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What Role for Critical Scholarship in the Social Sciences in Irish Public Debates?

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Introduction

This paper reflects on the role of social science scholarship in 21st century Ireland and beyond. In particular, it discusses the relevance and importance of public engagement by academics. It argues that it is an essential aspect of academic work if our disciplines are to have the impact and recognition they deserve. Several avenues for maximizing public and policy engagement are suggested.

On the other hand, such ambitions face a set of constraints related to the neoliberalisation of higher education in Ireland, Europe and elsewhere. The tensions between the need and opportunities for public engagement and the obstacles posed by current higher education policy will thus be outlined.

The paper incorporates the author's research on neoliberalism in Ireland and in higher education, in particular, on two recent book manuscripts on the Irish economic crisis (Mercille, 2015; Mercille and Murphy, 2015). Also, it draws on experience in public engagement through various media outlets in Ireland and internationally.

Public engagement: opportunities

This paper asserts that there are three strategies that should be considered in public engagement.

1. Relevant research topics

First, research topics relevant to public affairs should be selected by academics in their scholarly projects. The under-exploited potential of social scientists to shape policy and public discourse stems in large part from a focus on subjects that are often tangential to central policy debates (although rich in academic terms). There is no

shortage of challenges and problems in 21st century Ireland that could be addressed by social scientists. Housing, homelessness, deprivation, poverty, unemployment, underemployment, weak indigenous industrial base, heavy reliance on foreign multinationals, tax haven status, etc.

It is true that many scholars do work on such issues. However, it is not enough to research a relevant subject. The angle of research must be significant and relevant. There is room for debate as to what constitutes a relevant aspect of a given subject, but clearly, some angles of research are more impactful than others and offer more potential to improve public policy.

2. Media strategy

Second, interactions with the media, both social and mainstream, should be encouraged. They are virtually the only way to have a public impact (unless one has access to individual policy-makers, which is another way to increase relevance for the social sciences). Writing in academic journals and for quality publishers constitutes the bedrock of quality, internationally recognised research, however, it must be translated into impactful ‘sound bites’ that reach those in decision-making roles and the public.

For this, media strategies should be elaborated in order to reach audiences beyond academic circles. Institutional support at the College or University level can help to maximize outreach. Social media may (or may not) be useful in this regard, depending on how it is used and to whom the research outputs are addressed.

3. Audience

Third, audience reception should be considered seriously. Academic language must be adapted to both decision-makers and the general public in order to have influence in policy circles. This applies to social scientific, quantitative studies, critical political economy, cultural or postmodern approaches. Although they have all made significant advances within scholarly circles, they need to adapt to make conversations with policy-makers possible and more fruitful.

Public engagement: constraints

The above strategies to increase public engagement by social scientists and raise the relevance and reputation of the social sciences in 21st century Ireland face a number of obstacles and tensions. These revolve around the neoliberalisation of higher education in Ireland and elsewhere over the last several decades (in Ireland, especially since the 1990s) (Mercille and Murphy, 2015).

In general terms, neoliberalism has re-oriented government policy more towards the needs and interests of the corporate sector and political elites, and away from the interests of ‘ordinary people’ (Harvey, 2005). This, therefore, obviously poses a set of challenges to academics in the social sciences seeking to make their discipline(s)

relevant and important to human affairs. In short, whereas a number of scholars might wish to improve quality of life and opportunities in the country, the very institutional setting in which they work is being actively reshaped in directions contrary to such objectives. In concrete terms, the rewards for ‘going against the grain’ are diminishing and the penalties for doing so are becoming more real and significant. It is thus difficult to operate within this environment.

What follows outlines and explains briefly three constraints that follow from the neoliberalisation of higher education in Ireland: lack of institutional independence and ‘new managerialism’; austerity and labour casualisation; corporatisation entrepreneurial ethos.

1. Lack of independence and the ‘new managerialism’

Under neoliberalism, government policy has made universities more aligned with state priorities. Academia is thus less considered to be an institution whose primary mission is to conduct research to uncover scientific truths, or to challenge power and injustice; rather, its task is to assist political and economic elites in their pursuit of power and protect their privileged socio-economic position. Indeed, the HEA (2014: 9) states that each higher education ‘institution has entered into a compact with the HEA, undertaking how it will contribute to national objectives from the position of particular mission and strengths’. Correspondingly, the ‘framework of higher education system objectives set out by the Minister [for Education and Skills] roots them in wider national goals’, or ‘national priorities of government’, which are listed as:

1. Economic renewal and development at national and regional levels
2. Social cohesion, cultural development and equity at national and regional levels
3. Public sector reform towards greater effectiveness and efficiency
4. Restoration of Ireland’s international reputation

In reality, in Ireland, objectives like ‘national development’ and ‘public sector reform’ mean austerity and unequal economic growth that accommodates overwhelmingly the needs of business over those of ordinary people.

The establishment of ‘new public management’ doctrine and practices has facilitated those transformations. This mode of higher education governance has replaced traditional administrative structures and processes, which tended to be based on bureaucratic rules and professional ethics. Accountability is now located with ‘objective’ public sector managers or external auditors who direct professionals and civil servants according to an “output driven” corporate style of managerialism taken from the business world and neoliberal models of organizational governance’ (Ward, 2012: 46).

Lynch et al. (2012) have analysed Irish higher education through the concept of new managerialism. They point to an increasingly thick bureaucratic layer of managers

who have exerted progressively greater control over academics and the education system as a whole. They have oriented the latter toward serving the corporate sector and implemented detailed ‘performance management’ standards in order to evaluate and measure the work of employees.

2. Austerity and labour casualisation

The austerity regime and privatisation of education has resulted in cuts in public funding and corresponding increases in private sources of revenue, a trend especially evident during the last few years. Since 2006, the real value of public expenditure per student in higher education has declined from just over €11,000 to slightly above €8,000. As a result, there was a lower level of funding in 2013 than a decade previously (see Figure 1).

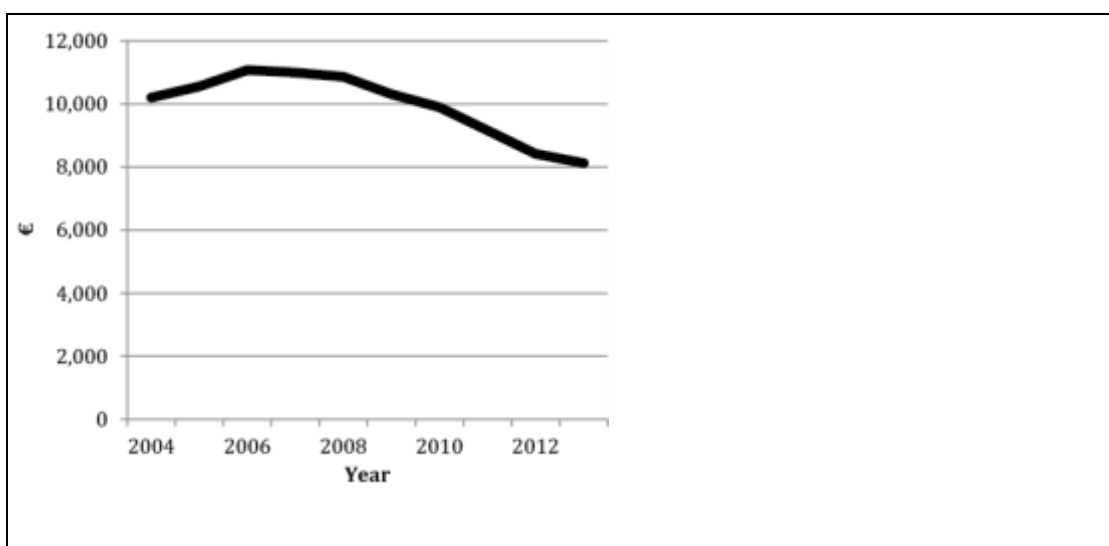


Figure 1. Real current expenditure per student, 2004-13 (€).

Source: Central Statistics Office (2015: Table 4.1).

The Hunt report reiterates those principles and calls for shifting the funding base away from public expenditure and toward increasing student fees, allegedly the ‘only realistic option’ since government funding must be cut (see Figure 2) (Hunt et al., 2011: 16). Students should be made to pay through increased fees and loan schemes, which are ‘essential’ elements of the future financing of education (Hunt et al., 2011: 16). As a result, figures show that, overall, public funding as a proportion of total funding for higher education has decreased between 2008 and 2014 from 76% to 56% and is projected to reach 51% by 2016. However, and more precisely, because about half of the student contribution is paid indirectly by the government through grants, when this is taken into account, public funding as a proportion of total funding has actually decreased from 78% in 2008 to 68% in 2013 and will drop to 64% by 2016, as compared to a European Union-21 average of 77% (2010) (HEA, 2014: 26, 88). It is projected that, by 2016, private student contributions will amount to 19% of total higher education institutions’ income. Moreover, income from research grants and contracts as a proportion of total income has grown from 13% in 2002 to 19% in 2011 (HEA, 2014: 88).

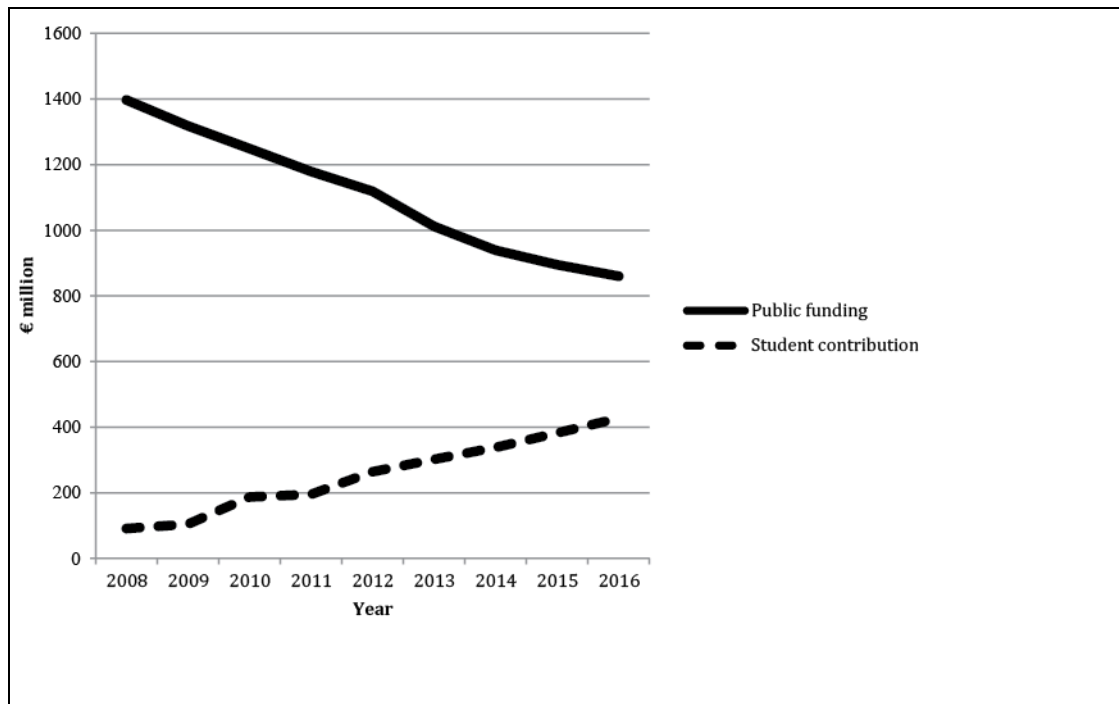


Figure 2. Declining public expenditure and rising student contribution, 2008-16 (€ million).

Source: HEA (2014: 88).

All this makes it more difficult to attract students and to form an academic community within which knowledge creation takes place. It also devalues the role of the social sciences in universities and public life. Students increasingly choose to take degrees depending on job prospects and the social sciences are at a disadvantage compared to the natural sciences in this respect. Without adequate funding, student numbers will drop, and ultimately, it is staff numbers that will be reduced.

A related growing phenomenon is the casualisation of labour in higher education. The number of permanent, tenured academic positions has been gradually reduced and replaced by temporary, low-paid, and non-tenured jobs. This has resulted in the proliferation of a type of worker that may be referred to as the ‘casual academic’ (Clarke et al., 2015; Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015). Although there is no reliable systematic data available tracing the evolution of precarious labour in Irish higher education (see Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015), the casualisation of work, especially under austerity, is obvious to anyone working in the sector.

One result is that it becomes more difficult to conduct significant research projects, let alone to transfer them into the public domain, when one has a precarious status.

3. Corporatisation entrepreneurial ethos

As outlined in the Hunt report (Hunt et al., 2011), the primary change sought is to make higher education more at the service of the corporate world and government,

by conducting research that is usable by enterprises, supplying a skilled workforce meeting the needs of companies, and by producing knowledge and applications that can be commercialised and profitable for the private sector. Indeed, the word ‘enterprise’ is used 89 times in the 134-page report, which states that, in the future, ‘higher education will need to be more proactive in commercialisation and knowledge transfer’, goals which will have to be pursued ‘in collaboration with others in enterprise’ (Hunt et al., 2011: 31). It asserts that a ‘renewal and transformation of the relationships between higher education and enterprise can position Ireland at the leading edge in the competitive global environment’ (Hunt et al., 2011: 31). Higher education ‘needs to focus on transferring knowledge as quickly and effectively as possible’ so that it becomes available for ‘exploitation’ by the private sector, which has ‘a better expertise to do so’ (Hunt et al., 2011: 12). Likewise, higher education must become more active in ‘incubating new companies’ (Hunt et al., 2011: 38).

To be sure, links between education and the private sector are not necessarily problematic, as when education provides students with the knowledge and technical training to find employment. However, under neoliberalism, the significant qualitative shift is the degree to which this is happening in that the education system as a whole is being shaped along commercial and corporate needs and requirements. Those objectives have concrete consequences in restructuring academic institutions and practice. Indeed, the Hunt report notes that the state will allocate funding to universities according to the extent to which they commercialise their activities: future ‘research funding should be allocated according to these principles, and a new focus on the impact of that funding is now necessary’ (Hunt et al., 2011: 12). This is part of a more fundamental realignment of higher education with state objectives, as universities’ ‘strategies will be defined and aligned with national priorities’ and a ‘new contractual relationship’ between the state and higher education will be established (Hunt et al., 2011: 14). Moreover, the state should steer institutions and individuals toward dedicating themselves to the task of knowledge transfer and commercialisation by embedding those criteria ‘in performance appraisal, promotion and recruitment policies’ (Hunt et al., 2011: 70).

It is obvious that such a realignment of higher education policy poses an obstacle to critical scholarship. The Hunt report presents one specific vision of the role of the social sciences in 21st century Ireland, but it is a relatively narrow one.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for more public engagement on the part of the social sciences. This would raise their relevance and profile in 21st century Ireland. In order to do so, selecting subject matters that have direct relevance to policy and human problems is important, as well as effective communication strategies involving the media and accessible language.

However, there are serious institutional constraints that must be taken into consideration. They mostly related to the neoliberal transformations that have affected higher education in recent years. These have sought to realign universities' mission with those of political and economic elites. This has meant that academics are presented with fewer degrees of freedom in choosing their research topics and in the types of arguments they make.

Those tensions between the opportunities of social science scholarship to become more engaged in the public domain and the institutional and governmental frameworks in which they operate are key to determine the extent to which we can fulfill our potential as social scientists.

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