

Ireland

Introduction

St Aubyn et al. (2009) find the Irish tertiary education system always at the production possibility frontier (together with Sweden, the UK, and the Netherlands). The efficiency of the system is mainly due to the graduation output, which is large in numbers and is also the best in perceived quality. The Irish tertiary education system is highly efficient and specialised in teaching.

One of the strengths of Ireland's tertiary education system is that it has expanded student numbers while preserving very high quality. The entry rate of higher education has grown from 44% of the population in 1998 to 65% in 2008. The National Skills Strategy plans to further expand the participation rate to 72% by 2020. At the same time, total expenditure on education and tertiary education has decreased in recent years and is expected to further decrease due to budgetary consolidation efforts.

Indicators

With above average numbers of students, the Irish tertiary education system produces the second largest numbers of graduates and their quality, as measured by the recruiter review indicator, is the best. The Irish tertiary education system has the largest number of graduates per student. The number of publications is also above average and their quality is very good.

Table - Summary of indicators in St Aubyn (2009)

	Average ISI citation		Recruiter review		Peer review	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
IE	3,85	11	2,00	1	1,94	2
best performer	NL - 5,51	1	IE - 2	1	FI - 2	1
worst performer	RO - 1,63	26	CZ -1,06	16	GR - 1,02	16

	Funding rules		Staff policy		Evaluation	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
IE	5,90	4	7,9	9	6,7	6
best performer	PT - 7,8	1	CZ, DK, NL, AT, SK, SE,	1	HU - 8,3	1
worst performer	SK - 2,9	18	FR - 1,8	18	GR - 2,3	18

	Academic staff	Students	Graduates	Publications	Students	Graduates	Graduates
			<i>per capita</i>		<i>per academic staff</i>	<i>per student</i>	
IE	2,3	41,6	13,5	0,8	18,0	5,8	32,4
EU27	1,9	33,7	7,1	0,6	17,8	3,7	19,8

	PISA	
	Score 2000*	Rank
IE	514	5
best performer	FI - 540	1
worst performer	RO - 410	18

Considering its size, Ireland is one of the countries with more universities pointed out by peers as being excellent. Recruiters regard universities in Ireland as providing highly employable graduates.

The average PISA scores are very good.

The scores of the efficiency indicators are above average. Some of the factors typically identified as important for performance are not found in the Irish system, for example there is not (yet) performance-funding in the core grant, and the proportion of private investment in

higher education is relatively low (15% in 2008) and has declined over the past fifteen years. A main strength of the tertiary education system is that Universities were always autonomous – autonomy was asserted by law by the Universities Act (1997) – and there is a strong quality assurance culture.

Government accounts for above 80% of funding of Universities and above 90% for Institutes of Technology. Local & national government, as well as industry & business are represented on Governing Bodies of Universities.

Research activity of Institutes of Technology is growing, especially regionally orientated applied research. The Institutes have very close links with local government and industry. There is a strong focus on collaboration between institutions so that institutions share infrastructure (funding meets 50% of the cost of collaborative activities). The focus is explained by the small size of the tertiary education system, with seven Universities with small Departments and Schools.

Burnham (2003)¹ highlights the expansion and reorientation of State-funded higher education as one of the important explanations to the economic success of Ireland and stresses that the programmes in electrical engineering and information technology were expanded in view of the computer firms established such as Apple and Wang. By 1993, the share of science and technical graduates in the 25-34 age group of the labour force was the highest in the OECD, which highlights the interactions between labour markets and education policies.

Policy developments

The expansion of higher education opportunities is a policy goal with a target to raise the participation rate to 72% by 2020. Making access more equal and responding to skill shortages are among the main reasons for this target. A main policy challenge is to create study places for more students (as population is growing and access to tertiary education is expanding) under fewer resources.

The current grant allocation model was reformed to be more transparent (includes formula) and reflect national priorities. It encourages lifelong learning and mobility within higher education. Universities decide how to spend the core grant.

The research landscape is under transformation. Until recently there was a strong emphasis on teaching and the production of graduates. Now there is more emphasis on MSc and PhD degrees. There was a very quick and strong increase in Higher Education expenditure on research and development. The main research funding programmes are the following:

- Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions: From the late 1990s the Irish government has made large scale investments available on a competitive basis to the higher education institutions for research.
- Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) was established in 2000 to support research in biotechnology, information and communications technology and sustainable energy and energy-efficient technologies development.
- Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation (2006-13) is investing in science, technology and innovation programmes to ensure that “Ireland by 2013 will be internationally renowned for the excellence of its research, and will be to the forefront in generating and using new knowledge for economic and social progress, within an innovation driven culture”.

¹ Burnham, J. B. (2003), Why Ireland Boomed, The Independent Review, vol. VII, n. 4, Spring.

- Strategic Innovation Fund (SFI) [2006-2013] to support innovation in Higher Education institutions.

In the last 12 years, the priorities of the new major research streams are decided by the Government.

The main acts in education reform are as follows:

- The Universities Act (1997) provided for greater autonomy for the universities, set out the objects and functions of a university and established internal and external structures for their governance, quality assurance and accountability, while providing a legislative framework to preserve their academic freedom, diverse tradition and institutional autonomy.
- The Institutes of Technology Act (2006) provided for greater institutional autonomy, improved governance and provided a statutory guarantee of academic freedom. As part of this, it brought the IoTs under the aegis of the Higher Education Authority, away from direct control by the Department of Education and Science.
- The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) established the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Higher Education Training and Awards Council and the Further Education and Training Awards Council.