Measures and Metrics and Academic Labour

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By way of an introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to act as a partial continuation of Chapter 3 and to discuss the work of Irish academics and researchers and their subsequent ‘outputs’. I will start by considering the role and scope of academic labour and then move on to consider the ‘products’ of their work. This will include the traditional outputs such as journal articles and research funding and also some of the key markers emanating from so-called third mission: patents, invention disclosures and industry–higher education (HE) collaborations. Lastly, I will weave into this a discussion around the performativity of Irish HE institutions vis-à-vis global and European ranking systems. Due to space constraints this chapter excludes any detailed treatment of these three areas here, though my intention my intention is essentially to map out their main characteristics in relation to that of Irish HE.

As an opening comment, it would be unsurprising to say that these three areas (the shape, scope and form of academic labour, their outputs and any subsequent evaluations of their worth and status) are interlinked. However, in echoing the neo-evolutionary economists, the connections between them are arboreal, non-linear and most definitely non-Newtonian, which for policymakers attempting to steer the system in a particular direction is intensely problematic. However, more specifically, what links this triad together (and is firmly implicated in the steering ‘problem’) is the overarching refrain of control and governance of the system. Since the demise of the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent legitimation crisis (Offe, 1984), this has taken the form of a more assertive posture by the state, in terms of its articulation of what constitutes the function of the sector and control around the processes and products of HE. But how this has been enacted is, as Walsh and Loxley (2012) suggest, a curious hybrid of network governance, neo-Weberianism and old-fashioned new-public managerialism (NPM). Although the state has since the 1960s incrementally increased its control over the university sector in particular (see Chapters 1 and 2) since 2009, a critical factor which has
accelerated this degree of intervention in this state–HE relationship has been
the very stringent constraints on public spending. For public sector work-
ers, including those in state-funded higher education institutions (HEIs),
this comes in two main forms: firstly, the Public Service Agreement (PSA)
2010–14 (Government of Ireland, 2010) and secondly (and emanating from
this settlement) the Employment Control Framework (ECF) 2011–14, of
which a number of variants were produced for different sectors (for exam-
ple, health, compulsory education) as well as HE (see HEA, 2011a).1 Both
of these measures were products of the National Plan for Recovery 2010–14
(2010), which was an attempt to reduce public sector expenditure which had
increased from 25% (€26 billion) of GNP to 44% (€63 billion) by 2008 and
to restructure public sector organisations and work practices. The scale and
associated time frame of the cuts have been dramatic to say the least; the
national recovery plan envisaged a reduction in spending of €15 billion and
a deficit of less than 3% of GDP by 2014. However, the estimate for 2013 is
for an overall public spending target of €54 billion and a reduction of €9
billion.2 This less-than expected reduction has been attributed to relatively
weak and slow economic recovery (Government of Ireland, 2012).

A further contextual factor that is important to note is that state-supported
Irish HE institutions derive 83% of their income from exchequer sources;
in the United Kingdom it is 30%, Australia 45%, Finland 95%, with the
OECD average being 70% (OECD, 2012). HE expenditure accounts for 2.8%
(€1.63 billion) of all Irish public spending, of which the education sector
as a whole constitutes 14.2% (or €8 billion) (Government of Ireland, 2012).
However, between 2008 (the peak year for funding) and 2010, the allocation
to the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) and universities had fallen by 14% or
€238 million and a further 5% between 2012 and 2013. This general reduc-
tion in funding should also be viewed in the context of the Department
of Education and Science’s (DES) 2011 comprehensive spending review. The
DES noted (following the European Commissions Directorate-General for
Economic and Financial Affairs, 2010, and St Aubyn et al.’s, 2009, studies
of tertiary education) that Irish HE was an efficient and cost-effective sys-
tem, which was commended for its quality assurance procedures and high
degree of institutional flexibility and autonomy (p.87). The St Aubyn (2009)
study in particular found Ireland to be effective across a number of indica-
tors: output of graduates, levels of enrolment of traditional age cohort, ratio
of graduates to non-graduates, reputation of institutions and employability
and quality of graduates, public and private returns from HE, academics per
1000 of the population. In summary:

Ireland, Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands were
the countries to be found always at the production possibility frontier
(or very close to it) … in contrast, another group of countries appears as
highly inefficient. Bulgaria, Spain, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia,