

OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland

Submission by:
All Ireland Society for Higher Education



www.aishe.org

January 2004

Background

Mr. Noel Dempsey, T.D., the Irish Minister for Education and Science, has invited the OECD¹ to carry out a review of higher education in Ireland. A call for submissions from interested individuals and organisations, in relation to this review, was published in the Irish national press on 19th December 2003. This document presents a brief response to this call on behalf of **AISHE**, the All Ireland Society for Higher Education.²

About AISHE

AISHE is a professional society whose goal is to bring together and support those people who are concerned to advance higher education in the island of Ireland. It promotes the professional recognition and enhancement of teaching and learning in Higher Education through a wide range of activities including seminars, conferences, and provision of online community forums and services.

The initiative to establish **AISHE** originated in the Colloquium on University Teaching and Learning: Policy and Practice,³ held at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, 1st-2nd December, 1998, under the auspices of the Irish University Training Network. **AISHE** was formally established at a meeting hosted at University College Cork, 14 March, 2000.⁴

¹<http://www.oecd.org/>

²<http://www.aishe.org/>

³<http://www.aishe.org/iutn-cutl-1998/>

⁴<http://www.aishe.org/mgt/foundation/minutes-14Mar2000.html>

The Role of Higher Education

AISHE endorses the general and overarching comments on the role of Higher Education presented in the review terms of reference.

We would emphasise particularly the crucial contribution of higher education to the establishment and maintenance of “open societies”: societies whose citizens are free and *empowered* to engage in continuous innovation and critical learning, rather than locked in dogmatic or authoritarian ideas. Indeed, one might say that the most essential or distinctive aspect of “higher” education is precisely that it is based on *critical* rather than *authoritarian* learning.

Strategic Management and Structure

It is implicit in what has been said of the role of higher education that the agencies, organisations and institutions involved must themselves be *open*, must be capable of continuing bold innovation, yet be subject to the rigour of critical evaluation. It is clear that this requires a significant diversity of organisation, with very considerable delegation or “subsidiarity”; but exercised within a coherent framework of shared public objectives and corresponding incentives.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching and Learning is at the core of the objectives and activities of **AISHE**. Indeed, it can be argued that the very establishment of **AISHE** stemmed from a frustration on the part of practitioners on the ground with the state and status of teaching and learning in higher education in Ireland. This is now clearly changing—through the efforts of particular individuals, of organisations like **AISHE** itself, and also through specific policy interventions such as the HEA⁵ Targeted Initiatives.

However, it remains the case that the professional training and development of staff in higher education in the Republic of Ireland is still dominated by personal mastery of the academic discipline or specialism. We believe that, in this respect, higher education here is lagging behind that in other developed economies.

Specific measures should be considered, at all levels, to address this. At the public policy level, further strategic initiatives might include national Teaching and Learning Fellowships, teaching and learning subject networks etc. There is a particularly strong opportunity to exploit all-Ireland networking here, sharing and integrating initiatives in both jurisdictions.

⁵<http://www.heai.ie/>

Within institutions there is also considerable scope for clear recognition and support for excellence in teaching, and for greater scholarly reflection on, and research into, the specific practice of teaching in higher education.

Professional development and expertise in teaching in higher education should be strongly promoted as an *additional* and *complementary* facet of the training of academic staff in particular.

The quality of teaching and learning also clearly depends on effective feedback from learners, and active engagement by individuals and institutions with that feedback. We would encourage the continuing development and embedding of effective systems for student feedback in the design and management of teaching activities.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that effective learning depends also on the wider learning context, specifically including many support functions such as student administration, library, computer services, careers, etc.

Research and Development

AISHE has a particular interest in the relationship and interaction between research and teaching and learning in higher education.

We would particularly support measures which would integrate professional development in teaching and learning with “conventional” academic training (Ph. D. and post-doc levels).

As a separate issue, while interaction with teaching and learning is commonly mentioned in the criteria of many research programmes, it is not evident that this is being followed through as effectively as it might. In particular, this interaction should go beyond curricular innovation (the assimilation of new research results into taught programmes) to include serious investigation of *methodological* innovation (how can any given research domain be taught or learned more effectively?).

Investment and Financing

The effective financing of higher education is emerging as a serious challenge in many countries.

AISHE does not have a particular position or recommendation on specific mechanisms or arrangements for such financing. However, we strongly urge that the issue not be fudged. There is a clear recognition in the review terms of reference of the key strategic importance of higher education in the future economic and social development of Ireland. Notwithstanding this, because of the very large investments required, and the relatively very long term lag between investment and outcomes, there is a real danger of systematic under-investment under the current arrangements. Whatever financing model is proposed, it should have the clear capacity to ensure that

there is adequate, and long term, investment, while also, of course, having strong mechanisms to ensure that that investment is deployed efficiently and effectively.

International Competitiveness

AISHE welcomes the growing internationalisation and mobility of students. We believe that such mobility contributes in a very direct way to enriching learning experiences (for both students and staff) by facilitating constructive engagement and debate between very different knowledge structures. Further, by requiring local institutions to operate in international educational markets, it ensures a serious and continuing challenge to their own standards and quality—to the benefit of all stakeholders.

We suggest that encouragement of educational mobility—both into and out of Ireland—should be a matter of explicit public policy and incentivisation. In the specific Irish context, mobility between the two parts of the island itself should be a matter of particular interest and focus. Indeed this may provide a particularly good opportunity for exploring the implementation of the EU Bologna process.

Conclusion

In summary, **AISHE** very much welcomes this strategic review of Higher Education in Ireland. We believe that we have a particularly distinctive perspective to offer on these issues, arising from:

- an individual (rather than institutional) membership structure, which emphasises “grass-roots” or practitioner experiences;
- the diversity of membership, embracing (in the case of the the Republic of Ireland) both the university and institute of technology sectors, and both public and private educational institutions;
- our particular focus on the teaching and learning mission of higher education;
- our all-Ireland organisation.

In conclusion then, we hope that these brief remarks will contribute constructively to the review, and we would be happy to engage in further discussion or elaboration at any time.

Members of the AISHE Executive Committee

- Dr. Barry McMullin (President), Dublin City University.
- Prof. John Panter (Vice-president).
- Ms. Terry Barrett (Secretary), Dublin Institute of Technology.
- Ms. Ellen Breen (Treasurer), Dublin City University.
- Mr. Bernard Burke, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology.
- Ms. Linda Carey, Queen's University, Belfast.
- Ms. Sandra Griffiths, University of Ulster.
- Mr. Tim Higgins, NUI Galway.
- Ms. Sylvia Huntley-Moore, Trinity College Dublin.
- Ms. Anne Jordan, Waterford Institute of Technology.
- Dr. Mícheál Mac an Archinnigh, Trinity College Dublin.
- Ms. Saranne Magennis, NUI, Maynooth.

Contact Information

Email: info@aishe.org

Web: <http://www.aishe.org/>

Voice: +353-1-700-5432

Post: AISHE,
c/o Office of the Dean of Teaching and Learning,
Dublin City University,
Dublin 9
IRELAND.