Editorial

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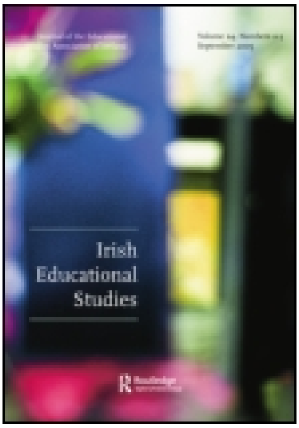

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Editorial

Rolf van der Velden & Emer Smyth

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Editorial

As Europe and the rest of the world moves towards a knowledge society, an effective system of higher education is seen as increasingly important to the economy and to society at large. Given the breadth of the concept, it should come as no surprise that there are differing conceptions of what the knowledge society is and the part to be played in it by higher education. Notions of 'super-complexity' in society and economy (e.g. Barnett 2000) suggest greater divisions of labour and a further fragmentation of academic disciplines in the university (Clark 1996). On the other hand, notions of 'flexibility' in professional life suggest greater emphasis on generic 'transferable' skills in the workplace and interdisciplinarity and integration in the university (Mason 2001). There are similar ambiguities related to the trend towards increased participation in higher education, which inevitably leads to the 'massification' of higher education (e.g. Scott 1995; Trow 2000). Despite the move towards a knowledge society, this has led many scholars to raise the spectre of over-education: according to this view, the supply of highly educated labour outstrips demand, and an increasing proportion of graduates are forced to work in jobs for which a lower level of education would be more appropriate (Freeman 1976; Smith 1986). Although the evidence for over-education and the interpretation of its effects are disputed (Allen and van der Velden 2001; World Bank 2002), it is certainly clear that higher education no longer *automatically* confers an elite status on its bearers. At the same time, there are strong indications that various 'elites' continue to play an important role *within* mass higher education in many countries, based on stratified higher education, protected labour market positions, or both (e.g. Brennan 2002; Brown and Scase 1994). Finally, the EU has the ambition 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Commission 2000). Universities have a vital role to play in realizing this goal (European Commission 2003). The Bologna Declaration signifies an attempt at an integrated policy response to the challenges and opportunities associated with globalisation, but the effectiveness of this response and the broader consequences for international collaboration and mobility, and for territorial cohesion within Europe and the wider world, are uncertain. If, as some have claimed, there are really different 'societal equilibria' (Maurice, Sellier, and Silvestre 1982), attempts to harmonise only one societal domain while leaving others unchanged are likely to be fraught with difficulty.

Such ambiguity as to the meaning of the knowledge society is reflected in tensions in the demands made on those fulfilling key positions in the knowledge society (Allen and Van der Velden 2011). On one hand, these workers are expected to possess the advanced and often highly specialised knowledge and skills required of modern high-level professionals. On the other hand, in many cases they are also expected to be highly flexible and adaptable, able and willing to take up challenges

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not closely related to the specific field in which they have been trained. For access to key positions, tertiary education is increasingly becoming a necessary, but no longer sufficient, condition. Whether because of the need to guarantee excellence or of the need to protect privileges of the in-group against outsiders, or a combination of both, entry to many professions is subject to an increasingly complex and demanding set of criteria.

Graduates' ability to meet the demands that the knowledge society makes of them depends in no small part on the resources that they acquire through higher education. However, higher education policymakers face demands that are just as complex as those facing graduates. For a start, how do they deal with the increase in enrolment in higher education leading to more variation in the abilities and motivations of students? How does that variation affect internal differentiation? How do they strike a balance between the sometimes apparently contradictory demands made of graduates, such as the need for specialized knowledge and flexibility? How do they decide between investing in the competencies of the best and brightest, and making higher education more accessible to a broad range of young people? How do they deal with the growing budget constraints on one hand and the increasing demands put on higher education on the other? How do they strategically place themselves in their role of knowledge transfer centres on the international market as well as the regional market? Finally, given that education systems are each embedded within their own national constellation of institutions, laws, customs and so on, how quickly can they adjust to the essentially global challenges of the knowledge society?

Against this background the editorial board of the *Irish Educational Studies* has decided to publish a special issue on higher education. The articles in this special issue explore pathways into and out of higher education in a number of different educational systems, namely, Ireland, Canada, Germany and Norway, and present new insights into the processes shaping such trajectories. The under-representation of working-class young people in higher education has been well documented internationally, although commentators have disputed whether educational expansion has resulted in an improvement in their relative position or not (see, for example, Shavit et al. 2007). McCoy and Byrne's article shows the complex ways in which social class processes can influence the transition to higher education in Ireland and points to the barriers faced by a hitherto ignored group, children of lower service (lower non-manual) workers. Drawing on a rich mixed methods study, they identify three sets of processes as shaping decision-making around higher education entry: school experience; information and advice; and financial considerations. Young people from lower service backgrounds are found to lack the cultural capital and access to information and advice of their peers from professional backgrounds. Furthermore, their under-representation in higher education reflects not only barriers at the point of potential entry but also a much longer-term process of school disengagement and underachievement. Their careful analysis shows the need to explore the within and between class processes involved in education decision-making.

Few studies explore the influence of immigrant background on higher education entry so Støren's article provides a significant contribution not only by documenting differences between Norwegian-born and immigrant youth in higher education participation but in attempting to unpack the processes shaping such differences.

Second-generation, non-Western immigrants are found to be more likely than ethnic Norwegians to enter higher education, especially more prestigious study programmes. Støren attributes these differences to the emphasis placed on investment in human capital by immigrant families, who have low levels of financial resources and face labour market discrimination. Thus, immigrant youth have strong motivations to select professional programmes which will yield longer-term access to well-paid employment. This article shows the importance of looking at the complex interaction between immigrant status, social background and gender in shaping educational trajectories.

There has been much discussion internationally about the 'feminisation' of higher education (for a critique, see Leathwood and Read 2009). However, it is important to note that gender differences in higher education entry vary significantly across educational systems. In the German case, young men remain more likely to enrol in higher education than young women. The article by Lörz, Schindler and Walter attributes this pattern to specific aspects of the German educational system, in particular, opportunities outside the higher education sector for vocational training in traditionally female occupations. Using a rational choice framework, gender differences are found to be related to the fact that women evaluate the employment prospects for vocational training more positively, and judge their academic abilities more negatively, than men with similar school grades. The article by Lörz et al. points to the need to carefully consider the specificity of educational systems in exploring patterns of higher education entry.

Reimer's article considers the German situation from a different perspective by looking at the extent to which the returns to higher education qualifications are a factor in young people's decision-making about going to university, a factor which has not been addressed in previous studies. He finds that these decisions are not responsive to the income differential between graduates and those with vocational training qualifications. However, as the risk of unemployment increases for vocational training relative to higher education graduation, women, especially working-class women, are more likely to go on to higher education. The article points to useful directions for future research in educational decision-making.

Murdoch, Kamanzi and Doray's article looks at the extent to which PISA literacy scores measured at age 15 influence later entry to, and persistence within, higher education in Canada. PISA scores are found to have a very strong effect on entry levels, particularly to university, even controlling for social background and grades achieved at school. However, in contrast to school grades, PISA scores do not influence persistence within, or drop-out from, higher education. The authors attribute this pattern to the fact that high literacy levels are the norm within higher education and discipline-related factors are likely to be more influential in shaping retention at this stage. Given the continuing debate internationally about how countries fare within the PISA study, it is interesting to note that literacy skills (as measured by PISA) have an influence on college entry over and above the grades achieved at school.

Hovdhaugen's article continues the focus on retention in higher education by looking at the Norwegian context. She carefully distinguishes between transfer between courses (which is quite common in Norway) and drop-out from the system, examining the impact of higher education reform on changes in these two processes. The introduction of new, more structured programmes made progression more predictable and employment opportunities more transparent. She finds that the reform led to a significant reduction in the rate of between-course transfer but made little difference to the rate of drop-out. This article provides useful insights into the potential impact of higher education reform but points to the need to allow for the possibility that various 'outcomes' (e.g. transfer, drop-out, achievement) may be influenced by different processes, with consequent implications for policy intervention.

Klein's article looks at pathways out of higher education in Germany, namely, the impact of field of study on how long it takes graduates to obtain a job and whether this job reflects their level and field of qualifications. He finds that graduates from 'soft' fields, such as arts and humanities, experience significant disadvantage on labour market entry. In contrast, those who studied subjects more closely linked to specific occupations made a much smoother transition into the labour market. Klein attributes this pattern to the fact that employers use the occupational specificity and selectivity of a study programme as a signal for the expected training costs and make recruitment decisions accordingly. His article provides useful evidence for debates around graduate employability and the skills required by employers in a changing labour market.

Lolich's article casts a critical eye over the rationale for higher education expansion and over discourse on the 'smart economy,' providing a useful counterpoint to the other articles in the issue. Analysing Irish higher education policy documents, she argues that higher education has been increasingly framed in economic terms and other aspects, in particular education for affective citizenship, have been undermined. Her article poses useful questions about the extent to which education has come to be viewed as a 'product,' like any other, and lifelong learning has become a moral obligation to become 'valuable human capital.'

In conclusion, there has been a good deal of debate in Ireland and internationally about higher education policy, including how best to achieve equity in access, how to minimise student drop-out, how to enhance graduate 'employability,' and who should pay for higher education. In their different ways, the articles in this special issue provide valuable evidence to contribute to these debates and a foundation for future research in the area.

Rolf van der Velden and Emer Smyth

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