

An inclusive higher education and the global world

Minimising Hazards, Maximising Opportunities

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I had an opportunity last year to see a performance of Joan Didion's play 'A Year of Magical Thinking' based on her memoir centred on the sudden death of "her wild Irish husband", John Gregory Dunne. Didion had not written any plays before this one and the work is an effective collaboration between her and the director, David Hare. In the interval between the publication of the memoir and their collaboration on the play, her only daughter had also died. I sat in a packed theatre in Dublin, a single wonderful light on the face of Vanessa Redgrave and listened to Didion. I found myself thinking as each sentence flowed that I could have finished any one of the sentences. Why? Didion spoke to Hare with a "mordant sense of humour about her over-controlling tendencies – her desire to arrange the world just as she wants it and to make sure everyone else in her orbit also sees it her way".

This desire to arrange the world and to make sure everyone sees it in the same way now seems to be an issue on which all of us involved in H.E could reflect. Let me outline some of what I call the "us and them" positions which I hear and read. Standards are slipping. There is grade inflation. Students are no longer really literate or numerate. Students don't really study or know what it is to study. They are too busy working, drinking, plagiarising... The past is indeed a foreign land where students arrived better prepared, got down to their studies, reached standards never seen now and the relationship between academic and student was properly calibrated. In this rosy past, we have no 'managerialism' or 'bureaucratization'. We had small colleges, small cohorts of elite students and the world was a better place. It was a place where our world order prevailed and those in our orbit saw it our way.

Now we have 'targets' for participation and we have much talk of 'massification'. We have teaching 'loads' and 'research opportunities'! So what is going on? Yes, we examine key issues in relation to socio-economic background, ethnic origin, gender, regional disparities and intergenerational equity. But why is so much of discourse framed as "us and them" in a binary divide. Is it too focused on our place in the firmament? Many of these issues are now being reviewed by the National Strategy for Higher Education in Ireland Expert Group. This process mirrors a similar project in Australia which resulted in the publication of the Bradley Report in Australia in December. There is for example, strong evidence of a substantial difference between the UK and Australia in relation to intergenerational equity. And yet, the Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, commented in December that Australia has really made no substantial progress on equity over 15 years.

In Ireland, the government has set a target for participation at 72% by 2015. The participation rate is now approaching 60%. What this figure marks is the inequalities which persist. The Irish figure of 60%, when disaggregated by region and socio-economic background shows that we have reached saturation rates for participation by higher socio-economic groups, particularly those who live in affluent areas. And that we have disastrously low levels in participations from some groups.

Data on participation rates is but one metric and it is sometimes easy to focus on what is easily measured. Ireland has a poor record on participation by those over the age of 35 and this is more a commentary on the opportunities available to this cohort earlier in life and our failure to deal with the flexible provision of life-long and life-wide opportunities to those who were not able to avail of 'first-chance' higher education.

In recent months there has been much debate in Ireland on grade inflation, the decline in interest in science and engineering and attrition rates in higher education, particularly in first year. There is a lot of rueful comment that students have changed. They have! So let's look at the world from their perspective.

In Joseph O'Neill's novel 'Netherland', there is a wonderful statement in the opening pages "I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath". In relation to H.E. there is 'a taint of aftermath' in our approach to equity. It is disguised in Ireland by reference to 'grade inflation' and 'slipping standards'. There are real questions around our capacity to distinguish between readiness for higher education and capacity to benefit from it. And there are major questions around diverging world views, sense of identity and values.

Let me shift the perspective a little. As you could expect, I know very little about heavy metal or industrial rock. I am a child of the '60's and more particularly of the West of Ireland. But I know

something of the work of Trent Reznor, aka, Nine Inch Nails. His works include the titles 'Pretty Hate Machine', 'Broken', 'The Downward Spiral', 'The Fragile' and work released in 2007 called 'Year Zero' alongside an accompanying **alternate reality game**. The magazine Rolling Stone commented that "the industrial rock Godfather" has become "the world's scariest digital nerd". Less admiring commentary refers to his work as brutal and brutalist. I had never heard of him until Johnny Cash sang "Hurt" which opens

" I hurt myself today
To see if I still feel
I focus on the pain
The only thing that's real
The needle tears a hole
The old familiar sting
Try to kill it all away
But I remember everything"

It continues

"Everyone I know goes away
In the end"

and concludes

"If I could start again
A million miles away
I would keep myself
I would find a way"

Reznor's fascination with the alternate reality is symptomatic of a generational cultural and social shift on a scale that we are only beginning to access in H.E. I believe that by the time I become aware of some of the places and spaces which form the global social networks, that the participants will have already moved on. If we are to deal with access and accessibility in H.E we need to think about how compelling these alternate realities are and why they prove so much more 'real' than the physical world. Some of this phenomenon arises from a disconnect between what we value in higher education and what students actually see. Many students have taken a view that their participation requires attaining minimum thresholds of performance because they fundamentally do not subscribe to our value system. Perhaps as educators we might consider why this is so.

There is, as you know, much lamentation about declining interest, standards and achievement in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM subjects). In 2008, the OECD reported its findings of a review of this decline¹. It makes for startling reading. It notes that "the number of people showing no interest in science is also worrying, particularly in Europe, where 45% of people feel they are neither interested in nor informed about science and technology". Only 50% of Europeans agreed with the statement that "the benefits of scientific research outweigh any harmful results". It also comments "the general public has little or no idea of what scientists actually do in their working life (and for mathematicians, the situation is even worse) and very few scientists are known by name". The Report has a very interesting section called 'The Student's Voice' where it refers to the two-volume International Handbook of Science Education (1998) where the word 'student' does not appear in the index! Their findings refer to students' interest in developing the skills for critical and creative thinking, their interest in relating STEM disciplines to 'real life' as they understand that term, their wish for more attention to philosophical and ethical issues. One of the most discouraging conclusions in the section of the report is that "interest (in STEM) declines steadily through schooling". These are the views of our future students, taught by our graduates. There is much here for us to consider.

Issues of access and accessibility are about engagement and about values. Where we raise questions about falling standards and mass participations, perhaps we are asking the wrong questions. We focus on 'them' as the source of the problem when perhaps it is much more about us. So when we talk about 'teaching loads', 'accommodating' new types of students in suitable 'institutions' are we really talking about access and accessibility at all?

The Irish poet, Michael O'Siadhail, writes of being creatures of the 21st century – "born in a land, I wake in a globe". For many of our students, the goals and challenges we set them are not worth pursuing. They are pragmatists and so many will engage with our rules and our world vision and order on the most peripheral basis. Perhaps we don't hear and I think, most certainly that we forget. We forget the terrors, the anxiety and the search for meaning. The terrible associated costs of this disengagement can be seen in the statistics for suicide in Ireland. A member of my staff, Seamus

¹ OECD Encouraging Student Interest in Science and Technology Studies

McGuinness, is currently engaged on a research project with the School of Medicine in UCD. Seamus is a Textile Artist and his involvement has grown out of an installation entitled '21 Grams' centred on 90 young male suicides. This larger project now centres on 104 individuals who committed suicide and their families. Most of those who died were under the age of 25 and died between 2003 and 2007. The statistics in Ireland are mirrored elsewhere. When we consider access, accessibility and engagement, it is in this space that we meet our greatest challenge.

So where do we go? When Didion and Hare were working on developing the play, Hare describes a moment when "it took flight". The pair were watching an afternoon rehearsal, "watching Vanessa (Redgrave) up on stage telling us once more about her moody Irish husband and her beautiful, volatile daughter". Didion pointed one of her spidery fingers at the stalls and said, "Wouldn't this be better if it were less about me and more about them". This could become the new mission statement of H.E and our approach to access.