

Symposium: ‘Societal Impact of our Universities’

A History of Queen’s College, Galway; University College Galway; and NUI Galway in Four Contrasting Images

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(read before the Society, 16th December 2021)

Keywords: education history, demographics, Queen’s College, Galway, University College Galway, NUI Galway
JELs: N30, I20

In 1845, Queen’s College Galway was founded. This was at the beginning of *An Gorta Mór*: harrowing, tragic times that wrought permanent change on the country’s demographic, cultural and political landscape, none more so than in the very region where the university was based. In an asymmetry not without its stories of both dislocation and of urbanisation, in 1841 there were far more people in Connacht (1.4 million in the census of 1841 as against 551,000 in 2016), but many fewer in Galway town (approx. 17,000 in 1841, compared to nearly 80,000 in 2016). As further evidence of the immediate changes wrought by the Famine context in which Queen’s College was established in Galway, by 1851 the population of the town had grown to 23,000 from 17,000 ten years previously (the highest percentage growth in the country): this increase includes 3,000 people (nearly one in eight of the population of the town) in the Union Workhouse and other institutions, and also reflects an emptying out of areas like Rahoon and people moving to town, away from the land.

Following construction of the iconic Quadrangle building, the University opened its doors four years later to the first cohort of just 68 students.

The campus was recently visited by the CEO of a major international MedTech company. In conversation at the Quadrangle, one of its Irish-based management aptly asked, “wasn’t this a mad idea?”, referring to the founding of the university in famine times.

The history of the university – ‘a mad idea’ – is a contrast of time and space, formed and framed by a number of images and illustrations outlined here.

Firstly, location has been particularly pertinent to each of the Queen’s Colleges, and Galway is no exception. The Quadrangle, which commenced construction in 1846, and received its first students on 30 October 1849, was then on the edge of Galway. The surrounding area of Newcastle was scarcely built up; what is now the Salmon Weir Bridge, completed in 1818, was still the ‘New Bridge’; and the Galway-Clifden Railway Bridge, which traversed the river further north, did not exist (being completed in 1895).

¹ I am grateful to the participants in the SSISI online symposium in December 2021 on the history of the Queen’s Colleges for their helpful comments on the presentation and to Dr John Caulfield, Dr Marie Coleman, Kieran Hoare, Professor Jim Livesey and An tOllamh Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh for their constructive comments on this paper. It draws on a number of historical anthologies recording the history of the university, including, for example, Diarmuid Ó Cearbhaill’s *Galway Town and Gown – 1484-1984* (Gill & Macmillan, 1984), Tadhg Foley’s *From Queen’s College to National University: essays on the academic history of QCG/UCG/NUI, Galway* (Four Courts Press, 1999), Jackie Ní Chionna’s *An Oral History of NUI Galway: A University in Living Memory* (Four Courts Press, 2019), the work of local historians, Tom Kenny and Fr. James Mitchell, as well as contributions to *cnuasaigh staire* by Professor Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh.

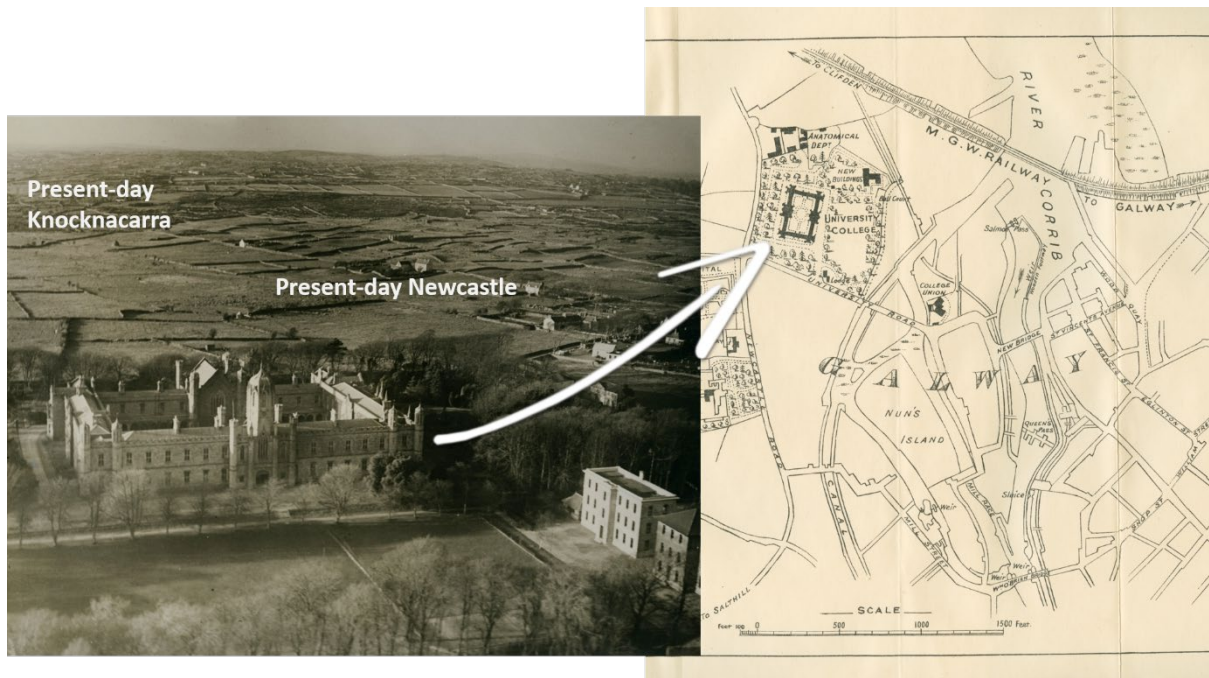


Image 1a: Early beginnings – the University in the late 19th Century

Today, the University is *i lár an aonaigh, fite fuaite* with the town of Galway, surrounded by early twentieth century Newcastle, within sight of the Cathedral (where the County Gaol used to be), with Galway University Hospital, a Grade IV hospital, across the road. The campus now stretches all the way south from Dangan, along the river Corrib, to Nun's Island, close to the Claddagh basin and the sea.

From the edge of town to the centre of things.



Image 1b: the 21st Century campus – from Dangan to Nun's Island

Secondly, and reflecting this change in space, the composition of the student population has changed dramatically. Of its first 68 students, 38 were Catholic, 22 were members of the Established Church, and eight were Presbyterian. As well as the President, and a vice-president, there were 20 professors (a staff-student ratio that would be the envy of any university now!). It became a narrower place when, in 1850, the Synod of Thurles, in

the context of the establishment of the Catholic University, deemed the Queen's Colleges to be "dangerous to faith and morals" and Catholics were prevented, under pain of suspension, from taking studies there. This was not, however, a universally-held truth: the first President of the Queen's College Galway was the Rev JW Kirwan, Parish Priest of Oughterard, who suffered opprobrium for taking up the position, particularly from Archbishop McHale of Tuam. Moreover, as time and concerns with regard to the danger to faith and morals moved on (particularly following the establishment of the Royal University in 1880), there can be no doubt that the university opened up the professions to some degree to Catholic middle-class families (even though many had to move abroad to practice in those early years).

However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were still only about 100 students in Galway, increasing to approximately 600 by the beginning of the Second World War. Passing through various legislative changes, establishing the 'Royal University' in 1880, the National University of Ireland in 1908 and the constituent colleges of the NUI as universities in 1979, more substantive changes came in participation rates, representing new expectations of education, particularly in the generations following the introduction of free secondary school education in the 1960s. Likewise, substantial change was evident in the range of subjects taught, representing a widening out of the provision of education of a citizenry, technical expertise in engineering and science and the medical and business provisions in the region and for the region.

The gates of the University represented below were made more open, physically and metaphorically (the high wall and the gate posts in the photograph have since been removed), and the entirely male student cohort in the photograph was appropriately diversified and revitalised by the arrival of female students, who now comprise c50% of the student population (the first woman graduate being Hannah Moylan who graduated with a BSc. in 1896).



Image 2a: The University gates, around the 1860s, from Chetham Library in Manchester, showing the original Quadrangle building and the gate posts.

This contrast is evident in Image 2b, class photo from the 1980s (my vintage but not my class), when the student population was approximately 5,000, and 2019's Image 2c, choreographed to mark our 175th anniversary (and representing a student population of nearly 20,000).



Image 2b: A class of the 1980s



Image 2c: Students of the 21st Century

While more representative of a different, twenty-first century society, it remains an imperfect mirror of that society – and a constant mirror on that society.

With that admission, however, appropriately reflecting its region, NUI Galway has the highest proportion of first generation students and the highest proportion of students on SUSI grants of any university in Ireland, demonstrating our continuing mission to attract and serve students from under-represented communities.

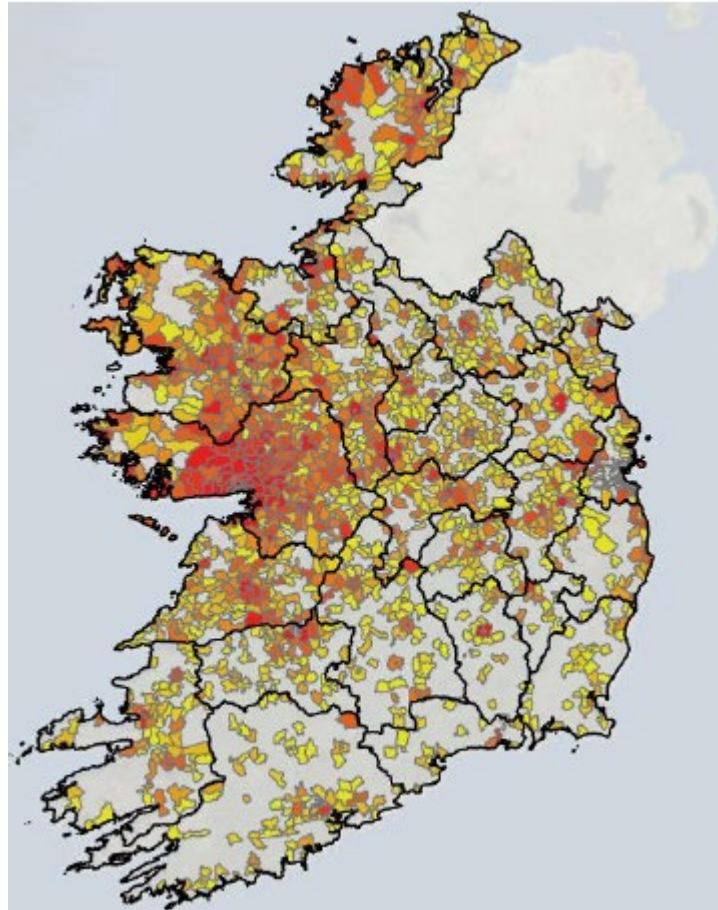


Image 2d: A heatmap representing the home addresses of students currently enrolled in NUI Galway.

While comprising one quarter of the population of Galway, as shown graphically in Image 2d, the mean distance from NUI Galway students' home addresses to the university is 108km. This is the highest of all universities and institutes of technology, and is, coincidentally, consistent with its founding mission. Our students travel further to come to study at NUI Galway than any other university's students. This may also have been true in its early decades, given the religious backgrounds (and therefore the place of origin) of students, largely from the Ulster counties; and it is now a logical function of the size of the university relative to its hinterland, as well as, we would like to think, the attractiveness of the student experience and the degrees offered.

And this regional representation – this regional remit – is a **third** contrasting image of time and place.

NUI Galway is of Galway but not only in Galway. Now, in terms of place, the university has the widest geographical reach of any university in Ireland, including the new, emergent Technological Universities. The university's presence stretches from our Medical Academy in Letterkenny and Gaeltacht centre in Gaith Dobhair in the north of Donegal to Shannon College of Hotel Management in the south of Clare, a short distance from Limerick City.

Indeed, medical education was a feature of its founding: the map on the right of Image 1a shows the 'Anatomical Building', one of the oldest buildings on the Galway campus; while the medical academies throughout the region in Image 3a are, along with the Human Biology Building on the Galway campus, among the university's newest buildings – emblematic of progress given that the 1950s nearly saw the closure of the medical faculty, in an early attempt at consolidation and cost-cutting.

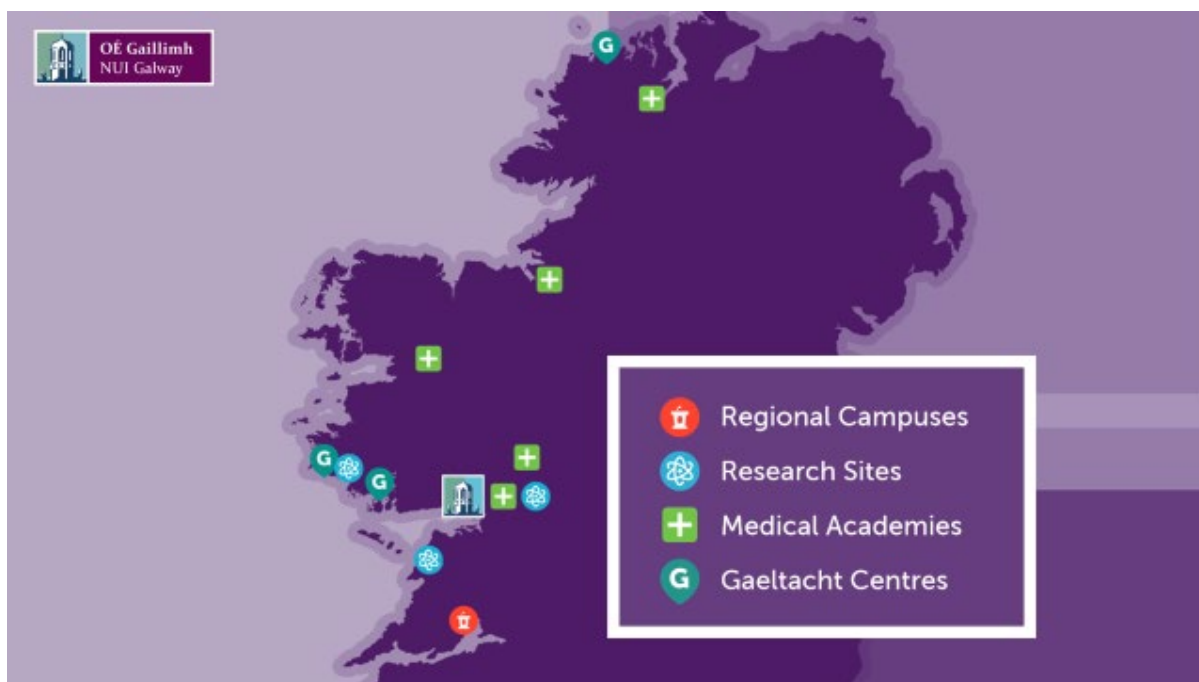


Image 3: NUI Galway's current regional presence

This geographical reach not only represents, physically and metaphorically, a broader opening up than in its beginnings but also represents a broader mission, shaped by how the nature of universities in general has changed but also formed by the specificities of place, which marks the role of any university.

Research now defines a university to a greater extent than ever before. And NUI Galway's research presence is manifest not only in Galway, on campus and in the hospital, but in the uniqueness of its environmental research station at Mace Head and in its laboratory at Carron in the Burren. Arguably, it also stretches out to sea in the use of the Marine Institute's marine research vessels, the *Celtic Explorer* and the *Celtic Voyager*. These again are metaphors for a university's sense of place and the extent to which one extends beyond the walls to understand the world.

Ó Acht Choláiste Príomh-scoile na Gaillimhe i 1929, tá dualgas ar leith ag ar Coláiste na hOllscoile, Gaillimh, mar a bhí – OÉ Gaillimh mar atá – maidir leis an nGaeilge. Bhí – agus tá – an tionchar sin le feiscint i bpearsanra agus i bpearsantacht na hollscoile, ar bhealaí nach raibh – ná nach bhfuil – ar fáil in aon áit eile. Mar ollscoil ar imeall na Gaeltachta agus le hionaid sa Ghaeltacht, bhí dualgas agus deis ar leith ag Gaillimh sa Stát nua chun dul i ngleic le forbairt na teanga mar theanga oifigiúil náisiúnta, teanga a bhí faoi bhrú choíche ag an mBéarla ón seachtú céad déag ar aghaidh: le tionchar faoi leith ag tubaiste an Ghorta Mhóir le linn na tréimhse céanna inar bunaíodh an ollscoil féin. Sampla eile é sin, ar bhealach, de thionchar na hollscoile ar an tsochaí agus ar an todhchaí: ollscoil a bunaíodh nuair a bhí an teanga ag dul i léig agus a raibh de dhualgas uirthi ansin snámh in aghaidh eas an aonteangachais.

Tá sé sin le feiceáil freisin sa bhealach ina bhfreastalaíonn an ollscoil ar phobail [? ar phobal?] na Gaeltachta. The Gaeltacht presence of the university, in Carna, An Cheathrú Rua and Gaoth Dobhair, also represents not only in geographical form its commitment to the Irish language but also its strength of hinterland, and its presence in communities that have unique challenges and opportunities in teaching, research and civic engagement at their most profound.

So, from narrow beginnings in the horrors of famine to a presence stretching along the western seaboard in a much different, inclusive, independent, if yet imperfect, Ireland, our university, like the other Queen's Colleges, reflects its time and space, and the intervening changes in time and space.

Ours is a university stretched along the western seaboard, which sits on the horizon and sees the horizon every day. And when we see the horizon, like all great adventurers, all great explorers, all great researchers, we wonder what's on the other side.

And this is the final, **fourth** manifestation of a university that reflects its time and place – and the changed hand that history has dealt us.

Building on its twentieth century, twenty-first century Ireland is now firmly part of a globalised world. Also building on its twentieth century, its faculty and student experiences, its research collaborations and Erasmus exchanges, twenty-first century NUI Galway is now firmly part of, embedded in and connected to the world around us. This is represented by the image of ENLIGHT below, which sees NUI Galway as a founding member of an EU-sponsored European university network, comprising the Universities of Bordeaux, the Basque Region, Comenius (Bratislava), Ghent, Groningen, Göttingen, Tartu, and Uppsala, stretching from the westernmost to the easternmost borders of Europe, representing a new Europe and a different Ireland. It represents also a choice of perspective in a different century, a look to Europe instead of the forced migration and the coffin ships at the time of the university's foundation. And a country and a university which sees no contradiction in valuing a strong sense of place and self, and an international presence and ambition at the same time. More so, a country and a university which now sees that international perspective as a strength of nation and region.



Image 4: The ENLIGHT European University Alliance, formed in 2020

Universities undoubtedly played a role in this transformation, nationally – and regionally. The Queen's Colleges could have been set up in different towns and it is an interesting thought experiment – an alternative history if you will – that wonders what Galway would have been without its Queen's College. Other towns in Ireland invite contemplation of alternative futures that were prevented.

There is also a Galway that might not have been. A Galway without a civic, intellectual spirit brought and wrought by a university, and its staff and students. But also a Galway without An Taibhdhearc, Druid or an International Arts Festival, all of which were formed in part at least by university students in the 1920s, 1970s and 1980s respectively. A Galway without a MedTech hub, formed in part at least from a research-formed industrial base rising from the demise of Digital Equipment Corporation.

Coming back to its beginning – and the beginning of this presentation – it is unlikely that a Galway without a university would have welcomed the CEO of a major MedTech multinational, whose local leadership would have remarked that this was a 'mad idea' in its time and space.

From the edge of Europe to the centre of things.

DISCUSSION

Giselle Myles: What are the universities doing to promote Irish identity, is there a strategy for preserving the Irish language?

Donal O'Brolchain: Ceist do Dr. O'hÓgartaigh. Ins an grúpa ollscoilleana eorpacha, tá sé soléil go bhfuil COGaillimhe páirteach in grúpa ina bhfuil mionlachtaí. An cabhraíonn sé seo le Gaeilge a fhorbairt CoGaillimhe?

Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Donal, tá an ceart agat ó thaobh na mionlaíochta de. Táimid bainteach le hollscoileanna sa Bhriotáin agus i dtír na mBascach agus tá deis ansin treisiú le mionlaigh agus teangacha mionlacha ar fud na hEorpa.

Donal O'Brolchain: Go raibh maith agat. Beannachtaí na Féile agus Sonas na hAithbhlíana ortsa, agus chuid gach éinne in COGaillimhe. Dr. Ó'hÓgartaigh. Mar eolas - muna bhfuil eolas agat ar cheanna https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_81. Ivory Tower Dated perhaps but see. Peter Froggatt "Business and Academics - the Fruitful Interaction of Town and Gown." in Miriam Hederman (ed) *The Clash of Ideas - essays in honour of Patrick Lynch*. Gill and Macmillan 1988

Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Go raibh maith agat - an-úsáideach.

Eóin Flaherty: Thank you for the very interesting presentations. For Prof. Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh - NUI Galway has had a special role to promote/use Irish since c. 1930, though perhaps the University had a particular focus on it before this point. How has this progressed over the years and how does NUI Galway see this mandate at the moment? I suppose this also ties in with the University's link with the city and the wider county.

Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Yes, Eóin and Giselle. We see Irish as an opportunity for distinctiveness, drawing on our hinterland. Ní aon ualach í ach luach.