design. And, I don't know, I think that there's a lot of work to be done on what Humanities mean in the IoT sector. And I think that while there is a big Humanities school there isn't really if you like, they've been reducing Humanities subjects, German has been eliminated (senior academic 1, IoT1).

When one compares this to the course offerings of a School of Humanities in the university sector, the difference in subjects is stark. NUIG for instance has a School of Humanities that offers none of the above mentioned courses but instead comprises Departments of English, History, Irish Studies, Journalism, Old & Middle Irish and Philosophy. In TCD, the School of Histories and Humanities includes the Departments of Classics, History, History of Art and the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies. These Departments cover a broad range of disciplines such as Archaeology, Philosophy, Latin and Greek language and Literature, Classical, Medieval and Modern History, Art History, Architecture and Gender and Women's studies.

This suggests that IoTs moving into the apparently traditional Humanities domain actually represents less of a significant blurring of the boundaries between the two sectors and more of a development of their applied focus. The second hurdle consists in going deeper into the fabric of these Schools/Departments and understanding if there is a distinction between the "Humanities" courses offered in the IoT sector and the university sector based on this "applied focus" mentioned by the senior academic from IoT1.

6.4.1 Redefining the Humanities: the case of Sligo

With regards to the possibility for an institute to offer a traditional Humanities course with an applied focus, Sligo establishing a course in Archaeology is a case in point and was recalled by three interviewees in QQI, the HEA and IoT1. It is worth paying closer detail to what the interviewees thought about this, because it is revealing of their perceptions with regard to either the porosity or rigidity of the binary divide.

The contentiousness behind Sligo's request to offer a course in Archaeology was encapsulated during an interview with senior academic 1 (IoT1):

> I know for a fact some years ago, Sligo I think was introducing a degree in Archaeology and the government, the Department of Education called in Sligo and said basically: "No you can't do Archaeology, the country is producing too many archaeologists" and the person that was dealing with them told me, he said to them "that will be fine when you say the same to a university" (senior academic 1, IoT1).

Senior policy officer 2 (QQI) also referred to the Sligo case and framed it in terms of "mission drift", while emphasizing the vocational focus Sligo had ascertained it would include in the delivery of its programme. He/she found it very difficult to judge whether this was "mission drift", because of the identified need for archaeologists at the time, and because of the vocational focus of the course:

> There was a famous row back about ten years ago, at the height of the building boom, one of the things the building boom produced was a demand for archaeologists and Sligo institute of technology wanted to establish an Archaeology degree, so it said "it's entirely vocational, all we want is for people to get mud on their boots and go out in the fields and dig up stones and things". Now of course entirely opportunistic and we now have lots of unemployed archaeologists, but was it mission drift? Very hard to say that that was mission drift. There was a clearly identified local need and so on.

Senior policy officer 2 (HEA) expressed a different and more nuanced perspective as to the application process and its outcome for Sligo than senior academic 1 (IoT1):

> There's a fairly well known case in the system about eight years ago, Sligo IoT wanted to do a degree in Archaeology and there was outrage and shock as to why an IoT would be doing Archaeology, this is classic university stuff, classic liberal arts. This is understanding our history and our heritage, nothing to do with the world of the economy and so on. And whether they had plans or not, they were able to show very convincingly that at the time, which was a time of massive road development, road development was being hindered because you couldn't get archaeologists to say whether you can build a road or not. Because what are you building over? And it was actually significantly affecting the national transfer authority of the roads, road safety, whoever they were. So on the face of it, that was a crazy piece of mission drift and in reality actually they were able to make a fairly convincing argument, this was vocational training that they were supposed to be doing and they were meeting an absolutely identified skills need and you can get into that space quite significantly (senior policy officer 2, HEA).

The general perception that Archaeology is "classic Liberal Arts" which is itself singled out once again as "classic university stuff" led to a high degree of stupefaction in HE circles when Sligo decided it wanted to offer this subject. But Sligo was eventually given permission to offer the degree, even though at first glance, it had "nothing to do with the world of the economy and so on", which is strongly reminiscent of the kind of close ties expected to be forged between IoTs and their local/regional economy when they were first established. However, permission was granted in 2005 only when Sligo proved to the DES that the degree was essentially vocational training and included practical skills such as surveying and excavation. Hence approval to go ahead was only given once the case for an applied focus was demonstrated and as of September 2014 the institute offers taught courses in Applied Archaeology at levels 6 (Higher Certificate), 7 (BSc) and 8 (BSc Honours). It should be noted here that Archaeology in Sligo is to be found in the Department of Environmental Science in the School of Science and not in a School of Humanities. Significantly, while Sligo was allowed to offer a degree in Archaeology, it had to go through the process of demonstrating that the degree it proposed to provide had a distinct applied focus, thereby accommodating the binary concept of Ireland's HE system. Since this application to offer Archaeology was made to the DES eight years ago, in 2005, it is fair to say that the concern to keep a vocational focus on courses delivered by IoTs is not particularly new and that there

is evidence of the Department making sure that the substance of the binary divide (i.e., course offering and focus) is maintained.

This ambiguity with regards to the denomination of course offerings and/or Departments/Schools is visible throughout the IoT sector. Only two IoTs (AIT and WIT) have a School of Humanities named as such, independent of Business. Galway-Mayo IT (GMIT) used to have a School of Humanities until 2012 when it merged with the Hotel School to form the College of Tourism & Arts. College officer 2 (IoT3) explained his/her institute's increasing comprehensiveness on the basis that it was responding to the particular needs and demands of its region, which he/she contrasted to the needs of the South region that is already serviced by a multidisciplinary university (UCC), thereby naturally limiting a growth in the range of activities offered by CIT:

> We have a particular demands from our region to act in a particular way but CIT doesn't because UCC is there (college officer 2, IoT3).

6.4.2 The expansion of course offerings in the Institute sector

Interview transcripts revealed there was a perception amongst interviewees that there had traditionally been a different focus on different disciplines by institutions on separate sides of the binary divide, with the IoTs "traditionally" more focused on the "hard disciplines around Technology, Sciences and core Business subjects", whereas the universities were more engaged in the Arts:

> You can have a differentiation in terms of the disciplines that are encapsulated. OK, so traditionally the IoTs primarily focused on the hard disciplines around Technology, Sciences and core Business subjects and so on. Whereas universities typically obviously encapsulated the Arts and a broader range of disciplines so that's the type of differentiation and as I said we've seen the IoTs typically broaden out and there's a lot of different changes that have taken place in the universities' system around the Arts & Humanities (senior manager, Forfás).

This senior manager in Forfás was of the opinion that IoTs have expanded their course offerings, in particular in the Arts & Humanities, whereas this area would have traditionally been the domain of the universities. This was confirmed by a senior academic working in IoT1 who attributed this development in the distribution of disciplines between HEIs to the "blurring" occurring in course offerings between universities and IoTs:

> So there has been a blurring... Universities are doing courses that were formerly more the domain of the IoTs, IoTs are doing you know, some Fine Art courses, some Humanities programmes that were formerly the domain of the universities. So there has been definitely a blurring and they want to separate it again. And I suppose the Hunt Report, by not making any kind of statement at all, about what to do about cities where you have an IoT and a university, they didn't say "well they should get together" which would seem kind of, maybe a logical thing, they didn't do that, they want to keep the divide (senior academic 1, IoT1).

The interviewee also remarked that the "blurring" was not a development welcomed by government. He/she believed that the government was keen to re-establish a clear delineation between course offerings in the IoT sector and in the university sector. An example of this desire to keep both sets of HEIs separate was that there are no plans to bring universities and IoTs within a same city together.

A former President of the UL regretted the lack of legislation in prescribing a specific role and establishing legal boundaries in the types and levels of courses offered by the RTCs, because, according to the latter, such an omission impeded transfer opportunities for students from the RTCs to the NIHEs. Without rules regulating the types and levels of courses an RTC could offer, the latter could and did enter in direct competition with both NIHEs and universities by establishing its own degree programmes thereby retaining students:

> At the outset some of the RTCs offered the Technical Leaving Certificate, as well as third-level certificates and diplomas...all sub-degree level work when they were launched. The intention was that the NIHE in Limerick would be a transition institution; permitting a certain proportion of certificate and diplomas graduates to progress from the RTCs to degree level studies at the NIHEs. That didn't transpire. Why? Because if the

> head of a regional college devised a way whereby a student could transfer to NIHE Limerick to complete a degree the rationale for that regional college to establish its own degree programme diminished. So there was an absolute in-built discouragement in the system for collaboration between the regional colleges and the universities, or the regional colleges and the NIHEs (former President, UL).

This view was countered by a policy officer from the DES who believed it to be inappropriate to formally ascribe to IoTs a specific mission that would remain indefinitely static:

> And what you want to do is harness those strengths and channel them into improving and enhancing performance, but you don't particularly want to be slamming the door on institutional ambitions and saying: "No, get back in your box!" Because you do hear that narrative when people are talking about higher education, you know: "Shouldn't the IoTs just be made static, made into Level 6 and 7, we'll look after the Level 8" (policy officer, DES).

Interviewees within both the HEA and the DES were firm on this point, which underlines a government policy in favour of a flexible approach to the development of HEIs. Nonetheless, this flexibility is constricted to the binary framework since:

> Any attempt to develop a more coherent system of higher education in Ireland must, as a starting point, support and develop the mission differentiation that already exists, as reflected in the two broad sectors: the universities and the institutes of technology (HEA, 2013, p.9).

The former President of the UL gave the example of the USA to support his claim that legislation was necessary to prevent "academic creep, or academic drift" and to clearly define the roles and mission of the various institutions within the state systems:

> The United States encouraged collaboration when the community colleges were established. Legally, community colleges were not entitled to offer programmes at a higher level than associate degree. This constraint resulted in a healthy relationship between the community colleges and the universities in the US. It differentiated the US higher educational system. Just as primary school leadership feels no need to transform their schools into secondary schools, so the community colleges in the United States had a mission legally constrained and there was *no inbuilt incentive for academic creep, or academic drift.* The community colleges didn't attempt to become universities and healthy collaborative working relationships developed between the community colleges and the public universities...entirely different in Ireland (emphasis added, former President, UL).

The participant held the view that legislation delineating the activities and role of the different types of HEIs was the *sine qua non* to a "healthy and differentiated system". By

putting such legislation in place, community colleges were given a clear and limited space (the associate two year degree) in which to focus on. Without such limitations institutional ambition may lead to the community colleges attempting to become universities. In the Irish case, this lack of legislation has led to a consistent state of instability in the IoT sector, as remarked upon by a policy officer in the Department, because of a constant push from some larger institutes for higher status. According to this interviewee, initiating legislation from the start that specifically restricted RTCs would have prevented this and led to a healthier, more coordinated HE system with greater transfer opportunities for students. There is certainly some merit to this argument, since even a senior manager in the Department acknowledged that considerable energy has been spent by the management and leadership of IoTs in an effort to secure higher status, which is ultimately not an effective use of resources because that energy could be spent more effectively elsewhere:

> One of our aims is to bring some certainty and stability into the Irish higher education system. There has been a lot of energy expended in jostling for position and individual institutional status. If that energy were focused on teaching and learning and on managing the individual institutions that would be a good thing for Ireland. So part of our agenda is to complete this conversation, stabilize the system, and get the management and leadership to focus on their key priorities in a national context (senior manager, DES).

The former President of the UL also stressed how the American system facilitated effective transfer for students in the community colleges who successfully completed the associate degree there to do another two years in the state university and earn a full degree from the latter institution. The system of transfer is all the more effective in the USA because both types of institutions work closely together in order for the students coming out of the associate degree to be academically ready to make the transition and perform well in the state university. The same interviewee had stated his dismay at the situation in Ireland and the lack of incentives for the RTCs, the NIHEs and the universities to collaborate and enable students to successfully transfer from one degree level to another. Competition was the name of the

game and he believed that institutional leaders in the RTCs were not in favour of seeing their students transferring to the NIHEs in Limerick and Dublin in order to complete their certificate and/or diploma studies by an extra year or two synonymous to the award of a full degree (Level 8). It was not in these leaders' interest to see their students go somewhere else if their ambition was to make their RTC grow and ultimately offer their own degrees.

This view however was not shared by interviewees working within the government (DES) and the HEA. Senior policy officer 2 (HEA) believed that HEIs needed to be given flexibility in order to best respond to enterprise and industry needs. He/she made it clear that he/she did not believe the American, and in this case the Californian model that consists of a clearly delineated three tiered public system, with the research universities, the state universities and the community colleges, would have been appropriate to transplant to Ireland:

> There's the California model which is very, very straightforward. You've got your research universities, your comprehensive universities and then your community colleges and there are sort of boundaries stuck between them and you don't go beyond those boundaries no matter what happens. That's the way the state runs its system. But if you were to apply that law in Ireland say, not that it's a law, maybe it is a law actually? If you were to apply that say in Ireland in the 1970s, you'd have your institutes of technology, RTCs as they were then, and they would have done two year courses aimed at the economy, providing skills for employers and that's what we needed in terms of our industrial development. But these days, two year courses aren't terribly relevant as a launching point into the world of work. They can certainly help for people who are reskilling and they have some, they offer some creditability in the labour market. But by and large employers are looking for degrees, either ordinary degrees or honours degrees. So if we had said to our institutes, you cannot do anything more than two year courses, we would be probably hindering our economic development or industrial development. Now at some point that can go too far and you've loss of mission focus and so on but equally I think there's a danger of being too prescriptive in saying, you're in this box and you'll never get out of this box (senior policy officer 2, HEA).

Senior policy officer 2 brings into light an important concern for policy-makers; that HEIs remain attuned to the needs of employers and engage with enterprise/industry. This is a national priority found in the Hunt Report:

> A strong engagement between higher education and enterprise has the potential to play a vital role in enhancing Ireland's economic competiveness...In many cases, higher

> education institutions have developed close relations with business and industry. This is not universally the case and submissions from representatives of business and enterprise to the Strategy Group suggest that higher education institutions could be more dynamic and coherent in their approach to collaboration (HEA, 2011, p.75).

Some universities take engagement with enterprise and industry seriously. Certainly University 1 was proud to be able to claim that "75% of our students will either go out on industrial placement as part of their programme, or they will spend a year abroad. So there's a very strong tradition of saying OK, not all of what you learn is here, you have to learn somewhere else" (college officer 2, University 1).

In any case, senior policy officer 2 (HEA) makes an important point in ensuring that HEIs need to offer degrees that are relevant to the employment environment they are in and that while initially two year certificates and diplomas were in demand by industry back in the early days of the RTCs nowadays "two year courses aren't terribly relevant as a launching point into the world of work" (senior policy officer 2, HEA). Hence if the Irish government had legislated to the effect that RTCs would never be permitted to offer Level 8 degrees or other three to four year degrees they would have put their own graduates at a disadvantage on the job market.

6.4.3 The political agenda behind expansion of course offerings: the case of Shannon College

A participant concluded that there were essentially three factors driving "academic drift" in Ireland. According to a former President of the UL, the insidious consequences of a lack of legislation, natural institutional ambition and local politics has led to a gradual convergence of HEIs:

> As a result, these inbuilt forces have resulted in convergence between the regional

> colleges and the universities in a way that was never envisaged or planned. Since there was no *legal limit to the academic level of the regional colleges* then it was to be expected that the *ambition of internal leadership was to move to the highest academic level*; to develop postgraduate activities and use every device available to emulate the universities, while phasing out craft and sub-degree programmes. Internal pressures towards academic drift upwards were reinforced by external political pressures. Ireland's *strange electoral system*, results in national governance that tends to be more responsive to local pressure than rational national strategy. As a result the political system encouraged rather than discouraged regional college leadership towards upward academic drift. Local politicians would be likely to say to a college head "come on John, look, you shouldn't be doing that certificate/diploma stuff, we want more degrees, we want masters, we want doctorates, we want more research, forget about the craft and sub-degree work, we want to see our institute become a university....or something very like it (emphasis added, former President, UL).

The importance of local politics within HE is a factor taken on board by senior policy officer 2 (HEA) who admitted that some leeway must be given to allow for the growth of an IoT to best cater for "regional interests or regional needs". There is an admission, at least in part, that there are political interests supporting the development of a HEI that go beyond the standard concept and declared objective for greater diversity of mission between HEIs:

> There can be blurring and sometimes that's driven by, regional interests or regional needs. In particular a higher education institution in a region is an important entity for that region and there can be an understandable desire to see it develop and to see it grow and so therefore institutions are supported perhaps through the political system to change and develop, sometimes in a way that doesn't necessarily always go, align with that idea of diversity of mission and objectives (senior policy officer 2, HEA).

The importance of local politics in pushing for regional institutes to "behave like a university" was also highlighted by college officer 1 (University 1) who believed that the local community wanted their HEI to be like a university "and if the local politicians don't support that, they won't get voted in". This found an echo with a senior manager in the IUA who opined that it was unlikely that local politicians would support any plan to downgrade a local HEI or to make it in any way confined to a set of activities. On the contrary, according to the former president of the UL, local politicians would be encouraging the leadership of their local HEI to be ambitious and increase their course offerings while awarding higher degrees.

A concrete example of the political agenda behind decisions affecting the HE arena was given by a senior policy officer working for IOTI:

> But then just when you think there is clear blue water on some of this stuff, then in the reconfiguration, Shannon College is to be amalgamated with NUI Galway, and that came out of the HEA's reconfiguration on the basis of all the other elements of having a diverse system. Why would that go to NUI Galway? It beats me. That's where the politics sort of comes in, you know.

The fact that there is a proposal to fully incorporate Shannon College of Hotel Management (hereafter referred to as Shannon) into one of the seven universities (NUIG) does seem to defy the binary logic reaffirmed by the government that "formal mergers between institutes of technology and universities should not in general be considered" (HEA, 2011, p.99) as it is explained that this would dilute the diversity of the Irish HE system. Although Shannon is not an IoT, it delivers Level 8 courses in Hotel Management, an area of studies associated with the IoT sector and that is at present not offered by any university. A merger with a neighbouring IoT would have seemed a more natural alliance, fitting in neatly with the government's expressed objectives of creating coherence, critical mass (HEA, 2013, pp.5-8; senior policy officer 1, HEA), reducing duplication (senior manager, DES) and achieving a generally more "coordinated and coherent system of interconnecting, complementary higher education institutions, each with a clearly defined mission" (HEA, 2013, p.5). With these principles in mind, GMIT and its College of Tourism & Arts, which is the result of the merger of the School of Humanities and the Hotel School in September 2012, would appear to have been a more fitting partner. There seems to be no educational or even institutional rationale for the incorporation of Shannon as a college of NUIG. This is a reminder that the influences affecting the evolution of the HE system are diverse, complex and go beyond officially stated government policies, and also encompass history (senior academic 1, University 2), local loyalties and regional politics.

The report on "system reconfiguration" (2013) emphasises the historical *état de fait* whereby Shannon has "for long been integrated into the academic structures of NUI Galway" (p.22). This report underlined that this relationship between the two institutions has been managed "so as to protect and support the mission of Shannon as a distinctive type of college of management" and that closer cooperation can only be of benefit to Shannon, not least because of collaboration with NUIG Business School (HEA, 2013, pp.22-23). Shannon offers two Level 8 bachelor degrees, namely the Bachelor of Business Studies [BBS] in International Hotel Management and the Bachelor of Commerce [BComm] with NUI Diploma in International Hotel Management. The curriculum is the same until the final year, when BComm students transfer to NUIG and specialise in one business discipline, while their counterparts back in Shannon remain studying advanced Hotel Management modules and some general Business modules. Degrees are awarded by the National University of Ireland (NUI), of which NUIG is a constituent university and the closest to Shannon, geographically speaking. It seems like traditional alignments and indeed "politics" (senior policy officer, IOTI) played an overwhelming part in the proposal to incorporate the college into a university and not an IoT. Government did not want to disrupt the *status quo* and the particular status enjoyed by Shannon as a recognised college of the NUI, although this means NUIG will become the only Irish university to offer hotel management courses and will be in direct competition with IoTs, even a geographically neighbouring HEI such as GMIT, thus blurring the divide in course offerings between the university and IoT sectors. The proposed NUIG/Shannon integration appears to be a case of mission drift from the university side. By becoming an ever more comprehensive HEI, the merged institution will find it harder to define its mission and to situate itself within the new "system of interlocking institutions" (senior manager, HEA) the HEA is proposing to develop. The new institution will offer the kind of professional and vocational courses in hotel management one finds only in the IoT

sector. For instance, the neighbouring GMIT offers a four year (Level 8) BA in Hotel and Catering Management. To enable one institution in the university sector to be the awarding body for a degree that is in essence vocationally oriented (year two of both degrees consists of a twelve month professional placement in the hotel industry and at the end of the fourth year, students go on a nine month trainee management work placement) and is traditionally offered by the IoT sector is arguably detrimental to the binary model and has more to do with history and traditional relationships, notably Shannon's particular relationship with NUIG and its establishment in 1951, prior to the RTCs, than effective coordination. There is no evidence to suggest that Shannon's courses are less vocational and engage more with the Humanities and/or Social Sciences that could justify a university *rapprochement* as was the case in the reverse scenario where Sligo had to demonstrate its applied focus on Archaeology that made it compatible with the mission and purpose of the IoT sector.

This may contribute to increasing competition between the two sectors and prevent the government's objective of "creating a more coordinated and coherent system of interconnecting, complementary higher education institutions, each with a clearly defined mission" (HEA, 2013, p.5), while also satisfying universities' appetite to offer the broadest spectrum of subjects (senior administrator, University 1). The evidence indicates that the interests of a minority (Shannon and NUIG) trumped the overall system wide objectives of the HEA and the DES in this instance. However, it represents an exceptional development and does not by itself suggest an erosion of the binary divide.

6.5 Differentiation based on types of research

Research enjoys special status and prestige within a HEI, as exemplified by a senior policy officer (EUA) who stated that:

> So our main clientele I would say are still the universities but in 2008 we agreed that under certain circumstances if an institution which cannot award doctorates for legal reasons whatsoever, but nevertheless shows a strong involvement in research, a strong research record, that we would accept it as a member.

From this statement we can deduce that strong research is a key indicator of university status. What the broad term "research" refers to is important to further examine. One must first of all make a distinction between the type of research conducted in universities and IoTs, as reported by a senior academic 2, University 2:

> As I mentioned at the start in terms of research increasingly becoming more applied, I can see, you know our university [University 2] is going to be doing a lot more technical/ applied research, some of which could or should be done in IoTs or technological universities. Now that doesn't mean that universities should only do basic research either, I'm not suggesting that, but certainly the lines are blurred.

Indeed, this distinction is increasingly difficult to make because, as suggested by a senior policy officer in IOTI, the "outside world" is increasingly calling for more applied research and engagement with industry and enterprise to be conducted within all HEIs:

> LH: So where do they actually differ [universities versus IoTs]? Where is the difference?
>
> Well, one of them, the articulation is around sort of doing basic research and applied research, purpose-driven research, but increasingly the outside world is calling for more applied research and purpose-driven research and engagement with industry and entrepreneurship and innovation and all these things. And so no politician or policy-maker is going to say: "Well we're going to hand this area over to this set of institutions".

This move toward greater research activities in the Institute sector was confirmed in Ireland by a TUI official who stated that:

> The IoT sector then has also moved into research. In the IoT sector there are about 500 researchers compared to the university sector where there is 3,500 researchers. So they're moving into that area but whether it is the same type of research is a different thing. They're seeking to build capacity and they have done it quite successfully. For example the SFI Stroke lectureship awards, IT Tallaght, DIT and Sligo won these awards for the first time [in 2007], and 54 other awards that were given out to the universities, and they

> were research, high level research capacity building awards with substantial amount of funding to employ lead researchers. So the institutes are moving in that way. I suppose the main thing is, well, and the question is, what will be the difference between an institute and a university? Or is there a difference?

This statement was confirmed by facts. Indeed, under the SFI Stokes Professorship and Lectureship Programme, 67 new research posts, including 32 Professorships and 35 Lectureships were to be created in 2007. While universities received the lion's share of awards with a total of 53 awards, it is important to note that IT Tallaght (1), Dundalk IT (1), IT Sligo (1) and DIT (5) all received awards. This demonstrates that at least some IoTs are actively trying to build research capacity and that it is important for them to compete with universities in that area (http://www.djei.ie/press/2007/20071213.htm).

The reason for this focus on research is simple according to a senior manager in University 1. Higher research intensity will generate a higher ranking in any international ranking:

> I think research focus as well is another big issue there because if for example rankings are driven by the amount of citations you have, or the amount of research scholars you have, or PhD students, that's going to focus people's minds as well.

The importance and impact of rankings nationally was highlighted by senior academic 2, University 2:

> I know this country [Ireland] is quite concerned, and not necessarily obsessed by them [international university rankings], but whenever the rankings come out, two or three times a year from the various ranking companies, there's always a media interest, particularly when universities are going down rather than going up. And there is a concern there. And we need to make sure that we're represented somewhere in the top, reasonably high, top levels of those rankings.

As evidenced by the methodology of all major university rankings, research is a major indicator. In the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings, research output (under the indicator "Citations per faculty") is given a weighting of 20 per cent in calculating the overall ranking of a higher education institution (http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings-articles/world-university-rankings/qs-

world-university-rankings-methodology?page=1). In THE World University Rankings, "research: volume, income, reputation" is given an overall weighting of 30 per cent. The research category is made up of three indicators including a university's reputation for research excellence amongst its peers (18 per cent), university research income (six per cent) and the research environment indicator (six per cent) which looks at the research output of an institution scaled against staff numbers (http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2013-14/world-ranking/methodology). Furthermore, the "Citations: Research influence" indicator captures the number of times a university's published work is cited by academics worldwide. This indicator is also worth 30 per cent. Finally, in the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities the "Research Output" indicator is worth 40 per cent, and half of the weighting for the "Quality of Faculty" criterion is based on: "Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories" and worth 20 per cent (http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU-Methodology-2013.html). Therefore, the concerns over the weight given to research in university rankings expressed by the senior administrator (University 1) are well founded.

As presented in 6.1, the concern that mission differentiation between the two sectors was declining, and the views offered above that the types of research offered in both universities and IoTs are blurring was not shared by a majority of participants in the DES and the HEA:

> I think, no there certainly can be a sense of that, but going back to some of the high level data, there actually is fairly clear distinction between the sectors as a whole and that's important evidence to bear in mind and there will always be stuff 'at the margins' but the evidence I think will say that there is stuff 'at the margins' not in the masses and you wouldn't want to design policy responses to bits that's happening 'at the margins' and actually the system as a whole mightn't be going too badly wrong. You have to keep watching it of course and you have to be fairly sure of it and you have to have some sort of processes and systems to check it periodically. But I don't think that the evidence came out. We did this a year or two ago, and it showed that there was no growing homogeneity in the system (senior policy officer 2, HEA).

This view was reaffirmed by a member of the HEA who accepted that there was a degree of

"mission evolution" whereby institutions were primarily responding to the needs of their particular environment. However, and building on the above statement by senior policy officer 2 (HEA) that there is a "fairly clear distinction between sectors as whole" according to a member of the HEA, different institutions are doing quite different things, in terms of research for example:

> I think if you look at maybe Cork and Waterford as maybe examples of institutes of technology that have become much more research active the research is really quite different from what goes on in the more traditional universities, its more akin to the DCU, UL type model but again they are dealing with a very particular type of industrial enterprise requirement so for me *mission evolution* is a natural response to the broader context in which institutions are operating. I think it's good, it's healthy because it shows that institutions are not ivory towers, they are actually responding to the environment in which they are in. I think if the institutions stayed the same as they were 40 years ago, we would be in a bad place, equally I think there is no such thing as a traditional university anymore (emphasis added, member of the HEA).

The larger institutes, Cork and Waterford, are singled out here as being more research active, and in particular offering a different type of research from that found in universities. This matches comments made in the DES about certain institutes pushing for higher status, with Waterford and DIT explicitly singled out (policy officer 1). Revealingly, research carried out even in larger IoTs is characterized as being quite different from the type of research conducted in the traditional universities. This is a reference to the kind of basic, blue skies research happening in universities versus a more applied research focus in the IoTs:

> It still is, but I think it is becoming less, the divide is becoming smaller, from both directions, institutes of technology perhaps doing things that universities might have done in the past, and universities now being compelled to do things that perhaps institutes of technology would have done in the past. Research prioritisation in terms of, or research now supposedly being economically beneficial, being more applied research, one of the things that maybe you would have thought institutes of technology would have been doing in the past. So I think that divide is still there, it should still be maintained, but I think the borders are being eroded for sure (senior academic 2, University 2).

This parallels the previous discussion on the more applied focus of the Humanities in the IoT sector versus the more traditional slant of Humanities in the universities. While universities and institutes may be doing things that may at a first glance look similar, when one looks

beyond titles there is a difference in substance, in particular because both research and course offerings (in the Humanities) in the IoT sector tend to have a much more applied focus than their counterparts in the university sector.

6.6 Technological Universities

As shown in Table 6.1 (pp.210-211), IoTs have not only grown in size but also in their course offerings. They have broadened their original core mission to include subjects that have traditionally been offered by universities (senior manager, Forfás) even though the extent to which they offer Humanities courses is exaggerated because of their focus on "applied" Humanities, one that is rarely found in the universities except for DCU and the UL. The parallels between 'new universities' and IoTs was highlighted by college officer 2 (University 1):

> University 1 would have been distinct in being applied, we were also, Limerick has also this in terms of industrial placement, we were the first ones to do it on a really large scale of our students going out... 75% of our students will either go out on industrial placement as part of their programme or they will spend a year abroad (college officer 2, University 1).

Several interviewees both among government officials and institutional representatives stated that DCU and UL would have no trouble in being called TUs (member of the HEA; senior manager, HEA; senior policy officer, IOTI). Several interviewees, including a college officer in one of the post-1989 universities concurred with this analysis:

> UL is much more like, and DCU is much more like a technological university and they would have no difficulty being called such. So already despite the titles we put on things, we have very different types of institutions in the system (member of the HEA).

> DCU I think it's fair to say still has a lot of the elements that you could point towards a TU, I think Limerick less so. And that they have, inevitably drifted towards what you might describe as a classic university, particularly in terms of providing a very broad range of programmes from hard sciences to liberal arts to their students (senior manager, HEA).

> If you are actually talking about what is a technological university...to me DCU is. But it's now defined statutorily as a previously established university. But if you look at its mission and even what it's currently saying, it's all about the entrepreneurial university and all this... I mean in reality, you could argue that DCU should be the leader of the technological university sector. But it won't happen. And in the end it's all about status and so forth, rather than need. Now DCU will continue to act as it does, as a technological university but labelled, as previously established university. But when the technological universities are established, I think it will change the dynamic a little bit (senior policy manager, IOTI).

> My own feeling is that when the technological university becomes a reality, that you will probably find the old NIHEs, you might probably find universities like, Limerick and DCU, migrating into that space anyway. Even though at the moment they would resist it, because it's an unknown. But I mean, they are, they were set up to be technological universities, they went towards traditional universities because there was no other option, but, if you look at their ability to compete internationally as a traditional university, it's probably quite low (college officer 2, IoT3).

> It's very hard to know because once upon a time certainly DCU described itself, it would have told the world it was a technological university, and I suspect the University of Limerick would have done that as well. We would have been speaking a language that foreign institutions and foreign bodies would understand if we described ourselves as a technological university to distinguish ourselves from a full service, traditional university (college officer 2, University 1).

Yet it is DIT, in its proposed plan to merge with Blanchardstown IoT and Tallaght IoT, that is the most likely to achieve designation as TU first. It is to be followed by two other mergers expected to come to fruition in the South-West and the South-East. Ireland will then have an entire set of institutions that are either technological universities (DIT/Blanchardstown IoT/Tallght IoT; WIT/Carlow IoT; CIT/ Tralee IoT) or universities perceived as such (DCU; UL).

DIT was the same HEI identified by senior academic 1 (University 1) that saw itself "moving to university status over a long period of time, and so moving away if you like from the IoT arena", highlighting a more sceptical view of mission differentiation among senior institutional representatives. DIT's status amongst HEIs is more than confusing. DIT was the same HEI identified by college officer 1 (IoT3) as forming a "sector of its own", as defined by the Dublin Institute of Technology Act (1992). DIT's status amongst HEIs is more than

confusing. It is the only Irish institute that is a member of the European University Association (EUA), alongside the seven Irish universities and paradoxically, it is not a member of the IUA. It is also the only Irish institute that is a member of the International Association of Universities (IAU). Although not a full member of IOTI, DIT is affiliated to the organisation that represents the interests of the IoT sector (senior policy manager, IOTI). Through such diverse memberships (and lack of full membership with regard to IOTI), I would argue that a clear direction has been set by the leadership of DIT to promote a 'university image', at least abroad. The latter is cultivating an image that does not totally align itself with the IoT sector (by not being a full member of IOTI), while clearly trying to align itself with the 'university club' wherever it can, both at European and international level (EUA, IAU).

A senior manager in IUA was keen to emphasise that in his/her opinion DIT was the institution that fitted the TU profile the best:

> And I think it's a very good idea because if you look at other countries around Europe the TU in Germany has TU Munich, there's lots of them around, have been around for many many years, and have a distinct flavour in terms of what they do, they focus on science and engineering, as one would expect. When you look at our institutions, like DIT, they perfectly fit that bill.

The evidence therefore tends to point towards some convergence between parituclar HEIs that goes hand in hand with some institutions seeking greater recognition as suggested by some participants (policy officer 1, DES). DIT may not "look like UCD" (policy officer 1, DES) but it is increasingly looking like DCU or the UL and vice versa, because all three institutions were perceived by a number of participants as fulfilling the requirements of a TU. This supports the assertion that convergence is probably only peripheral, or at "the margins" (senior policy officer 2, HEA), involving specific institutions rather than a more consistent sectoral convergence.

Senior manager (IUA) admitted that DIT's research activity may not currently be on par with that of DCU, but once it is officially designated as a TU then it will assuredly get there:

> If you take DIT for example, if DIT becomes a technological university then the difference between DIT and say DCU and that is not, I mean DIT's research activity wouldn't be on the same scale, but it will get there, there's no doubt about that, it will expand, its moving to Grangegorman, it's going to have its own dedicated campus, and there's quite a significant amount of research going on in the institutes (senior manager, IUA).

By making such a comparison between the two institutions, the senior manager (IUA) implies that DCU and DIT are similar in many ways, and that once the research intensity of DIT increases it will effectively bring the two into the same playing field.

It is interesting to note that from the perspective of a senior policy manager in the IOTI, DCU is unequivocally classified as a TU and that even in the view of a senior manager in the IUA, who was understandably reticent to classify a member institution as a TU he/she expressed a feeling that if DIT is redesignated as TU it will have the means to catch up in terms of research activities with "say DCU and that" thereby reducing existing differences in intensity of research activities. Nonetheless, and while this certainly indicates a modification of the traditional binary divide, it is restricted to a single, fairly exceptional institution, and cannot be equated to increasing homogeneity or convergence between the two sectors, because convergence is limited in scope (in terms of the number of HEIs). It does not extend beyond the similarities noticed between the post-1989 universities and the larger institutes. It seems that if there is convergence, it is between those HEIs only, namely DCU and the UL and especially the former on the university side, and Cork, Waterford, and in particular DIT on the IoT side.

> The technological university will certainly move us beyond the binary model, but again the binary model is too simplistic, and to say there is some *"trinary"* model or whatever the word is, some three-way model would be too simplistic as well (emphasis added,

senior policy officer 1, HEA).

The move up the "ladder system" (senior policy officer 1, HEA; senior academic 1, IoT1), as identified by some interviewees, would continue, albeit within a different context. According to policy officer 1 (DES), it is entirely in the mission of an IoT to offer Level 8 degrees but this type of provision should not be made at the expense of Levels 6 and 7, and that the same should be true in the future TUs. This is because of two reasons: firstly, some students want Level 6 and 7 courses and access to these courses should not decrease, not least because the DES supports a policy of access (senior manager, DES). Secondly, an increase in course offerings at Level 8 may lead to duplication where consultation and coordination of programme offerings between HEIs (in particular in the same region) has not taken place. The Hunt Report makes it obvious that IoTs' remit should not focus on Levels 9 and 10, which could instead be taken up more effectively by the potential TUs. This projected role for the TUs, as both the continuation and the upscale of the IoTs was confirmed within the HEA:

> This is all about a focus on technology, a focus on enterprise, on economic activity. Which is very much the focus of the mission of IoTs currently, so it's important, this isn't about creating a whole new different kind of institution, it's about taking the IoT mission and bringing it wholesale into the university sector (senior manager, HEA).

The creation of TUs has the potential to have a profound effect on the traditional binary divide. This was acknowledged by the Strategy group under the heading: "The potential for redesignation as technological universities" where a footnote warns the reader that:

> There was not complete unanimity within the [Strategy] group on this issue. The counter-view expressed was that it would not solve the issue of further mission drift and could result in a third tier of institutions (Hunt et al., 2011, p.103).

The members of the Strategy group were therefore not unanimous in welcoming the creation of a new type of institution and dissenting voices were expressed. The fact that the creation of TUs would not solve the issue of "further mission drift" underlined that some level of mission drift was implicitly acknowledged by the Strategy group, although at interview level

this was rejected by three out four interviewees in the HEA and by both interviewees in the Department.

6.7 Moving beyond the traditional binary system?

The creation of a third type of institution, however similar in mission to the IoT sector, inevitably has significant implications for Ireland's system configuration, something that has been carefully taken into consideration by the government:

> We have been pondering that same question around what will the Landscape look like when you have universities, TUs, stand-alone IoTs, some aligned, some standing alone. So we have said that in the technological sector we don't want that to happen. We want the technological sector to work as a sector no matter what the status of the institutions is. So we have asked the leaders in that sector to think through and begin a dialogue internally, with themselves first and then with us around what the structure of that sector is going to look like in the longer term. So we are conscious that that is a challenge (senior manager, DES).

In other words the technological sector would comprise both the IoTs and the TUs. The binary system would in principle be essentially preserved with a somewhat more differentiated technological sector comprising two types of HEIs.

This view was not shared by several interviewees (senior manager, Enterprise Ireland; senior official, IFUT). Indeed, one interviewee believed that within five years of the establishment of the first TU, all remaining IoTs would be integrated or merged into one, because he/ she saw the TU concept as "the logical culmination of a drift that's already there" (senior official, IFUT). According to the same interviewee, the potential designation of TUs is just another example of the way the mission of HEIs is drifting towards a similar model, one that is more responsive to serving short term economic needs:

> You can see we had RTCs which were clearly differentiated from universities. They developed into IoTs, they are now developing into technological universities. And

> equally the universities are being called upon and are being persuaded and even forced by the funding model to be more responsive to short-term economics (senior official, IFUT).

Yet there is a clearly expressed desire by policy-makers to move "beyond a simplistic binary notion of a higher education system" (HEA, February 2012, p.5). This objective was reiterated by a senior manager in the HEA who highlighted the importance of a diverse set of HEIs, each with a clear and identifiable mission, the sum of which would best address the nations' needs:

> I don't know whether it will happen but what I would prefer in fact is to see just one system of higher education without it being binary or trinary is the word. And very much I think, what we're working for, is the idea of higher education institutions, each with a clearly identifiable mission, in terms of the kind of institution they are. So there would be some who would be very strongly focused say on research, there would be some that would be very strongly focused on technology and maybe regional engagement, there would be some focused upon lifelong learning and mature students. But there would be a range of institutions, let's say there would be, there are seven universities at the moment, let's say somewhere in the order of 14 to 16 institutions all of which would be on a par in terms of the way people look at them but they would be different kinds of institutions. So if you're a mature learner, X institution is the place to go, if you really want to get into biochemical research then you go to Y institution. So rather than having, sort of saying, it will be a binary system where you will have universities and IoTs or a trinary system where you have IoTs, TUs and universities, can we find a way in which we have a group of institutions with different missions, very clear missions, all adding up to the overall economic and social needs of Ireland, rather than trying to label things or put things into boxes (senior manager, HEA)?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this echoes the Hunt Report's appeal for a "coherent system, made up of diverse, responsive and sustainable institutions" that will be able to deliver on the ambitious goals set out in the Strategy. The stated objective is not so much to focus on labels such as "binary" or "trinary" but instead to have a wide set of distinct institutions with clearly identifiable missions, the sum of which can cater for both the social and economic needs of Ireland.

While there was agreement that the Irish HE system was historically binary as classified in the literature (Clancy, 1989; Harpur, 2010; Kyvik, 2004) there was clear divergence on whether the binary model has endured and on the level of convergence between the two

sectors. However, within the Department, the HEA and QQI the consensus among participants was that a modified binary system structure in Irish HE has been upheld with two distinct sectors. This view was reinforced even by the only voice in the HEA who clearly acknowledged both mission drift and institutional homogenisation (senior policy officer 1). Indeed, the latter nonetheless opined that regardless of increased mission drift and institutional homogenisation, the binary heritage was still a good starting point: "our binary origins (sic) is a good basis for diversity and we propose to preserve and strengthen the diversity". Nonetheless, all interviewees within the Department, the HEA and QQI believed clear mission differentiation to be crucial for maximising the full potential of the Irish HE system and identified differentiation as a key policy line to pursue, even though the concept of mission drift was largely dismissed (except in the case of senior policy officer 1, HEA).

However, outside of the DES and the HEA, in public agencies such as Enterprise Ireland, Forfás and SFI, the opinions expressed were far more critical, and participants identified either "blurring" between the two sectors because "institutes of technology see themselves essentially more like universities" (senior manager, Enterprise Ireland) or substantial decreasing differentiation in comparison to when the RTCs were established, which made the question as to whether the Irish system is still binary difficult to answer for a senior manager in Forfás, indicating that the binary nature of the system was not universally accepted. I would argue that, based on the evidence supplied, that changes occurring at the "margins" (senior policy officer 2, HEA) should not be generalized to entire sectors. So the drive for higher status that characterized both DIT and WIT's unsuccessful bids for university status does not imply a move to a unitary system and that both DCU and the UL's emphasis on work placements should not be understood as a push from the whole of the university sector towards a more vocational orientation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Institutional Differentiation – Findings from Interviews

This chapter focuses on differentiation within sectors, between the seven universities within the university sector, and between the 14 IoTs that constitute the IoT sector. Differentiation within sectors was a key finding extracted from a majority of interviews, and gave a more concise picture of the complexity of the Irish HE system than public policy documents such as the Hunt Report because the latter tend to address sectors as a whole. According to a majority of interviewees, there were several areas that supported their claim that a healthy amount of differentiation existed within sectors, based on institutional mission (7.2), research intensity (7.3) and on course offerings and the applied focus of courses (7.4). Nonetheless, it is important to note that there were several interviewees that did not see any significant amount of differentiation within sectors (senior manager, Forfás; senior official, IFUT) indicating once again that interviewees perceptions on the same issue can be conflicting. This limitation makes it difficult to offer definite conclusions that may fluctuate depending on the interviewee.

7.1 Differentiation within sectors: beyond the "bird's eye" perspective

While there was substantial divergence among interviewees with regard to the clarity of the binary divide, many interviewees were eager to point out that within sectors, there existed significant differences between HEIs concurring with the view expressed by senior manager (DES). Indeed, it is vital to understand that institutional differentiation may appear and analysis cannot be restricted to the system structure level (i.e., along the lines of the binary divide). This point was reiterated by all interviewees within the HEA, the DES and QQI:

> And then also within the university group and within the IoT group there are distinct differences between them (senior manager, HEA).

The analysis of the interview transcripts made it clear that differentiation is not limited to the macro-perspective and a "bird's eye" view of the binary system structure:

> Even now, there's huge differentiation internally within the university sector and within the IoT sector. So while the system is binary from the birds' eye perspective, from the worm side perspective there's enormous difference, so it's more of a spectrum (senior policy officer 1, HEA).

The binary structure can no longer be understood (if it ever was) as a framework consisting of two rigidly defined blocs made up of two distinct sets of identical institutions. This view was confirmed by college officer 1 (University 2) who did not believe that there existed only one model of institution for each sector, because such a "clear cut" division was artificial and did not reflect reality:

> Yeah, I think, I think you can't really just have one model for each. And I don't think it's as clear cut as the universities are all the same and the IoTs are all the same. There is differentiation within them. *University 2's mission would be still very different from a lot of the other Irish universities* (emphasis added).

This does not transpire from policy documents who tend to stick to a "birds' eye perspective" (senior policy officer 1, HEA) of the system and usually address the IoT or the university sector as a whole, indifferent to size, scale or research outputs of individual institutions, as evident from the Hunt Report:

> Universities should specialise in basic and applied research, and institutes of technology should concentrate more on applied research (HEA, 2011, p.70).

> The system in Ireland is relatively diverse – institutes of technology and universities each play different and complementary roles to meet the diverse need of students, society and the economy (HEA, 2011, p.98).

Notwithstanding this type of generalisation according to whether a HEI belongs to the IoT or to the university sector, many interviewees were keen to emphasise, often spontaneously, that within a same sector there were significant differences between HEIs and that such diversity

was being fostered by official policies. The DES felt strongly about this point:

> If what we're saying is we want a system with a very diverse set of institutions you're not going to end up with one model here in that sector and one model here in that sector, you're going to have diversity within that and in between those sectors so you can see there are significant differences between as you say the new universities, DCU and UL, particularly DCU I'd say yes and Trinity. They're hugely different institutions while both being in the university sector. So we'd be hoping to see, and you can see it even in the IoT sector, I suppose a good example in the IoT sector is Dún Laoghaire, who are very very different again to say the IoT in Blanchardstown. They're doing something very different in a very specialised niche area (policy officer 1, DES).

This was the official view presented by the DES (policy officer 1 and senior manager), according to which diversity was considered to be a given within both sectors. However, the senior manager added that although he/she thought there were significant differences between HEIs, from the Department's perspective "we would like to see more" thus implying that differentiation between HEIs is to be further encouraged and pursued. This was consistent with the view expressed by his/her counterpart in the HEA who advocated a system comprising of 14 to 16 highly differentiated but equally prestigious HEIs (senior manager, HEA). Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT) was used as an example of that diversity with regards to the IoT sector.

However, the views identifying differentiation within the sectors (policy officer 1, DES; senior manager, DES; senior manager, IUA; senior academic 1, IoT3) were not universal. With regards to the level of differentiation between the seven Irish universities just as a college officer 1 (University 1) found it difficult to see diversity within the IoT sector, a senior manager in IFUT disagreed with most participants by believing there were no tangible differences between the universities:

> But there is no real difference between one university and another and there's increasingly less and less difference between the universities and the IoTs (senior official, IFUT).

A senior manager in Forfás concurred with this analysis and believed that universities themselves suffered from growing institutional homogeneity because they are all comprehensive and do not specialise sufficiently in any particular way in an area of recognised strength:

> I suppose on the issue of growing institutional homogeneity it's important to say that universities are pretty homogeneous as well, they probably haven't differentiated themselves particularly in that they are all providing the breadth of experience, and that's partly what denotes a university of course, but the extent to which they have excelled in one area or another, I think there's scope for a bit more of that.

However, there is a majority view that differentiation occurs between institutions in each sector, even though both senior officials in IFUT and Forfás disagreed with this and pointed towards growing institutional homogenisation in both sectors.

The binary divide, established by creating a vocational higher education sector alongside the existing university sector is therefore only the starting point. More complex and refined differences between institutions exist within each sector. One cannot make such a clear cut division between HEIs as a superficial surface reading of the binary divide would suggest. Therefore, three main criteria were used to differentiate between HEIs within each sector; mission, research intensity and breadth of course offerings and/or applied focus.

7.2 Differentiation based on mission

Senior academic 1 (University 1) shared a similar view to policy officer 1 (DES) with regards to diversity within the IoT sector, based on the chosen mission, for instance the pursuit of research with the award of PhD degrees:

> For example here in University 1 there was a discussion about should IoTs be able to award PhDs? And that discussion was recognising that firstly there's a large diversity in the institutes, difference in scale, and in capacity and in centres of excellence.

However, college officer 1 (University 1) considered that diversity within the IoT sector was actually limited presenting IADT as an exception and not as an example of diversity (in contrast to policy officer 1, DES). He/she considered that IADT was the exception that proved the rule, something which the very name of this HEI would seem to indicate, although, as discussed previously one should be cautious about judging a HEI based on its legal title alone or the title it gives to a particular course:

> There is diversity, I would struggle a bit to see the diversity within the IoT sector, beyond IADT in Dún Laoghaire, which is Arts, it was formally an Art college and it calls itself something different, all the rest of them are institutes of technology, *this is the Institute of Art, Design and Technology*. So that one I think is quite different. But I don't know if there is a major diversity of mission say between IT Tralee and the one in Galway and Cork, Athlone...*You actually go into them they actually even look very similar*. But because they have this regional responsiveness as part of their goal, that means that they have to provide what the region said they need. And regions often need similar things. So they are a little bit different, I don't think those institutes of technology see their missions as national, they see them far more as regional (emphasis added).

The participant did not perceive major differences in mission between the other 13 IoTs, apart from IADT which by virtue of its name encapsulates a different dimension and mission to that of the IoTs. The participant's opinion on the lack of diversity within the institute sector was reinforced by their alleged physical and architectural similarities, which could be partly explained by the simultaneous establishment of nine RTCs in the early to mid-1970s. The same interviewee believed that similarities between the institutes are spurred by their regional remit. While institutes must remain responsive to their regional needs, "regions often need similar things". According to this interviewee, institutes are therefore confined to regional, not national needs and any differences that may appear between institutes are small and caused by particular regional needs, which would account for making institutes "a little bit different" from one another, but not to the point where one could speak of a "major diversity of mission".

However, with regard to the university sector, college officer 1 (University 1) identified greater diversity, at least between the "newer" universities (DCU/UL), Trinity and the NUI:

> They're *newer*, that's the reason. Yes, they did start off as NIHEs, so they had a certain ethos coming out of that. But also because they are newer, they are more flexible, they have a newer and a younger staff, and they are less and less tied to different types of traditions and ways of looking at things. So I think as a result they are a bit more flexible. So they are less wedded to have it done a particular way… Now you see I would say, Trinity in the end may become more different from the others just by virtue of not changing. So in some ways, it might be a good strategy for Trinity to hold on to certain types of very traditional ways of doing things, because then that might be a differentiation. But I would also say, I don't see huge differences between UCC, UCG and say UCD (emphasis added).

With regards to the university sector, college officer 1 (University 1) believed there were significant differences between the "newer" post-1989 universities (DCU, UL) and the more established universities. The interviewee believed this was because of the origins of DCU and the UL as NIHEs and the "certain ethos coming out of that". Their younger staff and their detachment from tradition enabled them to be more flexible and responsive to their environment, most notably industry and enterprise needs. These differences do not necessarily amount to differentiation in mission and academic activity. Yet the idea of differentiation between the "new" and "old" universities was endorsed in more specific terms by a senior representative in the IOTI:

> There will be differentiation but I mean there is differentiation between the new and the old universities. I mean I was an undergraduate in Galway, I did my PhD in Trinity, worked in DCU and I mean there are differences. There is a difference between DCU and Trinity. They both have their strengths and in a sense, I mean if you are actually talking about *what is a technological university, to me DCU is a technological university*. But it's now defined statutorily as a previously established university. But if you look at its mission and even what it's currently saying, it's all about the entrepreneurial university and all of this. They have set up a centre for family business. That's pure technological university (emphasis added, senior policy officer, IOTI).

If the age of an institution may give a clue to differentiation as indicated by these interviewees, then the perceived lack of differentiation within the IoT sector expressed by college officer 1 (University 1) may be attributed, at least partly, to the relatively young age of all IoTs, bar DIT who can trace its origins back to the late nineteenth century. However,

this view was not shared by senior policy officer 2 (QQI) who was keen to stress that there were differences, and not only between IADT and neighbouring IoTs, but also between all IoTs, while also concerned about how those differences would survive if the proposal for a TU of Dublin met the criteria set out by the HEA for redesignation: "Dún Laoghaire looks very different from Tallaght and Blanchardstown, and Tallaght and Blanchardstown are different in their own ways from each other, and that difference of course, how will that difference be sustained though when they are all part of DIT"? The same interviewee was keen to stress the differences in research intensity between IoTs (see section 7.2).

Within the university sector, college officer 1 (University 1) also remarked that he/she did not see any substantial differences "between UCC, UCG and say UCD." Interestingly, he/she does not include Maynooth in that group, even though it is legally speaking a constituent college of the NUI. The particular status of Maynooth was also picked up on by a member of the HEA who referred to it as a "liberal arts university" (member of the HEA) and senior academic 1 (IoT3) who grouped Irish universities into three different families, and placed Maynooth with Trinity, as opposed to the other grouping that including the three other constituent colleges of the NUI.

Indeed, an illuminating categorisation of Irish HEIs into various "families" was offered by senior academic 1 (IoT3). He/she concurred with the analysis of senior policy officers 1 and 2 (HEA), policy officer 1 (DES) and the senior policy manager in IOTI who identified significant differences between HEIs in both sectors. Unlike college officer 1, University 1, this interviewee also found distinct differences in the IoT sector. The latter interviewee identified four families in a broadly defined university sector (Trinity-Maynooth; UCD-NUIG-UCC; UL-DCU; colleges of education) and at least two in the IoT sector (WIT-CIT-

GMIT; Tralee-Athlone-Limerick), while placing DIT "outside of all categories". With at least seven families of HEIs the Irish HE system was deemed to have a healthy amount of systemic diversity, even without taking account of private providers:

> I think there is diversity. Diversity is visible across HE in a number of respects and one would leave out the private higher education providers, but they are part of the picture too I mean they do offer, places like Griffith college and Dublin Business School do offer a particular type of higher education but leaving those aside if you look at the state supported ones, the publicly funded higher education bodies there is actually incredible diversity. You have your traditional universities of which you would probably say straight away Trinity and Maynooth would be very very different, both of them with a very long tradition, then you have your NUI colleges again with different traditions and different expressions of that tradition but possibly closer to one another than they would be to Maynooth or Trinity. Maynooth is a very complicated case because it is a NUI college after all but I think its traditions are very different. I think you have the teacher training colleges and associated colleges which while nominally at least forming parts of UL and DCU are very different than even their parent university with very different traditions. Then you have UL and DCU which are operating in slightly different ways to each other but again broadly in the same family (senior academic 1, IoT3).

According to the interviewee, within the university sector, "different traditions" or ways of doing things provide tangible delineations between the families. The colleges of education, even though legally attached to universities (e.g., St Patrick's College Drumcondra is a college of DCU and Mary Immaculate College is college of the UL) were also singled out and separated from their parent universities" based on these "different traditions". However, it should be noted that although Maynooth was singled out by several interviewees (college officer 2, IoT3; member of the HEA; senior academic 1, IoT3) as somehow different from other NUI colleges, the association with Trinity was only offered by senior academic 1 (IoT3), and it is questionable as to whether members of both the academic and administrative staff of either institution would identity with each other:

> Now interesting enough, if you look at Maynooth and what Maynooth is doing, Maynooth has already stepped back slightly from being a research institute in the sense that, whether they published it or not, but they have a policy to be known much more as a teaching university, with greater emphasis on the Arts (college officer 2, IoT3).

The IoT sector also went through the same deconstruction based on "families" and on research intensity:

> Then you have the IoTs and within the IoTs, despite the efforts of the HEA to sort of say the IoT sector is more or less the same, and maybe despite the existence of bodies like the IOTI, actually within the IoTs there are two or three different families, certainly two (senior academic 1, IoT3).

Another aspect of the core mission of a HEI was identified by senior manager (IUA) and corroborated by participants from University 1 (senior administrator and college officer 2). With regard to the relationship with industry and community engagement, the post-1989 universities were identified as incorporating this as part of their core mission from the start:

> Limerick would have always had and maintains a very very strong relationship to industry and the local area, and indeed something else, they've always been very strong universities for local communities, for working with local communities as well, DCU in particular is the same as well. Now Trinity has done that as well, but it hasn't been one of the core activities of the university as it would have been, from day one DCU was certainly looking to trying to attract talented students from the local areas, like Ballymun and that, into DCU. So there is a differentiation (senior manager, IUA).

This interviewee was more specific about what kind of differences one may find between the new universities and the established ones, suggesting differentiation in terms of graduates, student intake and linkages with industry. Firstly, there is a difference in what the new universities "produce in terms of graduates and their approach". Secondly, the closer linkage with industry was a distinctive feature of DCU (and UL) and thirdly the focus on attracting students from the local community were identified as characteristics that differentiated both the UL and DCU from the other universities.

College officer 2 (University 1) offered a similar perspective about how University 1 differs from older, more established universities. He/she demonstrated this through what institutions choose to "do and how they approach it" and in particular in the case of University 1 its emphasis on the curriculum being closer to the needs of industry:

> That leaves the differentiation between institutions I think in what they do and how they approach it. So if I looked at say University 1, I would have said what makes University 1 distinct or differentiates it? Well we'd say, and I think it's true if you look

> at...graduation statistics for undergraduates, we're closer to the needs of industry then say is Trinity or UCD.

A senior administrator in University 1 also stressed the extent to which the young age of University 1 and its enterprise focus constituted markers of a distinct mission within the university sector, supporting the view of the two college officers (University 1):

> I can't speak too much for the other universities but here in University 1 we very clearly identified how we want to be different. First of all being young, but then this emphasis on being the 'University of Enterprise', so that all programmes are encouraged to bring an element of that, all students are given an opportunity to work with an enterprise or develop their own enterprise (senior administrator).

Participants from University 2 characterised their institution in a markedly different way. In contrast to participants from University 1, college officer 1 (University 2) did not identify industrial placement when answering the same question on what differentiation meant to him/her and his/her institution (question 3, Appendix 2), or indeed at any point within the scope of the interview. Instead, he/she preferred to emphasise his/her university as one with a "global presence" and with an international catchment going well beyond County Dublin and even Ireland, in contrast to what he/she described as other more regional focused universities. The interviewee also focused on the strong research orientation of his/her institution, where research and teaching were integrated following the Humboldtian tradition, in contrast to other universities who would be primarily focused on regional needs:

> We would see ourselves as, at the core mission of being education and research, research being very much a key part of the curriculum and then we would see ourselves as being, some universities are regional, we would see ourselves as being for the whole of Ireland, the 32 counties but also attracting students from around the world and very much having a global presence. And doing that through our education and our research. Whereas others would be more concerned with maybe the region or, with particular aspects of it rather than the whole focus. But I think there the good thing about it is that there is a space for these different kinds of mission within the overall structure (college officer 1, University 2).

College officer 2 in University 2 also concurred with his/her colleague on the importance of integrating research and teaching in the curriculum and was keen to emphasise his/her strong belief in "education for education's sake":

> I think the government at the minute is concerned with the economy first and foremost and I think that drives everything that they do. And I'm quite old fashioned about education for education's sake. And a good broad basic education which teaches people to think and teaches people to analyse and teaches people to do research and those sorts of things. And I think the government is more concerned with training programmes and that would be my honest response to that and for that reason, I think we are moving towards homogeneity rather than diversity. Because it seems to me that the government is interested in young people coming out of higher education ready for work place.

These contributions from college officers 1 and 2 (University 2) emphasise how important integrating the Humboldtian model of the European university in the mission of their university remains.

The testimony of both college officers in University 1 show a clear parallel with comments by other interviewees (college officer 1, IoT3; member of the HEA) underlining both former NIHEs' strength in offering industrial placements to a majority of their undergraduates. University 1 may certainly be differentiated from the traditional universities on the basis of its applied focus, its emphasis on industrial work placements and being closer to the needs of industry. There is a case to say, based on the evidence provided by college officers in both Universities 1 and 2, that the two institutions within the same sector are nonetheless clearly differentiated. When set against the priorities expressed by college officers in University 2, it would seem that at least in the case of University 1, their focus on delivering courses with an applied focus and including closer contact with industry through work placements makes this a hybrid institution reflecting key aspects of the education and training mission assigned to both NIHEs and RTCs in the late 1960s and concurs with statements made about University 1 being the TU *par excellence*.

7.3 Differentiation based on research intensity

Senior academic 1 (IoT3) pushed his analysis further as to why he/she considered the IoT sector to consist of at least two, even three "families", based on research intensity:

> And you could really differentiate the IoTs on the basis of research success and research activity. Waterford IT, Cork IT and to a certain extent GMIT operate at a sort of a reasonable level in research and then the smaller colleges like Carlow IT, Athlone to a certain extent, Tralee, Limerick aren't really operating in the research area at all or very much, so they differentiate themselves really in terms of, often also in terms of scale but particularly around the research agenda (senior academic, IoT3).

The interviewee distinguished institutes based on the level of "research success and research activity" in the different institutes. Based on such criteria, the interviewee was capable of differentiating between those IoTs that operate at "a sort of reasonable level in research" (WIT-CIT-GMIT) and those that are not engaging in the research arena "at all or very much" (AIT, IT Tralee, LIT). Statistics from the HEA (2013) certainly confirm relatively strong research activities for CIT and WIT and the lower research intensity of Tralee IT. However, the figures are inconclusive with regard to differentiating between AIT, GMIT and LIT, because each institute performs higher than another in at least one research activity. Scale of the institution is also another parameter mentioned by the interviewee, although the research agenda (if any) is of particular importance.

This perspective on the level of differentiation based on research activities and intensity between larger versus smaller institutes was similar to the view expressed by a senior manager (IUA) who believed that:

> But when you go to the IoT sector then, the differentiation between institutes, like say Waterford and DIT, and somewhere like Letterkenny or Tralee, is vast. If you look at for example in terms of research activity, it's tiny, you can count the number of PhDs in one hand. And in fact you have to be careful, because there was a report produced a few years ago, actually I think there's some recent data, there's some very good data from the HEA, ...which gives you a full breakdown of the activities of every institution, the numbers of undergraduates, postgraduates, PhDs, everything is in that, but what it shows, and the numbers in some institutions, PhDs, can be bloated by the fact that they're staff members or part-time PhDs, so they're not actual sort of PhD students per se, in the traditional sense. So when you look at the smaller IoTs their actual activity in research s

> tiny, it's very very small, so there you see a big distinction, plus the fact that the range of courses they offer is quite limited (senior manager, IUA).

This is an important contribution, in particular because it stems from a participant working within the university sector (IUA) and suggests significant differentiation between larger and smaller IoTs based on research intensity. This perception matches the hard data released by the HEA (December, 2013) which will be discussed in Chapter eight (see Table 4.1, p.130 and Table 8.3, p.268).

With regards to differentiating between universities, interviewee 2 from QQI spoke of a "spectrum" on which you can place the various institutions according to (once again) research intensity:

> There is differentiation within the two sectors and I think that's important, and that sort of was the gist of where the argument has been going for some time is that yes you've got a binary system but it's more nuanced that that. It's not black and white, there are shades of grey on both sides, if you like and the *spectrum*, and it is a spectrum in the sense that you can pretty much order them, is we have Trinity as being the most research intensive at one end, and becomes more so over the last twenty years, followed by UCD which is probably the most comprehensive, Cork, Galway, Maynooth, DCU, Limerick pretty much in the rank order of research intensity and then on the institute of technology side DIT as a bit of an outlier, bit of a stand-alone entity, head and shoulders above the rest of the institutes, and then coming after that probably Cork, Waterford and it trails off after that really and it becomes harder to differentiate (emphasis added, senior policy officer 2, QQI).

This parallels, in perhaps a less dogmatic way, the "seven families" theory exposed earlier by senior academic 1 (IoT3). It supports the idea that significant differentiation arises between institutions and not simply between sectors. The interviewee suggests an established spectrum of research intensive institutions from Trinity being "the most research intensive" to the UL as the less research intensive of the seven universities.

This participant also highlighted sharp differences between DCU/UL and most IoTs:

> That being said though, if you look at the types of graduates they're producing [DCU and UL], they're producing everybody up to Level 10, everybody up to PhD, there's quite a

> spectrum, but there's a good proportion of the students are PhD students, whereas if you were to go to the IoTs, then you have a much higher rate of diversity. First of all you have a diversity, because if you actually look at the numbers of PhD students that would come out of DIT and WIT, they are relatively small, compared to those of the universities. Then if you go within that sector, and even taking the two organisations, they are very much focused in the Science and Engineering side of teaching and learning and research as well, whereas DCU and UL would be broader in terms of their teaching and learning activities (senior manager, IUA).

Nonetheless, the same participant did also believe that once DIT achieves TU status, its research activity will become comparable to that of DCU and the UL.

Within the HEA, similar sentiments were expressed that whatever the blurring of the traditional binary divide between the two sectors observed in Chapter six, differentiated institutions existed and thrived within the same sector:

> If you look under the surface of that and you look at different institutions on both sides, you see that UL is as different from Trinity, as Sligo IT is different from Cork IT. So there is a lot of diversity within the system and institutions have naturally kind of grown up I think to develop their own way of delivering higher education within their own regional context but also depending on leadership, their own vision and it's not simply down to their heritage. So I would quite adamantly say there is not a clear [binary] differentiation but I think there are a lot of differentiated institutions within the higher Irish education system, which is a good thing. Maynooth is like a liberal arts university. UL is much more like, and DCU is much more like a technological university and they would have no difficulty being called such. So already, despite the titles we put on things, we have very different types of institutions in the system (member of the HEA).

Once again, the post-1989 university (in this case the UL) is contrasted to the older, in this case Ireland's first university (TCD). In the IoT sector Sligo is contrasted to a larger and more research intensive institute, one that is currently at the forefront of a merger proposal to become a TU (CIT). Although these are interesting examples, they are also extremes (i.e., the oldest university versus the second youngest, one of the largest IoTs versus one of the smallest). There seems to be less evidence to distinguish the middle group (e.g., institutions of the same size and age). According to this member of the HEA, the lack of "clear differentiation" at a binary level is compensated by a variety of "differentiated institutions within the higher Irish education system". All interviewees within the HEA agreed that there

was differentiation between institutions within the two sectors. This supports the idea that the HE system could be conceptualised as a "spectrum" (senior policy officer 2, QQI) of differentiated institutions.

With regard to the importance of research focus as a factor leading to differentiation between HEIs, a senior policy officer within the HEA also believed it was an important indicator of differentiation within the IoT sector. He/she also expressed his/her belief that the TU concept was a way to recognise and codify this difference, enabling for the larger, more research active institutions to stand out under a new denomination:

> Yeah, I suppose the point of having the TU concept or possibility was to recognise that the system is always evolving and that in the Institute sector particularly there is, there are different types of institutes that have emerged so you have some that have become very big, quite efficient, would have good reputation in teaching but also have begun to develop quite a strong reputation in very small niche areas of research. So [IoT3] might have talked to you about their TSSG [Telecommunications, Software and Systems Group] group when you were down there…they would be quite a strong player in that very small niche at a European level, they are drawing down European money (senior policy officer 2, HEA).

Regardless of the fact that there are notable differences in research intensity between the seven universities (senior policy officer 2, QQI; member of the HEA; HEA, December 2013) the two "newer" (college officers 1 and 2, University 1) universities still have a strong research record setting them apart from IoTs, and their research is more focused on specific niche areas, according to a senior manager (IUA):

> But at research level both universities would be very active, in research, both DCU and UL, again not in all disciplines, their areas would tend to focus on the Sciences and that, DCU is different because of its whole area of Communications and that, it's something which probably nobody else really does at the level it does. So there's diversity within the sector, number 1 (senior manager, IUA).

While the research intensity of both institutions is strong, it tends to focus on the Sciences and other related disciplines. There are other areas where each institution has differentiated itself and subsequently invested significant resources, such as the "whole area of

Communications" for DCU. This implies some degree of specialisation, and prioritisation of research investments at institutional level.

7.4 Differentiation based on course offerings and applied focus

The senior manager from IUA also remarked upon the significant diversity within the university sector, particularly contrasting TCD and the two post-1989 universities:

> It has changed dramatically over time, not least the fact, since 1989 you have two new universities, with Limerick and DCU, and even within and I think it's always important to remember that even within the university sector there is great diversity. I mean if you take Trinity and contrast it with UL in terms of what they do, they're very different types of universities in terms of what they produce in *terms of graduates* and their *applied approach*. They're similar but they are quite different (emphasis added, senior manager, IUA).

For example, the senior manager (IUA) was also able to expose differences between the two post-1989 universities at the level course offerings (programmatic diversity according to Stadtman, 1980, p.97) and course focus (whether business oriented or applied). The unique focus on European Studies at UL was singled out as an example differentiating the two universities at programme level, as well as the UL and DCU's "different slant" on for instance Modern Languages:

> Then again, there is the commonality in the sense, the commonality is the fact that they offer subjects across a wide range of disciplines. I mean Limerick are particularly focused on European Politics and that, so there is a broad range of disciplines there, but they wouldn't be into Languages let's say, Modern Languages, as much, they would be into Languages in DCU but more in a focused sense for Business. So there is a different slant on it (senior manager, IUA).

However, this was not to say that there are not many "commonalities" in the breadth of offerings of the two universities that cover a wide range of disciplines.

This "applied approach" (senior manager, IUA) was further refined by a college officer 1

(University 1):

> You could historically always almost put applied in front of any of our programmes. The kind of things we did, we did things in spaces that others didn't so when others ran a straight languages programme, we were running applied languages, so we had translation and interpretation as part of it rather than just doing French literature and German literature. We were the first to say something like Biotechnology, so pulling in Biology and Engineering (college officer 2, University 1).

This perspective highlights key aspects of differentiation between the post-1989 universities and the more established universities. In particular, college officer 2 (University 1) highlights significant differences in disciplinary offerings and subject combinations due to the more "applied" focus maintained by the new universities such as DCU. The industrial placement component is also highlighted as a distinctive part of University 1's programmes, with three quarters of students embarking on a work placement or going abroad as part of their undergraduate degree, reflecting once again much stronger, more formalised linkages with industry than in University 2.

To corroborate this point made by both college officers in University 1, senior administrator 1 (University 1) identified fostering distinctive "graduate attributes" as another key source of differentiation between universities, fostered by a more applied focus in the post-1989 universities:

> And then another thing that might have not come up so far in your findings is this idea of how you can differentiate with *graduate attributes*, and what we mean by that here is that when a person graduates from here they don't just graduate with a degree in Engineering, they graduate with a set of skills and attributes that they can bring with them, whatever they do, so they learn about and have demonstrable achievements in say for example public speaking, or project work, or team work, in particular in University 1 we have a great emphasis on training within the degree programme, what we call our INTRA [Integrated Training] programme, so you take a year and you go and work for an organisation. We find that, people come back, if they do that in third year, they come back completely different and they're ready for fourth year. So that's one thing, then later on we talk about this, this whole idea of what are universities for and I don't believe, even though I'm very practically oriented, I don't believe necessarily that universities are solely for preparing people for the workplace, it's about that learning, that growing process as well. So differentiation, I think they're trying to homogenize

> more, I think that we're all going to look more the same in 10 years' time (emphasis added, senior administrator, University 1).

However, the same interviewee also acknowledged another influence on course offerings and research activities. Indeed, some crucial factors that shape differentiation do not appear to be organic (i.e., originating from the institutions themselves) but originate instead from external sources such as government funding and rankings based on certain criteria:

> I think what shapes differentiation for universities, is what gets measured gets done, and it's funding availability, so if the government suddenly says OK you have 10% less this year to do what you do, so we might all look at our programmes and we might decide well actually we can't offer all those programmes so we might decide to get rid of Italian for example. So I think that's an influence, the availability of funding. I think research focus as well is another big issue there because if for example rankings are driven by the amount of citations you have, or the amount of research scholars you have, or PhD students, that's going to focus people's minds as well (senior administrator, University 1).

Senior administrator (University 1) acknowledged that top down policies affect universities in deciding what courses they offer. If funding decreases then universities need to rethink their course offerings. He/she shared the widespread perception that the measuring of research activities for each HEI was a way to differentiate, especially in the context of university rankings and their reliance on research inputs and/or outputs.

In any case, a senior manager in the IUA emphasised the difference between the "larger IoTs", namely Waterford, Cork and DIT and the other smaller institutes. He/she warned against generalising the developments that have occurred in those larger institutes and that have led them to operate as universities to the entire institute sector. Again DIT is in the unusual position of "effectively operating" in a similar sphere to some universities because of its broad range of subjects:

> Although it depends because if you take some larger IoTs, like Waterford and Cork, and in particular say Dublin, DIT, they are effectively operating as universities, certainly DIT, WIT less so because of its tighter range of subjects, but in terms of their activities they really do but if you try to broaden that across the sector then it's not the case (senior manager, IUA).

7.5 Summing up realities of institutional differentiation

The findings therefore indicate that a substantial majority of interviewees believe there is a high level of diversity within each sector and that diversity is defined much less by the binary divide than by more complex, fine-grained institutional differentiation. It was easier to find a consensus on whether there was differentiation within sectors (and the overall view was that there is) rather than between HEIs across the binary divide. However, the extent of that diversity is sometimes controversial. Within the university sector, most interviewees focused on the differences in mission, engagement with enterprise and course offerings between the new universities (DCU and UL) versus the NUI colleges and TCD, with Maynooth and TCD sometimes identified as a distinctive subset due to their history, pre-1908 origins, cultural traditions and original focus on the Arts and Humanities. Within the IoT sector, the exceptional status of DIT was highlighted by all interviewees who believed there was differentiation within sectors. Most participants did agree that there were notable differences, in particular in scale and research intensity, between the larger IoTs that were named (CIT, DIT and WIT) and the smaller, less research intensive ones.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Discussion

In this Discussion chapter, I will analyse the data collected in chapters 4-7. I will be assessing the perspective of interviewees against hard data provided by the HEA (2013) on the clarity of the binary HE system and the accuracy behind claims of "mission drift". Furthermore, I will gauge the extent of the common discourse between Irish and European policy-makers as emerged from key documents and interview transcripts and examine whether there is a distinct lack of awareness of EU policies and/or tools in HE at the Irish level.

8.1 Looking beyond the binary divide

Based on documentary evidence and interviewees' perceptions the conceptualisation of the Irish HE system as binary (at least in the sense of the very well established German binary system) appears to be oversimplified for three reasons. Firstly, a majority of interviewees (although not most participants from the Department, the HEA and QQI) clearly identified "mission drift" in the Irish HE system. Secondly, several interviewees found it difficult to identify a clear binary divide or to establish Ireland as a prime example of a clearly differentiated HE system. Finally, several policy-makers stressed the fact that the "old fashioned binary system" (policy officer 1, DES) and how it was defined back in the 1970s was not necessarily what suited the current environment including employer and students' needs, and that labels such as "binary" or even "trinary" (senior manager, HEA) were unhelpful categorisations. Instead, as argued by a senior manager in the HEA, the objective should be a smaller number of differentiated HEIs (potentially reduced from 39 to "14 to 16"), on "par in terms of the way people look at them" and each with a "clearly identifiable

mission, in terms of the kind of institution they are", the sum of which would cater for the "overall economic and social needs of Ireland" (senior manager, HEA). This concurs with the opinion given by policy officer 1 (DES) that the binary context has led some of the larger institutes to be ambitious and to push for "greater recognition, greater esteem", because of a generalised feeling of being perceived as second rate to the universities.

8.2 A comparative outlook on the evolution of binary systems: Germany and the UK

Teichler (1996) argues through a case study of the German "two-type structure" (p.117) that the latter country's binary system is stable and ultimately sustainable because of the distinctiveness of the universities from the *Fachhochschulen*. This distinctiveness was much less apparent in the British case, because the universities did not differ systematically from the polytechnics in several respects, such as their formal entry requirements, the duration of study and the type of degree awarded. Indeed, Teichler argues that in the polytechnics, only the "educational thrust" was different to that of the universities, in terms of it being more vocational and applied, which was ultimately not enough to maintain a distinctive polytechnic sector. The "educational thrust" of the IoTs was brought up by several interviewees, including an official in TUI, who explained that whatever the similarities in the names of the courses offered in both sectors, the delivery of courses in the IoTs was done in a completely different way, with much more of an applied focus and taught in smaller classes. This suggests that there is indeed a different "educational thrust" in the IoT sector, at least generally speaking. However, a senior academic working in the IoT sector was more critical of what was happening on the ground and opined that, while this had been the case initially, with the establishment of the RTCs, this specific "educational thrust" was being diluted by an increasing number of courses without the opportunity for work placements, in contrast to a

growing number of university courses offering them, by a trend for "very big" classes and by IoTs simply "phasing out Level 6" and going for "Level 7 as an entry level" (senior academic 1, IoT1). The "shrinking of the provision" at Level 6 was also identified by senior policy officer 1 (HEA) as a particular concern to the HEA and the Hunt Report makes direct reference to serious challenges caused by the "fall-off in recruitment to apprenticeship programmes in the past three years" (Hunt Report, 2011, p.49), because the apprenticeship model was a key employer-led scheme that addressed the skills needs in the regional economy and presented the opportunity for educational mobility for under-represented social groups in HE. This decline in provision for apprenticeship at IoT level was also acknowledged by the official in TUI who conceded it was initially caused by the global financial crisis but made worse by Institutes taking this opportunity to distance themselves from that kind of "basic mission" by cutting their links with apprenticeship and move over to "just developing an undergraduate, an honours degree and postgraduate student population" therefore implicitly neglecting Levels 6 and 7. This trend is characteristic of "academic drift" because it places emphasis upon advanced work at higher levels on the NFQ, as well as "drift in curricular emphasis" because it occurs at the level of the curricular content in the IoTs and manifests itself by a "general reduction in emphasis attached to practical work" (Neave, 1979, p.155). Therefore, the "educational thrust" of the IoTs is not as distinct from the universities as suggested by an official in TUI, among other participants representing staff or institutions in the sector (senior academic 1, IoT2).

Further to Teichler's (1996) argument on the distinctiveness between the *Fachhochsculen* and the universities, the degrees awarded by the former, although considered to be of Bachelor's level, because of the vocational nature of the degree were considered to be terminal and did not allow for automatic progression to masters or PhD degrees offered in the

universities. This was not the case in France where the two-year programmes offered by the IUTs matched the first cycle of university study, and progression into the university was automatic on request. Therefore, the "structure of the degree pattern in the second type of higher education is not articulated with that in the universities nor does it allow for automatic progression to higher degree studies" (Teichler, 1996, pp.134-135). The success of the *Fachhochsculen* was also due to their specific "educational thrust" which was respected and appreciated by prospective employers. Another reason explaining the high status they enjoy is because the academic staff within the *Fachhochsculen* are expected to hold a PhD qualification, which could suggest that this demanding prerequisite might lead to institutional drift in the longer run. Teichler (1996) agrees that the "temptation of strengthening their position through imitating universities" (p.135) is there, and that many of the initiatives put forward in the 1990s for the improvement of the *Fachhochsculen*, such as the increase of junior academic positions or the improved opportunities for applied research, could be categorised as elements of academic drift. However, he leaves the debate open as to whether these initiatives will either further stabilize the German vocational sector or reinforce academic drift. It is this same concern expressed by Teichler on the stability of the binary sector that is echoed with Irish policy-makers. Indeed, reducing instability in the IoT sector, because of certain larger IoTs constantly pushing for higher status (policy officer 1, DES) motivated the DES "to bring some certainty and stability into a system which has really been jostling for position" (senior manager, DES) which led to what the Department hopes will be "the final solution"; i.e., redesignation as TUs (policy officer 1, DES). Teichler (1996), however, concludes that the "German *Fachhochsculen* turned out to be one of the most stable alternatives to universities" (p.136), because of their "high academic stature", and also as explained above because of the distinctiveness of the vocational sector in both structural

terms and "educational thrust". In other words, a "relative radical contrast to universities is the more enduring solution" (p.136).

Based on observations from policy officer 1 (DES) and senior administrator (University 2) the perceived academic prestige of the *Fachhochsculen* is lacking with regard to Irish IoTs, while their specific applied focus in Ireland is diminishing. In Ireland, based on the findings, it seems that the "radical contrast" that were initially the RTCs (senior manager, Forfás) no longer offer such a sharp distinction with the universities, as six interviewees shared their view that the differentiation between the two sectors was no longer as strong as it had been in the past. There is a danger that the second type of HEI is insufficiently stable to "counteract the drift towards the most prestigious institutional type" (p.136). Yet data from the "Profiling Irish Higher Education" (HEA, December 2013) shows significant differences between postgraduate numbers in the IoT sector and the university sector and suggests only limited "academic drift", at least based on the move up the NFQ.

8.3 The binary divide according to "le pays politique" (Neave, 2002)

Conversely, a significant minority of interviewees, concentrated within the Department, the HEA and QQI were very clear on identifying a binary divide in Ireland. Neave (1983) warns that all HE systems display a dynamic towards integration, even though government policy may be officially tailored towards sustaining or reinforcing a binary divide. This implies not taking government policy for gospel and looking at what the academic and administrative staff within HEIs and their representative bodies (IOTI, IUA, TUI, IFUT) believe has happened. According to interviewees in the DES, HEA and QQI, significant differences between the two sectors are apparent, always based on key indicators such as postgraduate

student numbers, PhD student numbers, SFI funding, proportion of academic staff holding a PhD (policy officer 1, DES).

8.3.1 Differentiation between sectors based on postgraduate student numbers

It is useful to consider data derived from documentary sources to assess the validity of the perceptions expressed by the above participants. Indeed, available data released in December 2013 (HEA) on the number of taught Masters students (L9), research Masters students (L9) and PhD students (L10) certainly underline that postgraduate numbers in institutes remain small, particularly at PhD level. The data reveals that "single digit numbers of PhD students" (senior policy officer 1, HEA) can indeed be found in five IoTs, including Athlone, Blanchardstown, Dundalk, Limerick and Tralee. Furthermore, both Letterkenny IoT and Dún Laoghaire IADT have no PhD students and Carlow, Galway-Mayo, Sligo and Tallaght IoTs have respectively 15, 16, 13 and 29 PhD students (see Table 8.1, p.265). This leaves Cork (55), DIT (310) and Waterford (52) as the only three institutes with any sort of substantial numbers of Level 10 students but even these numbers compare unfavourably to any of the seven universities.

Table 8.1

Name of Institution	Number of taught Master (L9) students			Number of research Master (L9) students			Number of PhD (L10) students		
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Athlone Institute of Technology	94	63	**157**	40	2	**42**	7	1	**8**
Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown	11	20	**31**	13	0	**13**	3	0	**3**
Institute of Technology, Carlow	0	58	**58**	18	0	**18**	15	0	**15**
Cork Institute of Technology	170	121	**291**	70	0	**0**	55	0	**55**
Dublin Institute of Technology	663	928	**1,591**	62	50	**112**	239	71	**310**
Dundalk Institute of Technology	66	46	**112**	23	5	**28**	8	1	**9**
Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology	73	52	**125**	8	0	**8**	0	0	**0**
Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology	73	6	**79**	22	0	**22**	16	0	**16**
Letterkenny Institute of Technology	34	45	**79**	12	2	**14**	0	0	**0**
Limerick Institute of Technology	42	27	**69**	403	3	**43**	1	0	**1**
Institute of Technology, Sligo	3	8	**11**	56	0	**56**	13	0	**13**
Institute of Technology, Tallaght	0	33	**33**	36	3	**39**	28	1	**29**
Institute of Technology, Tralee	18	13	**31**	9	2	**11**	3	5	**8**
Waterford Institute	250	274	**524**	101	22	**123**	35	17	**52**

of Technology									

Table 8.1: Level 9 and Level 10 student numbers per Institute of Technology (December 2013, HEA)

Indeed, the smallest of the seven universities, NUIM, has a total of 434 PhD students (see Table 8.2), a number roughly eight times greater than either Cork or Waterford IoTs and still greater than the number of PhD students in those three institutes put together. The HEA is unconvinced that such low numbers of PhD students in the IoT sector are viable and at least one of the HEA participants (senior policy officer 1) questioned whether this type of isolation of the postgraduate researcher leads to an inappropriate learning and research environment and an isolating student experience.

It is also apparent that whatever the claims about "mission drift" and increased involvement of the IoT sector in postgraduate work, Levels 9 and 10 are still predominantly offered by universities. This is particularly visible at Level 10. In total, only 519 PhD students are enrolled in an IoT, and when one excludes DIT from this, only 209 remain spread over 13 institutes. In contrast, the university sector can boast 7,697 registered full-time and part-time PhD students, which equates with nearly 94 per cent of the entire PhD body (see Table 8.2).

Table 8.2

Name of Institution	Number of taught Master (L9) students			Number of research Master (L9) students			Number of PhD (L10) students		
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Dublin City University	803	924	**1, 727**	63	34	**97**	569	149	**718**
National University of Ireland, Galway	1, 138	361	**1, 499**	81	28	**109**	867	83	**950**
National University of Ireland, Maynooth	518	231	**749**	60	5	**65**	375	59	**434**
Trinity College Dublin	967	749	**1, 716**	169	70	**239**	1, 731	265	**1, 996**
University College Cork	1, 139	336	**1,475**	132	59	**191**	1, 056	76	**1, 132**
University College Dublin	2, 192	1, 088	**3, 280**	167	46	**213**	1, 623	120	**1, 743**
University of Limerick	736	249	**985**	104	33	**137**	600	124	**724**

Table 8.2: Level 9 and Level 10 student numbers per University (December 2013, HEA)

8.3.2 Differentiation within the university sector based on research intensity

Beyond postgraduate student numbers, research intensity can be measured through a variety of other criteria. Data retrieved from the HEA's document: "Towards a Performance Evaluation Framework: Profiling of Higher Education" (2013) reveal a number of variables related to the research agenda of a HEI including a series of metrics such as the number of PhD graduates per 10 academic staff, the amount of PRTLI funding for 2010 per academic staff, the number of Web of Science documents per academic staff, the relative citation impact, and the level of research funding per academic staff received from SFI, the Irish

Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology (IRCSET), the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) and through FP7 (see Table 8.3).

Table 8.3

Name of Institution	Research intensity							
	No. of PhD graduates per 10 academic staff	PRTLI funding 2010	Web of Science documents per academic	Relative citation impact	FP7 income received 2007-2010 per academic staff	IRCSET funding 2010 per academic staff	IRCHSS funding 2010 per academic staff	SFI funding 2010 per academic staff
Dublin City University	1.2	4,461	2.5	1.0	20,698	3, 075	508	**25, 176**
National University of Ireland, Galway	1.2	6,012	2.3	1.0	24, 666	2, 480	1, 099	16, 792
National University of Ireland, Maynooth	2.0	3, 668	2.6	1.0	9, 857	2, 653	1, 870	14, 320
Trinity College Dublin	**2.1**	5, 558	3.9	**1.7**	**35, 190**	3, 048	1, 622	22, 897
University College Cork	1.3	**10, 264**	3.5	1.1	31, 876	2, 948	1, 308	13, 827
University College Dublin	1.8	6, 870	**4.4**	1.3	29, 986	**3, 541**	**1, 904**	20, 228
University of Limerick	1.2	5, 375	1.8	0.6	13, 469	2, 610	880	10, 392

Table 8.3: Universities and their research agenda (December 2013, HEA)

UL scores lowest in five out of eight categories under the "Research" heading including the number of PhD graduates per 10 academic staff, the number of Web of Science documents per academic, the relative citation impact, IRCSET funding 2010 per academic staff and SFI funding per academic staff in 2010. TCD has the highest scores in three out of eight categories including the number of PhD graduates per 10 academic staff, the relative citation impact and in the amount of FP7 funding received in the 2007-2010 period per academic staff. UCD is the only other university that scores the highest in as many different categories. These metrics certainly support the conviction among a number of interviewees that differentiation may occur within the university sector based on research intensity and concurs with the emphasis given by college officer 1 (University 2) on his/her university's strong emphasis on research, in particular with regards to success at attracting FP7 funds over the 2007-2010 period.

8.4 Mission drift: an issue of perspective

The policy-makers' identification of "significant differences" (senior manager, DES) between the two sectors at Levels 9 and 10 and in research intensity is undoubtedly supported by "high level data" (senior policy officer 2, HEA) retrieved from official documents. The data in the "Profiling Irish Higher Education" (HEA, 2013) document suggests a high level of differentiation between most universities and most IoTs, with convergence only appearing at the margins, between larger IoTs and the post-1989 universities: even then clear differences were apparent. Yet there was also a clear perception amongst the majority of administrative and academic staff within HEIs that "mission drift" is a reality in Ireland, in particular within the IoT sector (with the notable exception of the academic staff in IoT3) and University 1. The phenomenon which they broadly referred to as "mission drift" is characterised in the

literature as either "academic drift", "drift in curricular emphasis" and/or "institutional drift" (Neave, 1979, p.155). It is ironic that most policy-makers reject the suggestion that "mission drift" has occurred, but emphasise the need for greater rationalisation and co-ordination to overcome duplication.

8.4.1 Different interpretations of the regional remit: the perspectives of "le pays réel" and "le pays politique" (Neave, 2002)

"Mission drift" as a concept was rejected outright only by participants within IoT3, one of Ireland's largest institutes that has applied for redesignation as TU. The latter considered that the Institute's mission was first and foremost to service regional needs, whatever these needs may require. There is a tension here between the drive by national policy-makers to create a coherent and coordinated system approach to HE, one of "interlocking entities" (senior manager, HEA) which is very much in vogue at the moment (Hunt Report, 2011, pp.96-97; report on "system reconfiguration", 2013, p.5), and institutional ambition and/or responsiveness to regional needs. The IoTs regional role was variously identified as "regional economic development needs" (senior policy officer 1, HEA), "regional engagement" (senior manager, HEA; HEA, April 2013, p.10), "regional mandate" (senior manager, Forfás), "regional remit" (senior academic 1, IoT1; senior policy officer 2, QQI), "regional development needs" or the "regional context" (member of the HEA), leaving a broad scope for interpretation.

There were substantial differences with regard to the interpretation of the regional role for HEIs, in particular in the IoT sector. The latter is a core component of the mission of a HEI and its interpretation is key in contextualising the "mission drift" debate. There are different

and often competing interpretations of the regional role that do not fit neatly with the objectives set out in the Hunt Report, with specific reference to differentiation in mission and roles for HEIs (2011, p.70; p.96). For instance, senior policy officer 1 (HEA) spoke of "the rise of Arts and Humanities in the IoT sector you know was a little bit inconsistent with the regional economic development needs". For this participant, the economic regional needs trump all other regional needs. Senior policy officer 1 (HEA) consistently referred to the economic aspects behind regional needs, by urging HEIs to focus on key areas of strength that match the "regional economic development potentials" and to develop as "the economic needs of the region change".

The debate between two distinct schools of thought on the regional role of HEIs was well framed by senior academic 1 (IoT3). This participant believed that if the mission of a HEI is to "serve the needs of a region and to provide access to higher education", then those needs are always going to translate into a demand from the student base for a breadth of courses that is not necessarily available in a region, including in particular programmes in the Arts and Humanities. For example, IoT3, which is located in a region in the south of Ireland with no university, offers the broadest spectrum of Humanities courses in the IoT sector, including the type of Humanities courses offered in the university sector at Level 8 (English literature, Irish, Religious Studies) as illustrated by a senior administrator (IoT3):

> Also some of the courses we are offering are not traditional Institute of Technology programmes and we have gone into, for instance we have a Bachelor of Arts, Liberal Arts here, that is one of the main flagship courses of most universities in Ireland but we now have one.

Senior academic 1 (IoT1) relayed his/her opinion that what was missing in IoT1 was a "general Humanities option" for students from the region, because that is what they wanted. However, that option is available in IoT3, highlighting the fact that there has been blurring in

course offerings between those larger institutes and the university sector. Indeed, a senior administrator in IoT3 conceded that "some of the courses we are offering are not traditional institute of technology programmes" because IoT3 is now offering a "Bachelor of Arts, Liberal Arts here, that is one of the main flagship courses of most universities in Ireland but we now have one" (senior administrator, IoT3). Nonetheless, it is limited to specific cases, because even with regard to Humanities neither CIT nor DIT (the closest comparators to IoT3) offer a Bachelor of Arts and/or Humanities, because there is no regional demand for it. This is because, as underlined by the findings, these institutions are located within localities where Arts and Humanities are already catered for (college officer 2, IoT3). Therefore, there is tangible evidence that the mission of a HEI is greatly influenced by distinctive regional demands. In the absence of statutory delineation for the regional mission of a HEI to limit itself to simply meeting economic or industry needs a HEI cannot exist in a vacuum and will "interact with its environment for achieving its basic objectives" (Zha, 2009, p.460). HEIs are to a large extent "dependent on their environment for critical resources, be they raw materials, personnel, monetary resources", as suggested by Zha (2009, p.460) and in this case also students. Notwithstanding, they are not solely dependent on their regional environment for funding e.g., state funding. Nevertheless, the influence of the regional environment is undoubtedly strong, particularly given the original regional focus of the RTCs. The regional mandate of a HEI, unless specified, requires the institution to react to its environment, or risk remaining the 'ivory tower' it is often criticised to be. It was acknowledged by several official participants that all HEIs are ambitious, and that this is desirable (policy officer 1, DES; senior manager, SFI). It cannot therefore come as a surprise that any HEI seeks to grow and adapt to its environment and clientele.

The two competing visions on what the regional mission of an IoT should encompass, either a primary focus on vocational training and economic development needs in a particular region or fulfilling wider regional demands - are therefore potentially conflicting. The Steering Committee on Technical Education had been firm in prescribing that no "artificial limitation" of either scope or level should be placed upon the RTCs because this could hamper their contribution to the "needs of society and the economy" (1967, p.11). However, as evidenced by the case of Sligo, IoTs are not simply free to offer whatever courses they want, and an applied focus must be demonstrated.

The focus on the mission of a HEI has therefore become crucial. This is because the sum of all the missions of Irish HEIs must all add "up to the overall economic and social needs of Ireland" (senior manager, HEA). A sharper emphasis on differentiation in institutional mission and roles is envisaged by policy-makers in delivering such an ambitious target. A key preoccupation of Irish policy-makers, reflecting similar concerns within "universal" HE systems, is to contain or restrict institutional homogenisation, and instead promote a diversity of HE institutions, because only in that way will the different needs of society and the different needs of students, employers and other stakeholders be the most appropriately catered for.

8.4.2 System-level planning implications versus institutional ambition

The original vision for the RTCs envisaged extensive scope for the evolution of their role and mission to meet societal and economic challenges. This is perhaps the most effectively encapsulated in a recommendation from the Steering Committee on Technical Education (1967) that emphasised this dual role and the need to leave IoTs free to adapt to future social,

economic and technological changes:

> If they are to make their most effective contribution to the needs of society and the economy, they must be capable of continuing adaptation to social, economic and technological changes (p.11).

What the regional role of a HEI should encompass and what it should prioritise is probably more of an ideological debate, because those needs can be economic and/or social depending on the current context, sometimes even political. In any case, there is no consensus between policy-makers and academic/institutional participants on how best to fulfil this regional role. However, if the role and mission of IoTs is built on this regional remit, then it could only gain from further clarification, because differentiation between HEIs can only work effectively and be identified through the establishing of a clear mission and role for each HEI. Nonetheless, a prescriptive definition could also lead to a static situation whereby HEIs would be limited in their role and not be allowed to adapt to future social, economic and technological changes. Senior policy officer 2 (HEA) argued that legally prescribing a limited role to the RTCs in the level of qualifications they could offer for example would have been equivalent to "hindering our economic development or industrial development".

While the necessity of national planning and policy-making and institutional ambition can co-exist, they may also enter into conflict and it seems that this is what has happened as the DES has identified considerable overlap at Level 8 in the NFQ (policy officer 1, DES) as well as institutional homogeneity (senior manager, HEA). On the institutions' side, it has also been argued that institutes need to provide adequately for whatever demands occur in their locality. This perspective is not necessarily shared by policy-makers in a period of dwindling public resources and intensified competition for research funds. The government indeed has endorsed a whole-of-system approach (HEA, April 2013, p.5). Government policies are based on concerns about greater convergence between HEIs leading to duplication of roles

and functions and eventually a lack of diversity in the Irish HE system. According to Kyvik, many scholars regard the trend of "academic drift" in the non-university sector as unstoppable, leading to a "more homogeneous higher education system than is desirable from both a governmental and societal point of view" (2004, p.406). In order to halt institutional homogeneity (senior manager, HEA), whatever HEIs decide to do and what activities they focus on will have to fit within the overarching national needs, concurring with policy officer 1 (EC) who stated "I think in terms of differentiation and specialisation, knowing what you're good at, adopting a strategic plan, and then government enabling you to get there if that's something government thinks is important to do for the country".

IoT3's wide interpretation of its regional role could be seen as an example of a local elite pushing back against national and European agendas. Institutional ambition may lead to convergence and "institutional drift", as identified by Neave (1979, p.155), further exacerbated by the drive for TU status. By diverging from national and European planning, IoT3 may be conforming to the type of convergence identified by Kyvik (2004) that ultimately led to the destruction of the binary divide in Britain, when convergence was generalised to the entire polytechnic and university sectors, and reflecting the type of "institutional drift" identified by Neave (1979, p.155).

It is apparent that policy-makers are not simply seeking to maintain or reimpose a simple binary structure on HEIs. A policy officer (DES) explained that the objective was not to uphold or recreate the binary divide of the 1970s, because HEIs are now evolving in a significantly different space, but instead to ensure that these institutions are "fit for purpose" and that the system is catering for the increasing number of stakeholders including expanding student numbers entering HE with different needs and academic abilities as well as

employers with specific degree requirements. These system objectives require that close attention be paid to individual missions, and to ensure that all HEIs are not "trying to do the same thing and trying to ape everybody else" (policy officer 1, DES) or "trying to be all things to all people" (senior manager, HEA). This overarching system objective of providing for the needs of an increasingly diverse number of stakeholders was reinforced by a senior manager (HEA) who was keen to stress that instead of trying to label things "binary" or "trinary", the focus should be on creating a "system of interlocking entities" each with different missions, the sum of which cater for the economic and social needs of Ireland. This "whole-of-system" approach with different institutions offering different things is the one pursued by government and national policy-makers (Quinn, 2013, p.1), and horizontal differentiation as outlined by Bonaccorsi and Daraio (2007, p.7) is the way to achieve it, as evidenced from participants in the HEA and the DES (senior policy officers 1 and 2, HEA; policy officer 1 and senior manager, DES).

8.5 Horizontal differentiation: a government priority

Horizontal differentiation implies that not all HEIs will be allowed to continue offering the same programmes and that a rationalisation of course offerings will be implemented in order to create a truly differentiated set of HEIs, each with a clear mission and a well-defined role. However, it was conceded that even though horizontal differentiation was the main objective (senior policy officer 1, HEA), dwindling public resources also meant prioritising investments through concentrating investments in specialised facilities and high-end research, a priority explicitly favoured by the Hunt Report (HEA, 2011, p.41). The reality is that the latter two can only, by definition, be located in a limited number of HEIs and the choice of where to focus those investments will imply benchmarking HEIs against one another to see

which one performs the highest in order to maximise the investment. Elements of vertical differentiation are therefore envisaged and this concurs with the declared objectives purported by senior manager (HEA) who wants to see greater competition between HEIs through benchmarking their performance against their peers, not only nationally, but also internationally, as a way to increase performance and drive excellence. As of July 2013, the HEA invited all HEIs to develop mission-based performance compacts that are appropriate to their distinct mission and role within Irish HE system. (HEA, July 2013, p.2). This implies that HEIs must not only be clear on their mission and role within the overall overarching requirements of the Irish HE system but must have developed a concise and realistic strategic plan to deliver on their mission and role. A percentage of funding will then be allocated on the basis of assessing the performance of each HEI against the established and agreed objectives in the institutional compacts between the HEIs and the HEA. This demonstrates that the concepts of horizontal and vertical differentiation are to "all intents and purposes, ideal types in their purity" (Neave, 1996, p.27) and that elements of both are likely to be used. What we see in Ireland with regard to those two approaches is a move towards one or the other, rather than the effective and complete realization of one over the other. Therefore, evidence gathered within the scope of this study points towards a policy preference given to horizontal differentiation with elements that point to the emergence of vertical differentiation although this has not yet been fully developed. Horizontal differentiation cannot occur without the emergence of some level of vertical differentiation, because in order for HEIs to identify and be confirmed in their mission and role, they will have to prove their capacity in doing so, and this implies some amount of benchmarking against other national HEIs offering the same programme(s). Without such a performance based evaluation, horizontal differentiation cannot be properly and efficiently implemented. This may be one of the purposes behind the HEA's "Towards a Performance Evaluation Framework: Profiling Irish

Higher Education" (2013), which allows all publicly funded Irish HEIs to benchmark their research activities against one another, while enabling the policy-maker to make an informed decision in implementing a policy of horizontal differentiation based on each institution's strengths.

8.6 Assessing the reality of "mission drift": institutional drift

While some "institutional drift" (Neave, 1979, p.155), notably with a greater emphasis on providing higher degrees at Level 8 for instance is apparent in most IoTs, but in particular in the larger IoTs (such as IoT3), and a decrease in system diversity has certainly occurred, it has not led to consistent convergence between HEIs of one sector towards another sector. Indeed, the differences between a small, regional IoT and a university are still vast, and even the differences between a small regional IoT, such as IoT2, and a larger, more research oriented IoT, such as IoT3, remain considerable in terms of research intensity, if one looks at the key indicators supplied by the HEA (See Table 4.1, p.130; Table 8.1, p.265; Table 8.2, p.267). The same is true within the university sector, where differences in the number of PhD students for example vary significantly between the post-1989 universities and the more established ones. However, there is a strong case to say that convergence is happening at the periphery (senior policy officer 2, HEA). Convergence, or institutional homogenisation, was identified primarily between the larger IoTs (Cork, Dublin and Waterford) and the former NIHEs (Dublin and Limerick). I would argue that a tendency to 'drift' should not be generalised to the entire IoT sector but only to those larger institutes, namely CIT, DIT and WIT. The 'drift' in question, should also be primarily qualified as "institutional drift" (Neave, 1979, p.155). Convergence towards the university model is more obvious in the case of both DIT and WIT. Their earlier attempts at redesignation as universities (1996; 2007) were

sometimes perceived as a consequence of an inequitable binary system in terms of reputation because "what they're ambitious towards is greater recognition, greater esteem, all of those kinds of things that they feel coming from the context of the binary system that they haven't had, that they've always been perceived you know as second rate" (policy officer 1, DES). However, the opposite argument was offered by a university interviewee, namely that IoTs were experiencing strong "mission drift", enabling them to enter into competition with universities, or at least for IoTs to "move towards what looks more like a university mission" (college officer 1, University 1). Certainly DIT shares similar features with academic developments in the pre-1992 polytechnics in England where Kyvik identified "the comprehensive establishment of Master's and doctoral studies in the polytechnics, and the strong involvement of their staff in research activities" (2004, p.403).

It is no coincidence that the HEA's "Profiling Higher Education" (2013) provides data only for research activities. It is here that the delineation between the two sectors is still the most apparent and where it needs to be preserved if the policy of a binary system is to survive. If research activities with regard to the provision of Levels 9 and 10, combined with more sustained involvement with basic research in the IoT sector are intensified, or spread to all IoTs, beyond the group of "larger institutes of technology" (policy officer 1, DES) identified at the margins, Ireland will suffer the risk of going down the same route the British binary system did in 1992. This apparent limited convergence is reinforced by DIT's appetite to join "university" associations wherever it can (EUA, IAU) and to deliberately not be a full member of IOTI. On the university side, DCU was frequently suggested as the TU *par excellence*, with the UL following suit (college officer 2, University 1; senior manager, HEA; member of the HEA, senior policy manager, IOTI; college officer 2, IoT3), a status CIT, DIT and WIT have all officially filed an application for, in partnership with neighbouring IoTs. A

number of interviewees argued that HEIs from both sectors appear to be suitable candidates for this new status, which of itself indicates a blurring of the binary divide with regards to these HEIs. However, this blurring remains peripheral, because it only concerns a relatively small number of HEIs, therefore to speak of an undermining of the binary system would be to generalise across entire sectors which is evidently not the case, as underlined by the available data (HEA, December 2013).

While six interviewees identified a less differentiated system than in the past (senior manager, Forfás; senior official, IFUT; senior manager, IUA; college officer 2, University 1; senior administrator, University 1; senior administrator, University 2) a consistent convergence of all HEIs towards the research intensive university model was not identified by any interviewee, with the sole exception of a senior official in IFUT who did believe that diversity was decreasing so dramatically that the Irish HE system was on track to become a unified system, most notably because of the opportunity given to IoTs to be redesignated as TUs and due to the influence of short term economic demands (senior official, IFUT). While this opinion is important to note, it was not representative of the views of most participants among the academic and administrative staff of the five HEIs. Nonetheless, while the larger institutes were the first to apply for TU redesignation, the move is gaining momentum, with AIT having now indicated that it would submit an application (Humphreys, 2014). The senior official's (IFUT) comments viewed in this context should serve as a warning because the convergence of similar trends (i.e., the polytechnics in the UK increasing their postgraduate research course offerings and the universities becoming more vocational and recruiting part-time students) was identified by Kyvik (2004, p.403) in the British case as the ultimate reason for the destruction of the binary divide:

> The clear institutional and academic drift of the polytechnics, combined with the stronger vocational orientation of traditional universities, finally resulted in the establishment of a unified system with marked status differences between the institutions.

This also mirrors developments in the then binary Swedish HE system in the late 1990s, with the upgrade of three colleges to university status, because it has been argued the distinction between universities and colleges was unstable (Bauer, 2000, p.159). Keeping a diverse system with differentiated institutions is vital to the Irish government, who decided to shelve the proposal of the International Panel Expert Group (HEA, August 2013, p.22) that recommended merging HEIs across the binary divide to create four comprehensive regional universities in Dublin (DCU; NUIM; St Patrick's College, Drumcondra; Froebel College and Dundalk IoT), Cork (UCC and CIT), Limerick (UL; LIT; Mary Immaculate College and Tralee IT) and Galway (NUIG; GMIT; St Angela's College of Education, Sligo). The rejection of the recommendations stemming from this international report, almost immediately after its release, seems to break away from the Irish government's traditional reliance on external advice to formulate and legitimate policy since the 1960s (senior policy officer 1, HEA) and demonstrates the government's desire to maintain sectoral distinctiveness even in cities that harbour both types of HEIs. The state however accepted a report produced by another international review panel, namely the more limited Sahlberg report on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland (2012) which focused entirely on teacher education. This may be seen as a case of selective implementation by the state agencies which sought to achieve rationalisation without sacrificing sectoral distinctiveness.

As it stands, I would argue that the Irish HE system is recognisably differentiated and diverse with convergence manifesting itself mainly at the periphery, particularly among larger IoTs and the post-1989 universities. So far the designation of future TUs has been based on clear

criteria such as those established in the "Criteria for Designation to Technological University Status" (HEA, 2011), confirmed by the General and TU Bill (2014) by giving priority to a strong academic and institutional rationale, although redesignation is also likely to be influenced by local political concerns, based on the evidence provided by interviewees who believed politics to be highly influential in Irish HE (senior academic 2, IoT1; college officer 2, IoT3; college officers 1 and 2, University 1; former President, UL; senior policy officer, IOTI; senior manager, IUA; senior policy officer 2, HEA; member of the HEA).

By seeking to achieve the criteria set out by the HEA for redesignation, no doubt shared characteristics are likely to become more marked as the larger IoTs gear up to TU status, creating the prospect that the "significant differences" (policy officer 1, DES; senior manager, DES) in existing "high level data" (senior policy officer 2, HEA) linked to SFI funding, postgraduate student numbers, or PhD student numbers consistently identified by government officials. The latter are currently much lower in the Institute sector (HEA, December 2013) and may gradually be eroded. DIT occupies an exceptional position, perhaps midway between the universities and the smaller IoTs in terms of postgraduate student numbers and research intensity. A senior manager in the IUA was unequivocal about the prospect of future convergence in terms of research activities of the putative TUs with the post-1989 universities, referring to DIT in particular:

> ...if DIT becomes a [technological] university then the difference between DIT and say DCU and that is not, I mean DIT's research activity wouldn't be on the same scale, but it will get there, there's no doubt about that.

Once this happens those "significant differences" highlighted by government officials and policy-makers may well be reduced, and this is why the contemporary debate on the mission and role of TUs will do a great deal to determine the future system structure of the Irish HE system. TUs are envisaged as the guardians of (and possible successors to) the mission and

focus of the IoTs. This was confirmed at senior levels in the DES and the HEA. The Hunt Report (Hunt et al., 2011, p.105) emphasised that while Level 8 should be as much of an area of focus in the IoTs as are courses at Levels 6 and 7, TUs should bring this type of career-focused HE provision offered by the IoTs to a higher level, therefore Levels 9 and 10 on the NFQ.

8.7 Assessing the reality of "academic drift"

In order to best assess the extent of "academic drift" (Neave, 1979) in Ireland, the evidence gathered from interviews demonstrated that it is important to have a clear understanding of what the "Humanities" encompass in each sector, because it differs considerably from one sector to another. Firstly, the Humanities have a narrower scope in the IoT sector, with the notable exception of IoT3, with students mostly studying "Social Care, Hospitality, Tourism, Leisure, Sport Recreation, those kind of courses, Design" (senior academic 1, IoT1). Secondly, the applied focus of Humanities, and the "vocational orientation" of Humanities in the IoT sector was emphasised by interviewees. It is important to distinguish between the type of Humanities programmes offered in the Institute and University sectors, because misunderstanding on this point may create an exaggerated impression of "academic drift" or "drift in curricular emphasis" (Neave, 1979, p.155). The findings underline that the development of the Humanities in the IoTs is not at all a simple duplication of university offerings and the impression of "academic drift" is more apparent than real. However, there are signs of "institutional drift", according to Neave's definition (1979, p.155), in the case of those larger IoTs who have either previously lobbied for university status or whose applications are currently under review for redesignation. This is because those Institutes have reorganised some of their course structures on academic lines and have attempted to

seek parity with the university sector (policy officer 1, DES) and, as illustrated in the case of IoT3, they have re-defined, or perhaps more accurately reinterpreted "institutional objectives unilaterally", (Neave, 1979, p.155) such as their regional remit. The concept of "mission drift" must therefore be unpacked and attributed to the appropriate levels (e.g., institutional, Department/Faculty and/or programme/curriculum).

It is worth expanding on what senior academic 1 (IoT1) believes about the need for a genuine approach to the Humanities to be integrated into the regional remit of IoTs. This argument was first highlighted by the 1979 HEA report. The latter identified a need to establish further Certificate/Diploma courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences in the new colleges to be proposed for the Dublin area. This was because there were people there who wished to study "aspects" (and thereby implicitly not the entire curriculum one would expect to find in an established university) of the Humanities or the Social Sciences "at least initially for their own sake and yet for reasons of distance, cost or time are unable to attend a full-time university degree course" (p.39). However, it was also argued in the same report that for "many reasons from the viewpoint both of students and institutions" (p.39) sub-degree courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences were unlikely to be successful. Those reasons are not, however, dealt with in the report. A senior manager (IUA) offered one potential reason being that for someone "who is going to an IoT, a broad Humanities degree is not going to get them a job, whereas a more focused degree in a particular area will". In any case, the solution brought by the authors of the report was for the proposed colleges to operate in a similar way to the American community colleges, emphasizing transfer arrangements between the new colleges and the neighbouring NIHED, DIT and other degree-awarding institutions (p.39).

As indicated above, several participants showed a tendency to overstate the scope of Humanities in the IoT sector. The broader provision for Humanities in IoT3 is an exceptional case, which reflects the blurring occurring between the larger IoTs and the post-1989 universities. The case of Sligo IoT underlined that an applied focus must be demonstrated in order for the course to receive the approval of the DES (senior policy officer 2, HEA; senior policy officer, QQI, pp.209-211). There is evidence that even where IoTs expand course offerings, they offer a very different focus to universities (senior academic 1, IoT2). While Sligo may officially be offering a similar course in Archaeology to the universities, its applied focus enables it to cater for different needs from both a student and industry perspective. This reflects the perceptions of senior academics in IoT1 and IoT3 that there is a vocational orientation to Humanities courses offered in "many" IoTs, whether or not courses are offered within a separate School of Humanities or under the "wing of a School of Business" (senior academic 1, IoT3).

As pointed out by an official in TUI there are significant differences not only in the focus (what courses) but also in the delivery of courses because "if you go to a university and you go to an IoT and you see how a similar programme is delivered, it's delivered in a completely different way". This is because, according to the same participant, in the IoT sector classes are smaller and have a primarily applied focus, with less emphasis on theory, whereas the universities were traditionally theory heavy with less emphasis on applied practice. However, the interviewee also acknowledged that this was less marked than before because universities are increasingly integrating more "applied components to their programmes in order to enhance the theoretical base of their programmes" or, in the words of a senior manager in IFUT, universities are becoming "more responsive to short-term economics". Data from interviewees and the Hunt Report (2011, p.58), which singled out UL for integrating eight

month work placements in all its undergraduate programmes, also indicates that this generalisation of the University sector being more theory heavy is not entirely applicable to the post-1989 universities. This is because the latter have a strong record in integrating work placements into their degrees and a greater emphasis on training in all programmes in order to develop a set of "graduate attributes" that are in essence demonstrable achievements acquired at undergraduate level (senior administrator, University 1). University 1 is generally closer to industry needs than the more established universities (college officer 2, University 1), and maintains a more applied focus in all courses (college officer 2, University 1), reflecting a real distinction between the post-1989 universities and their older counterparts.

8.8 Concluding remarks on the Irish HE binary divide

There is a case to say that diversity between sectors is diminishing, with institutions on both sides of the divide doing things that would have traditionally been regarded the monopoly of one over the other. This is in line with Kyvik's argument that the binary divide was ultimately destroyed in the UK because of these converging trends between both types of HEIs (2004. p.403). This also concurs with the views expressed by a minority of interviewees, including a senior manager (Forfás), college officer 2 (University 1) and a senior official (IFUT), who believed that the system was differentiated in the past, upon the establishment of the RTCs, but that this diversity had eroded to some extent over time. The apocalyptic vision presented by a senior administrator in University 1, according to which all institutions are going to look the same in ten years' time is however, not shared by a majority of interviewees. The majority considered that although diversity between institutions across sectors was sometimes perceived as eroding, this was due mainly to the blurring appearing at the periphery (CIT, DIT, WIT; DCU, UL) and there is sufficient diversity within both sectors

to prevent all HEIs from looking the same in ten years. This evidence is also consistent with both documentary data and perceptions of interviewees suggesting that IoT3 is very different in its course offerings and to some extent research intensity than the two smaller IoTs in this study (IoT1 and IoT2). This suggests a limited blurring of mission between specific institutions rather than a general convergence across traditional sectoral boundaries. Government policies are also designed to maintain diverse HEIs with distinct missions and a well-defined role within their locality, in collaboration with neighbouring institutions.

The Irish HE system may no longer be conceptualised as a rigidly defined binary system with two identifiable sectors but it has not followed the trend towards integration identified by Neave (1983) and Kyvik (2004) in the UK and Australia. Neave presents academic drift in the non-university sector as an inevitable process leading to homogeneity which is ultimately undesirable from both a governmental and societal perspective because if all institutions are homogenous, then the system will be ineffective in delivering the needs of an increasingly diverse number of stakeholders. Nonetheless, in the case of Ireland, as demonstrated by the limited scope of Humanities in the IoTs (except IoT3), and the applied focus of Humanities courses in the IoT sector, academic drift as such is relatively limited. While a superficial glance at the system and the HEIs supports proponents of 'academic drift', key indicators (HEA, December 2013) establish significant differences between almost all IoTs (with the significant exception of DIT) and all seven universities. This diversity could be potentially threatened by the drive for TU status, but at this stage it is too early to assess the impact of the government's commitment to the three new technological universities.

Another argument put forward by Neave in Kyvik (2004, p.406) is that both the institutional leadership and academic workers within HEIs are driving forces in a process of integration

towards a unified system. This is due to the fact that the leadership of non-university HEIs have ambitions to achieve university status and will set targets and strengthen their activities in ways that bring them closer to what is perceived to be university like: an example in the Irish case is DIT's membership of EUA and IAU but not IOTI. Academic staff in the non-university HEIs will seek a rise in pay and status, through mimicking the research practice of their university colleagues. Furthermore, the academic staff puts pressure on the HEI to achieve better research conditions and to expand the level of course offerings. In return, the HEI puts pressure on the academic staff to raise their academic qualifications through the obtaining of a PhD. Both dynamics are mutually reinforcing and lead the non-university sector and its HEIs to slowly converge towards the university model (Kyvik, 2004, p.406). Revealingly, non-university institutions will justify the need to offer higher degrees and increase their research activities because of the need to strengthen local industry and respond to regional societal needs. In the case of Ireland, interviewees in IoT3 were unanimous in declaring that serving regional needs was their mission, and that therefore they could not be accused of "mission drift", because they were responding to a demand from the students and industry to expand their course offerings. This spiral has been described as a "snowball-effect", impossible to stop and illustrated by the upgrade of three Swedish "university colleges" to university status in the late 1990s (Kyvik, 2004, p.406): one of these was redesignated as a TU, namely the Luleå University of Technology, Scandinavia's northernmost university of technology, while the other two became 'traditional' universities (Karlstad and Örebro). Institutions may even obtain political support with regard to these objectives, a concern voiced by a former President of the UL and which certainly has been a reality in the Irish context with strong local support for the elevation of IoT3 to TU status.

Further research when TUs are established may establish whether there is a parallel here between the Swedish upgrade of those three "university colleges" with legislation enabling for the establishment of TUs. The General and TU Bill (2014) sets out the criteria and makes it clear that at least a minimum of 4 per cent of full-time students should be enrolled in honours degree programmes or above and at least 90 per cent of full-time academic staff should hold a postgraduate qualification, of which at least 45 per cent will be required to hold a PhD or other equivalent terminal degree. The latter represents a much higher percentage than is currently found in IoTs, indicating that a high bar was deliberately chosen for elevation to TU status (HEA, December 2013). The TU solution offered by the Hunt Report was characterised by policy officer 1 (DES) as "what we hope is a final solution", indicating disagreement with Kyvik's thesis that the snowball effect may be "impossible to stop in the long run" (Kyvik, 2004, p.406) at least for certain larger institutions, and that redesignation will offer a welcome respite from constant pressure for upgrading and a stronger institutional barrier towards the unification of the Irish HE system.

8.9 Analysing EU influence in Irish policy-making

The EC was not considered to be an influential actor with regards to HE policy-making by national policy-makers in Ireland, who preferred to characterise EU institutions as still trying to find their feet (senior policy officer 1, HEA) and with "peripheral" influence (senior manager, HEA). Yet this picture of minimal influence by European institutions, particularly the university modernisation agenda advanced by the EC, on contemporary HE policies deserves critical evaluation. EC Communications were not considered to have played an essential part in influencing national policies, with particular focus on differentiation in the mission and roles of HEIs, according to participants in the HEA and the DES. The Hunt

Report (2011) makes no reference to either Communications of 2003 or 2006. It is striking that other EC documents (e.g., Report on progress in quality assurance in higher education, EC, 2009) are referred to in the Hunt Report, implying that government does consult EC documents but "cherry picks" the ones it needs to justify certain policies (senior official, IFUT; lecturer on academic council, IoT2; college officer 1, IoT3).

It would be wrong to assume that the HEA and the Department are either unaware of or reject EU involvement in HE *per se*, because senior management in both institutions showed an acute understanding of the multiple ways in which the EU can directly influence HE systems and institutions, "beyond policy documents" (senior manager, HEA), through funding instruments such as the ESF or Horizon 2020 (senior manager, DES) or through the increase in economic activities, because of EU membership, that requires a matching growing number of skilled higher education graduates (senior manager, HEA). There is a distinction to be made between policies emanating from the Commission, which were not seen as influential and the wider impact of the EU (including funding and the impact of the EU) where policy-makers acknowledged EU influence. For example, although a senior manager (HEA) believed that the impact of the Commission's policy documents with regard to HE was peripheral, he/she also reflected on how the EU had to be the primary influence on HE. He/she alluded to how crucial HE and highly skilled graduates were to the economy, because of the knowledge and innovation HE systems produce through their research intensive universities.

8.10 Assessing the common discourse between EU and national policy-makers

With regard to differentiation in mission and roles between HEIs, there is strong evidence that the same policies are shared at both the European and national levels, but this common pursuit is not made obvious by the Irish policy-maker. As demonstrated in Chapter 5.4, there is a common discourse with regard to the importance of differentiation in mission and roles between HEIs underlined by policies proposed in various EC Communications (2003; 2006; 2011) and priorities included by Irish policy-makers in the Hunt Report (2011, p.70, pp.96-97), the Report on "system reconfiguration" (2013, p.5; pp.6-7) and the HEA's "Towards a Performance Evaluation Framework: Profiling Higher Education" (2013). The common discourse was also visible during the interview stage at Irish and European levels. Policy officer 1 (EC) spoke of the necessity for HEIs to know "what you're good at" and to adopt a strategic plan enhancing those areas, if this is compatible with government policy planning. This was echoed by the HEA whose senior manager openly declared: "what we're working for, is the idea of higher education institutions, each with a clearly identifiable mission, in terms of the kind of institution they are". In order to achieve this, the profiling of HEIs is a crucial element that has only very recently been undertaken full-scale in Ireland (HEA, December 2013). The EC has been issuing calls to this effect since 2003 (EC, 2003, p.18; EC, 2006, p.4; EC, 2011, pp.2-10). The EC urged Member States to concentrate research funds into a smaller number of HEIs (2003, p.18), to identify areas of strength in all HEIs (EC, 2006, p.18) and finally to enable for data on "all aspects of performance" to be made publicly available (EC, 2011, p.10).

Similar concerns were expressed by policy-makers in the Hunt Report (2011) which seeks to achieve "critical mass" (pp.99-100) in research and in the Profiling Irish Higher Education document (2013) which seeks to identify distinctive characteristics of Irish HEIs. If the "precariousness" (EC, 2003, p.18) of public resources was stressed as early as 2003, the

global financial crisis of 2008 has only made matters worse, in particular in Ireland. Participants in the DES admitted that a recession provided the opportunity for more radical changes that might not otherwise be accepted (policy officer 1 and senior manager, DES), a rationale that was also identified at European level (senior policy officer, EUA). A policy of concentrating resources in an 'elite' group of HEIs has been avoided in Ireland and was vehemently (and accurately) denied by policy-makers (senior manager, DES). Instead, stimulating or reinforcing horizontal differentiation was largely considered to be the appropriate policy tool to enable for an efficient and 'modernised' HE system, based on a differentiated yet more equal binary system and diversity between HEIs within each sector (senior policy officer 1, HEA; senior policy officer 2, HEA; policy officer 1, DES; senior manager, DES). Notwithstanding this, the senior manager in the HEA indicated that vertical differentiation would also be an official objective, because benchmarking an institution's performance against its peers, whether regionally, nationally or internationally was "absolutely the kind of space we want to be in" and senior policy officer 1 (HEA) conceded that while horizontal differentiation was the main priority, the lack of resources meant that a concentration of resources with regards to "high end research" and "specialised facilities" was necessary. These official priorities were very much in line with the wider discourse on HE reform developed by the EC since 2003.

It is striking therefore that policy-makers do not try to justify differentiation in mission and role between HEIs with reference to European policy initiatives or reports since 2003, not least because they were often accused of having recourse to this strategy "as political cover from time to time...even if it means taking the report out of context" (senior official, IFUT). The minimalist referencing to relevant EU documents and the perception particularly by officials from the HEA and DES that the EU is not a major driver with regards to HE policy-

making may reflect a genuine lack of awareness of EU initiatives or deliberate omission, because it is always hard for people to admit that "a good idea came from Europe" (policy officer 1, EC).

With regard to the influence of the EU on Irish HE policy, perhaps, as underlined by a senior administrator in University 2, urging people to do things is not enough. A number of institutional interviewees pointed out that EC Communications are non-binding and only if there are consequences for actions taken (or not taken), whether good or bad, can the EU expect to have greater influence on national policy-makers and HEIs alike. However, the prospect of the EU getting more directive and/or including sanctions in the arena of HE was rejected by the HEA (senior policy officer 1). Yet there is a distinction between formal EU intervention like the one suggested by senior policy officer 1 (HEA) which is indeed not present or envisaged by the EU Treaties and more 'informal' influence, which is harder to quantify, but manifests itself through the evolution of a common discourse on HE reform, rationalisation and differentiation. EU officials too were wary of overstepping the mark. While policy officer 1 (EC) purported that there is clear added value and therefore a rationale for EU involvement in areas such as mobility issues and a European qualifications framework, advocating specific policy approaches for the "diversification of higher education institutes and the role of government in supporting those institutions" may appear as an intrusion into the sphere of competence of Member States to the average European citizen. However, due to the diversity of Member States coming together through the OMC, one can learn from the approaches taken by other countries and assess their viability if potentially translated into a different national context, reflecting the views of the existing literature (see Birnbaum, 1983, in section 2.13, pp.49-50).

8.11 An identified lack of awareness of EU policy mechanisms

There was also a generalised lack of awareness in Ireland of the two main tools used by the EU in HE, namely the OMC and the European Semester. Both the OMC and the European Semester were mentioned by only one Irish participant each (senior policy officer 1, HEA; policy officer 1, DES). On the EU side, all interviewees mentioned these policy tools, but this was not matched by similar knowledge at the national level. It is true that Ireland only joined the European Semester in January 2014, but it was a striking finding that so few interviewees discussed these when asked whether the EU's repeated calls for the modernisation of HE systems were a significant influence on Irish national policy-making and whether particular EU policies were a driver for differentiation in mission and roles of HEIs. In this context, senior academic 2 (University 2) noted that "any information out there" (i.e., EU and OECD documents) should be at least taken into account by the policy-maker, and that ignoring such information was not an appropriate use of resources.

The perspective of policy-makers suggesting that the Commission's policy agenda for university modernisation was of little consequence in the Irish case contrasted with much of the scholarly literature. Neave argues that there are "regional authorities" beyond the nation state, such as the EC, that have emerged as "substantive actors on the higher education scene" with "system-shaping influence" (1996, p.31). Neave (p.31) also concurs with Thrift (2008, p.17) in giving a strong role to the EC in HE, and in particular in describing its influence as a "force for convergence between systems" (p.31). Neave goes even further and warns that the emergence of this supranational layer "has no counterpart in the history of the universities in Europe – save perhaps the Papacy in medieval Christendom" (p.33).

There are powerful normative and utilitarian forces at play (Neave, 1996, p.31) fostered by the EC that works through such legal instances as the European Court of Justice (ECJ), as illustrated by the *Gravier* judgement (1985) which held that a HEI may not discriminate against students from another Member State in terms of tuition fees. This landmark ruling, whereby a strip art cartoon degree was considered to fall under the heading of "vocational training", extended the interpretation of what was understood as "vocational training" and potentially enlarged the jurisdiction of the ECJ to a broader spectrum of courses.

The distinction between a general university higher education and vocational training/education is important as the EU only has legal basis for intervention in the latter (Article 166, TFEU), because it has the power and the initiative to implement its own vocational training policy, as long as it supports and complements that of the Member States. Indeed, the principle of national educational autonomy is clearly laid down in Article 165 TFEU. This Article is found under Title XII of the TFEU on "Education, Vocational Training, Youth and Sport". What differentiates "education" from "vocational training" is also left to interpretation. Nowadays, one often sees the words "vocational education" instead of "training" in the relevant literature. This evolution in terminology is potentially significant, due to the *rapprochement* between the formerly distinct types of education (university versus vocational) that were for a long time differentiated by the type of institution providing such education (e.g., the polytechnics in the UK until 1992). In other words, I would argue there is greater blurring at the European level between vocational education and general higher education. For example, it is not clear how the distinction in legislation at European level may affect unified European systems such as the UK and Spain, which incorporate a range of traditional universities and originally vocational HEIs. Moreover, as Irish universities are increasingly incorporating (and being encouraged by government to incorporate) an applied

component into their courses to make them more relevant to industry needs while IoTs have been "moving closer to universities" (senior manager, Forfás) there is much greater ambiguity than before about what constitutes 'vocational education'. In turn such ambiguity offers greater scope for EU judicial intervention, offering considerable powers of interpretation to the ECJ.

8.12 Concluding remarks on the influence of EU HE policies on the Irish national policy-maker

This lack of awareness observed at the level of national policy-makers regarding potentially significant aspects of the role played by the EU in HE policy-making is not entirely consistent with the established literature on globalisation (Vaira, 2004). National policy-makers were slow to acknowledge the role played by "institutional carriers" (i.e., the EU) who are "politically and socially highly legitimated" (Vaira, 2004, p.488), acting as agencies that contribute to the definition, translation and dissemination of the structural components of globalisation. Vaira refers to globalisation as a "meta myth" which would be appropriate to conceive as "a collection of rationalized myths characterizing the world polity" that include the following core features,; the minimalist state, entrepreneurialization/managerialization and the knowledge society. All of these features associated with globalisation can be found in Irish HE policies. Through their work, institutions such as the EU "develop a general common framework defining the new context, imperatives, ends and means in which higher education institutions have to operate nowadays" (Vaira, 2004, p.488). I would argue that this framework has offered a wider context for the modernisation agenda of Irish HE, because there is undeniably a common discourse between Irish and European policy-makers with regard to the need for differentiation between HEIs (see section 5.4). Moreover, as the EU's

modernisation agenda preceded that of Ireland it is difficult to argue that the EU's influence on Irish HE policy-making is "peripheral". It is unquestionable that institutional carriers construct through their working methods, exemplified through the OMC and the European Semester, a regional context that has profound ramifications for the nation-states' policies and societal sectors.

It was universally recognised that the EU does not exercise power directly over Irish HE. Yet even taking account of the restricted formal role of the EU institutions, it appears that official participants tended to downplay or understate influence of EU Commission policy initiatives in shaping the context for the development of HE policy in Ireland. The common discourse between EU officials and Irish policy-makers, exemplified by the common themes which emanate from key EU Communications and Irish policy documents, suggests a complex interrelationship between national policy-making and EU institutional influence, reflecting a shared world-view and common policy objectives.

Chapter NINE

Conclusion

One cannot always resolve the difference in opinion between interviewees and therefore produce clear conclusions. Drift, differentiation and the extent of EU influence on the Irish policy-maker were identified throughout this research as the most contentious issues raised by the interview-based methodology. This resulted in sharply different and often contradicting perceptions among interviewees. Therefore, the differences are in effect incapable of objective and clear adjudication based on the evidence available, and are uniquely responsive to local political and community escalation that flourishes in the absence of a clearly defined and vigorously implemented national policy. This in turn raises the question of whether these issues have been sufficiently addressed by educational policy-makers at the highest levels, of whether there is even agreement on whether there is a problem in the Irish HE system, or how it ought to be tackled; and of whether the entire development of HE has been consigned to a highly bureaucratised and to that degree unaccountable management system which is only marginally capable of solving the problems identified, and sometimes has difficulties even in identifying these problems.

The responsibility for policy-making planning and funding of HE needs to be more transparent. The consequences of the increased funding opportunities at European level under the Horizon 2020 programme need to be made more explicit to Irish policy-makers and both the academic and administrative staff of HEIs who are still for the large part unaware of or reluctant to shift their attention to this new policy layer that has enormous implications for the research funding of Irish HEIs. Irish policy-makers have sought a more coordinated and coherent HE system exemplified by demands stemming from senior management in the HEA

for directed diversity but ironically the policy-making system itself is surprisingly opaque and lacks clarity in terms of responsibility for key policy decisions. Further research into this lacunae at the Irish national policy-making level is strongly recommended as well as greater clarity in the roles of the DES, the HEA and research funding state agencies. The HEA was originally set up in 1968 as a buffer agency between the Department of Education and the Irish universities but its role has developed to the point where the Hunt Report (2011) proposals envisage the HEA coordinating the strategic direction of both the universities and IoTs.

In conclusion, as it stands the centre of gravity of decision-making in relation to HE is difficult to locate with any certainty at both national and European levels. The roles and indeed powers of the various institutions (not least the funding institutions), and the balance between them, is not conducive to effective policy-making, The evidence provided in this thesis also indicates that the centre of gravity of decision-making in relation to HE policy is shifting and can no longer be understood without looking to the European Commission's 'modernisation' agenda for HE and the research funding opportunities under the Horizon 2020 programme. Unfortunately, as noted above, the disagreements between interviewees was such that it was difficult to reach certain conclusions particularly on the extent of the power exerted by the European Commission, an influence which national policy-makers rejected, but that many academic workers, in particular in the IoT sector, were keen to stress. In any case, EU policies add a new layer of bureaucratic and potentially unaccountable policy-making to the complex pattern of domestic interrelationships that have led to somewhat haphazard Irish policies lacking an explicit whole-of-system approach until the Hunt Report of 2011. Fortunately, while the Irish HE system grew vastly in the last decades, it has done so in a reasonably sensible way, but there is no certainty that serendipity will be

permanently available and the evidence reported in this thesis indicates some peripheral institutional drift needs to be addressed in the interests of all, in particular when viewed in the context of TU redesignation and the ambiguity around different interpretations of the regional remit of IoTs. Nonetheless, accusations of drift between Irish HEIs are overstated and do not reflect available data produced by the HEA. Drift, and in particular "academic drift", is more glacial in the Irish context than would appear at a first glance.

In the ever-dynamic contemporary evolution of higher education policies, and the enormous resource and societal implications of all of this, further clarity as to the location of the centre of gravity of decision-making in relation to HE is essential. With this context in mind, state agencies, the government, supranational organisations and HEIs need to devise articulate and transparent policies, missions and roles in order for the Irish HE system to perform the best it can.

> There are now almost 153 million tertiary students in the world, a 53% increase since the year 2000 and a fivefold increase in less than 40 years. It is predicted that the demand for higher education worldwide will expand from 97 million students in 2000 to over 262 million students by 2025 (UNESCO, 2009).

Ireland has now reached what Trow would characterise as "universal" HE (1973, p.7). This is the first pressure Ireland's HE system must deal with. Although Ireland started from a low base and a late start in comparison to OECD counterparts, the rate of expansion in student numbers has been among the highest of all OECD countries in previous decades. From five per cent of 18 years old enrolling into HE back in 1960, the proportion has jumped to 65 per cent in 2010 (HEA, 2011, p.31). Senior academic 1 (University 2) was keen to emphasise that in Ireland, the numbers had increased so substantially over the past 50 years that entering HE had become "the norm". Obviously, this brings on new issues such as the funding of a HE system that must cater for such a large proportion of secondary school leavers with different

needs and different levels of achievement, as well as increasing numbers of mature learners. Universalisation should not be viewed uncritically but there is no doubt about the scale of the transformation of HE over a fifty-year period (Walsh, 2014). According to a senior manager in the HEA, the pressures emanating from this push towards universal access and the implications for the funding of HE systems have a major impact on Irish policy-making in the HE arena. This would frame the Irish HE landscape reforms within the context of continuously expanding HE systems according to Trow's linear model of development (1973; 2005), which has been described as helpful in "providing a framework for analysing the stratification of higher education and different types of institutions within universal systems" (Barnett, 2012, pp.42-43).

The evidence gathered indicates that within the Irish HE system, there still exists a set of differentiated HEIs, although not necessarily along the lines of the binary divide established in the late 1960s, the sum of which leads to a healthy amount of diversity within the system. The Irish HE system can be best characterised as a system in transition. It remains diversified, because it exhibits marked differences within sectors, even though the differences between sectors appear to have diminished to some extent. The level of convergence as enunciated by Neave (1983) and Kyvik (2004) is limited, and all HEIs do not look the same. The diversification that occurred in the 1970s may have blurred but not to the point where it has been decisively undermined. The persistence of a modified binary divide is visible.

There are specific examples where the binary divide has been blurred, because of growing institutional homogenisation e.g., the move up the NFQ by IoTs with greater course offerings at Level 8 and less emphasis on Levels 6 and 7, visible in both IoT1 and IoT2 (HEA, 2013). In some cases, in particular in the larger IoTs as evidenced in IoT3, an increase in provision

at Levels 9 and 10 is visible, but not to the point where these numbers are on par with that of the seven universities (see Table 8.1, p.266 and Table 8.2, p.268). Therefore, I would conclude that the traditional binary divide inherited from the late 1960s has been modified because the economic, social, political and technological contexts are no longer the same. Nonetheless, for the vast majority of HEIs on both sides of the divide, including IoT1, IoT2 and University 2, it has left an indelible imprint, confirmed by a majority of interviewees who identified a more vocational focus in the delivery of courses in the IoT sector, even though that vocational focus is diminishing. Therefore, I would conclude that there has been only a limited amount of "academic drift" and "drift in curricular emphasis" (Neave, 1979, p.155) as evidenced by the distinctive delivery and applied focus of the Humanities in the IoT sector and the very limited number of postgraduate numbers in most IoTs, especially at Level 10, as evidenced in IoT1 and IoT2. While the Irish HE system may not be as neatly divided as the German binary system, the Irish HE system is still far removed from the unified post-1992 system in England and Wales: indeed the study indicates that the Irish HE system operates on a continuum defined at either end by the German binary system and the British unified system, but remains significantly closer to the binary model. The distinctiveness both within and across sectors should not be underestimated, because a majority of HEIs in both sectors still exhibit distinctive characteristics. There is strong evidence pointing to the fact that the Irish HE system is not converging towards a unified system (Neave, 1983; Kyvik 2004) because of the relatively limited level of institutional homogenisation between HEIs identified by interviewees outside of those HEIs at the "margins" (senior policy officer 2, HEA). "Academic drift" (Neave, 1979, p.155) is easily overstated and in fact considerably less than argued by some commentators (college officers 1 and 2, University 1; senior academics 1 and 2, University 2).

However, there is undoubtedly some peripheral convergence (senior policy officer 2, HEA) between the larger IoTs and the post-1989 universities. The findings indicate that some elements of "institutional drift" can be found in the larger IoTs, most notably in IoT3 and its unilateral redefinition of institutional objectives, based on its own interpretation of regional needs. The drive for TU status, initiated at the level of the leadership of the IoTs concerned, has the potential to encourage greater convergence by larger IoTs with universities, which government in principle wants to prevent.

Ireland therefore does not fit neatly in the deterministic drive of HE systems towards a unified system as argued by Neave (1983) and Kyvik (2004). This is partly because of the interrelationship between top down influences at government level (DES, HEA) and the bottom up pressures led by HEIs that are specific to Ireland, and even to Irish regions. Substantial differences exist with regard to the regional role for HEIs that may differ from one region to another, depending on a multitude of factors (e.g., the proximity of other HEIs, a densely populated area, a socio-economically disadvantaged area, etc.). Significantly, there is no consensus between institutional and official participants on how to fulfil the regional role and there is a conflict between a primary focus on vocational education as favoured by participants from the HEA and fulfilling further regional demands as demonstrated from participants in IoT3. The latter have taken the view that their mission is to respond to all regional demands and that therefore, the expansion of course offerings, notably with a Level 8 BA course in the Humanities similar in scope to that offered in universities is not equivalent to 'drift'. This wide interpretation of its regional remit suggests a distinctive pattern in globalisation identified by Vaira (2004, p.484), with a local elite contradicting European and national plans for a more coordinated, coherent and system wide implementation of national goals seeking a concentration of resources and critical mass. The strategies pursued by IoT3

arguably demonstrate the "heterogeneity of globalization's effects and outcomes on the local level" and the importance of bottom up "processes of manipulation, localization, interpretation, mediation, resistance and so on" (Vaira, 2004, p.484). This study suggests that imposed, top down convergence is not occurring in the Irish context (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004, pp.349-350), not least because the choices made by IoT3 are not primarily driven by national and/or EU policies; indeed, as conceded by college officer 2 (IoT3) the presence of a School of Humanities is "not the type of thing that we are promoting because the government doesn't want it, but there's a demand we are responding to". However, it may be seen as an example of convergence in the sense of growing homogenisation and isomorphism between HEIs because of "institutional drift" as evidenced by the unilateral redefinition of institutional objectives (Neave, 1979, p.155). However, one cannot generalise what is happening in IoT3 to the entire system and in particular to the entire IoT sector, although parallels with other large IoTs are visible (most notably DIT). Significant differences exist, based on the findings that emerged from interviews with participants in IoT1 and IoT2, where for example the scope of Humanities remains narrow and with a specific applied approach, which is not the case in IoT3 with its own School of Humanities of a much broader scope than usually found in the IoT sector. It remains unique to this particular case, and as argued by Neave (2002), convergence depends on the level of analysis and it cannot be generalised from the unique case presented by IoT3 to the entire IoT sector (2002, p.188). There is no evidence to suggest that the level of convergence identified in IoT3 is replicated in a majority of IoTs: indeed the evidence by participants in the smaller IoTs suggests the contrary (senior academic 1, IoT1; senior academic 1, IoT2). Yet such a wide interpretation of the regional remit and resistance to national planning has an effect on national policy-makers, and undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of the proposed redesignation to TU status, designed by official agencies as a 'final solution' to institutional

demands: this development in national policy illustrate how bottom up pressures are subtly altering the institutional balance of the Irish HE system and how policy-makers cannot simply impose their will but must seek to negotiate solutions that command a degree of institutional support.

It is clear that national HE policies promote and favour horizontal differentiation first and foremost. However, as explained by a senior manager in the HEA, vertical differentiation is also an objective, and the performance related funding mechanism recently put in place with mission-based performance compacts indicates that this may become more of a trend in Ireland, because up to 10 per cent of the core grant will be allocated in the near future on the basis of "institutional performance against an agreed set of missions and plans" (HEA, April 2013, p.12; HEA, July 2013, p.6). The policy objectives articulated in the Hunt Report (2011) and subsequent policy documents mirror EC objectives geared towards the 'modernising' of HE systems and HEIs contained in successive EC Communications (2003, 2006, 2011), through sharper emphasis on differentiation in mission and role of HEIs, and in particular a clearer delineation in the distribution of resource heavy research activities between HEIs. With Irish HEIs about to compete for research funds within the framework of Horizon 2020, the EU's biggest research funding programme ever, and with ambitious targets set at national level, a change of institutional behaviour is deemed necessary by officials in HEA and DES to access those research funds According to Irish policy documents, this will require HEIs to be clear on their mission, ensure that the latter fits with the government's whole-of-system approach, reduce duplication and develop identified areas of strength, therefore concurring with views expressed by policy-makers in the EC on the importance of: "knowing what you're good at, adopting a strategic plan, and then government enabling you to get there if

that's what something government thinks is important to do for the country" (policy officer 1, EC).

It has been argued by the relevant authorities (senior policy officer 1 and 2, HEA; senior manager, HEA; policy officer DES), that EC Communications and other EU documents have peripheral influence and do not influence directly the national policy-maker (see Chapter five). Yet the above analysis of key priorities in the Hunt Report and EU Communications suggest a more nuanced picture. As an "institutional carrier" that is "politically and socially highly legitimated" the EU has formed a context, an "objective reality" as identified by Vaira (2004, p.488) that is the necessity to 'modernise' HE systems and HEIs. The EU's modernisation agenda for HE, which is shaped by the wider influences of globalisation, massification and most recently economic crisis is defined and disseminated through tools such as the OMC and the European Semester, but is advanced more obviously and directly through the necessity to align national and institutional policies towards funding opportunities such as the EU's Horizon 2020. It provides a wider context for national changes to operate in. National and EU policies are also responding to common pressures, such as the "massification" and/or "universalisation" (Trow, 1973) of HE which present similar challenges to the structure of HE systems, leading to broadly similar solutions. A complex interrelationship between EU and national policy is apparent, based on a shared discourse structured around the perceived priorities of rationalisation, institutional differentiation and system diversity, influenced in turn by the common ideological context of globalisation.

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Appendix A

Information letter and consent form sent to potential interviewees

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH
THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

Dear _____,

About me

My name is Ludovic Highman and I am currently in the second year of my PhD in the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin. I am working under the supervision of Dr John Walsh, Ussher Lecturer in Higher Education. Previously, I studied Law and Political Science at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in France, Ireland, Sweden and the UK.

About my research

The preliminary title of my thesis, which is a case study on the impact of differentiation at system and institutional levels in Ireland, is the following: *"A case study on differentiation in the mission and roles of higher education institutions in Ireland"*.

Within the scope of my research, I will be analysing in greater depth the underlying reasons and the extent to which differentiation between HEIs (both horizontal and vertical, whether bottom up or top down) is considered a necessary tool in the restructuring of Irish Higher Education, as expressed both in the "National Strategy for Higher Education till 2030" (HEA, January 2011) and the Landscape document 'Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape' (HEA, February 2012).

This will lead me to reflect upon the influence of external agendas, European and international, that could be embedded in the rationale for this specific domestic preference. By focusing on differentiation as part of the broader modernisation process the Irish HE system is currently engaged in, I believe I will be touching on sensitive, albeit crucial aspects of the structure of the Irish HE, including the potential review of Ireland's traditionally binary system, as well as issues affecting the diversity of HEIs embedded within.

However, in order to be able to decipher whether differentiation is actually occurring at ground level, and not just in policy documents, an insider perspective is essential. The gap between policy rhetoric and implementation can vary enormously and it is this subtlety that I wish to capture. Is a concrete policy of differentiation being implemented at institutional level, with visible tangible effects or is the reverse actually happening, encouraging higher education institutions to mimic strategies from what is perceived to be successful from a government's perspective, in fear of being left out or see their missions be delineated 'top down'?

Confidentiality

Your name will at no point be revealed during the process. Confidentiality will ensure that the privacy of the interviewees in guaranteed. Every effort will be made to protect the anonymity of participants. Participants' names and any other identifying information will not be communicated to anyone that is not directly involved in the research, including other participants. Interviewees' names will not appear in the final thesis. Only the name of the institution or agency a participant works for will appear below a particular quote or piece of information revealed during the interview as well as a general job title (e.g., policy officer 1, European Commission; senior policy officer 2, HEA). Higher education institutions that are part of the sample will be anonymized (e.g., University 1, IoT3). Finally, participants' answers during the interview will be sent to them for approval and cross-checking prior to completion of analysis of the findings.

Final note

I would be extremely grateful if you could spare some of your valuable time and agree to participate in a short interview (approximately 45 minutes), at your earliest convenience. Should you wish to participate in this research, I will communicate to you further details about the interview questions.

Kind regards,
Ludovic Highman
PhD candidate
School of Education
Trinity College Dublin

Appendix B

Interview schedule for Irish interviewees

1. Do you think that the Irish government values diversity of mission and objectives between higher education institutions?

2. Would you say that the Irish higher education system is a good example of a clearly differentiated system with distinct roles and profiles for the university and IoT sectors?

3. What do you understand by 'differentiation' between or within institutions? What influences have shaped differentiation between higher education institutions in recent years?

4. Would your organisation/institution favour government policies that promote a select group of world-class institutions as opposed to a world-class higher education system?

5. Do you consider the severe economic crisis which affected Ireland following the global financial crisis to be an important driver in an ongoing reconfiguration of Irish higher education?

6. To what extent do you believe that investment in higher education can boost economic recovery?

7. Does your organisation/institution consider the EU's repeated calls for the modernisation of higher education systems to be a significant influence on national policies in Ireland? In particular, do you think that EU policies influence differentiation between institutions?

8. Are you aware of higher education reforms happening in other EU Member States (such as England, Finland, France, Germany), which might be relevant for Ireland?

9. To what extent do you think that Irish higher education policies are influenced by policy documents or reports issued by international organisations such as the OECD?

10. Do you consider academic or institutional 'mission drift' a reality in Ireland? If so, how does such 'mission drift' show itself in practice?

11. Would you agree with the statement that there is growing institutional homogeneity within the Irish higher education landscape?

12. How do you think that technological universities might affect differentiation of mission and stratification within the Irish higher education system and in particular would they represent a dramatic change from the current binary model?

13. Do you believe that there are converging trends in higher education reflected at system and institutional levels in Ireland? Would you regard Ireland as an example of convergence or divergence at system and institutional levels?

Appendix C

Interview schedule for interviewees at European level

1. Are you aware of the binary structure of the Irish higher education system based on a traditional university sector and a more vocational oriented institute of technology sector?

2. What do you understand by mission 'differentiation' between or within higher education institutions? What influences do you think have shaped mission differentiation between higher education institutions in recent years?

3. Would your organisation/institution favour government policies that promote a select group of world-class institutions as opposed to a world-class higher education system?

4. Do you think the severe economic crisis following the global financial crisis was an important driver in the EU's modernisation agenda for higher education systems and higher education institutions?

5. Why did the EU launch a modernisation agenda for higher education systems and higher education institutions and what does it expect to achieve through such an agenda?

6. To what extent do you believe that investment in higher education can boost economic recovery?

7. Does your organisation/institution consider the EU's repeated calls for the modernisation of higher education systems to be a significant influence on national policies in Member States? In particular, do you think that EU policies influence differentiation between institutions?

8. Are you aware of higher education reforms happening in EU Member States? Are they similar?

9. To what extent do you think that Member States' higher education policies are influenced by policy documents or reports issued by international organisations such as the OECD?

10. Do you believe that there are converging trends in higher education reflected at system and institutional levels in Member States? Would you regard Ireland as an example of convergence or divergence at system and institutional levels?

A case study on differentiation in the mission and role of higher education institutions in Ireland

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Diversification was initiated in the 1960s in many European countries by structurally transforming, at the system level, predominantly university-dominated systems into binary systems of higher education with an officially recognised vocationally oriented higher education sector more adapted to the needs of the local economy. A key issue for my thesis is whether differentiation in mission and role between higher education institutions may be seen either as a response to external pressures (notably European Union policies under the European Commission's "modernisation agenda for European higher education"), linking this to converging theories of European higher education systems under the combined influence of the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy, Horizon 2020, European mobility schemes and funding opportunities or whether higher education reform, and differentiation in particular, is a more long-term feature of the development of national higher education systems, keeping in mind that both pressures are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Trow's linear model of development of higher education systems from elite to mass to universal (1973) is of relevance since in Ireland, participation has reached the "universal" phase, with 65 per cent of 18 years old entering higher education (HEA, 2011, p.31). Differentiation in role and mission between HEIs (e.g., research oriented HEIs versus teaching focused institutions) may be a tool enabling to deal with this transition, typical of a system whose priority is to prepare the whole population to rapid technological change (Trow, 2005, p.1).

Within this study, the research questions are: 1. How has differentiation manifested itself in the higher education sector in Ireland since 2000?; 2. Has the traditional binary structure of the Irish HE system been reinforced or diluted in the early twenty-first century?; 3. Have national higher education policies tended to promote greater differentiation in the role and functions of higher education institutions?; 4. To what extent are national higher education policies and institutional strategies informed by the European Union strategy for the 'modernisation' of higher education?

These questions will be answered through a single-case study of the Irish higher education system. Within the single-case study, attention will be given to five subunits of analysis, which will result in the use of an embedded single-case study research design. These five subunits will be higher education institutions that are representative of Ireland's binary divide, including three institutes of technology and two universities. Research methods will include policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews at all three global, national and local levels.