

Editorial*

The current difficult economic environment presents academic organisations, academics and academic journals with many difficult challenges. The most obvious, and the most significant, is financial. As a consequence of the reduced tax-take received by the Revenue Commissioners, the government has less money at its disposal, which means inevitably that the grants-in-aid provided to educational institutions by the Exchequer are likely to continue to contract, and that institutions will have less money than they require properly to finance the crucial functions for which they have responsibility. As the implications of the first of what at the moment look like a sequence of cuts works their way through the system, and universities and colleges come to terms with the consequences of having to meet the needs of record numbers of students, the increased bureaucratisation that flows from the demand for greater accountability, and patterns of educational delivery that are at once more complex and more demanding of time and resources, the danger is, as the President of the Academy recently warned, that the research culture so painstakingly constructed over the past two decades, and that is ‘the only lifeline to recovery’ will itself begin to contract (RIA, *Annual Review*, pp. 5–6). It is already the case that some schools and departments have decided reluctantly to decline applications from qualified candidates who have sought to embark on doctoral research because they do not have the staff required to provide the necessary expert supervision. This scenario is likely to become still more commonplace as the implications of the revised Employment Control Framework approved by the Minister for Finance and circulated by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in January 2010 take effect. The revised framework does permit third-level institutions greater liberty in the appointments they make (by comparison, that is, with the Employment Control Framework put in place in the higher-education sector in 2009), but one does not have to possess an egregiously alarmist disposition to apprehend the restrictive implications of the direction that ‘institutions will be permitted to fill academic and non-academic vacancies that are considered necessary for the continued delivery of essential services’ (HEA, 7 January 2010). The challenges implicit in the implementation of this policy for university presidents and school and subject leaders are exacerbated, certainly, by the no less serious implications of the incentivised early retirement scheme that will, by the time it is completed, have hastened the departure of large numbers of senior staff from all institutions. The obvious financial rationale for this notwithstanding, the precise implications for all disciplines of the loss of capacity, knowledge, experience and institutional memory is impossible to calculate, but it is certain to be considerable and will only become apparent in the fullness of time, and in some instances in the most unlikely and unexpected of ways. One can, for example, anticipate that it will have a seriously negative impact at postgraduate level, where any attenuation in the research expertise that is available must inevitably close off options for prospective research students and adversely impact the range, if not the quality, of research that is undertaken and completed.

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As if this prospect is not disturbing enough, the possibility of a re-organisation of the third-level education sector, encouraged by no less a figure than Peter Sutherland, the former European Commissioner, benefactor of the Smurfit Business School, and chairman of the board of the London School of Economics, poses the prospect of still further major challenges. It may well be, as Mr Sutherland has argued, that it is ‘not feasible to have seven universities at world-class research, education and training levels here’ (*Irish Times*, 22 January 2010), but since it is improbable that every university can be ‘world-class’ (in which case the designation must be meaningless), or that every university that is ‘world-class’ will be at the cutting edge in *all* areas of intellectual endeavour, it simply does not follow, as Sutherland contends, that ‘the number of universities in the state [ought] to be reduced in a bid to ensure educational standards’. Specialisation is integral to achievement in the modern world, and this surely is as logical in the university realm as it is in the worlds of politics, business and high finance that Mr Sutherland has graced over several decades. This is neither to commend nor to decry the policy of academic rationalisation that some posit as the only way forward. The recommendations of the National Strategy for Higher Education (Hunt) Group, which, among its terms of reference, is charged with considering ‘the number and roles of institutions’ required to deliver on the various ‘policy objectives’ that are to be allocated to the third-level sector, will be crucial in this respect, but, and this is particularly true of the humanities disciplines in general, there is little to be gained financially or administratively, and much to be lost educationally by the pursuit of an ill-considered scheme of consolidation. Indeed, one of the more welcome achievements of the third-level education sector in recent decades has been the increased number of institutions that have developed a research profile. This is manifest in the activities and membership of the Royal Irish Academy, as elsewhere in the third- and fourth-level educational sectors. It can be perceived, for instance, in the augmented number of institutions represented on the various National Committees, in the greater range of disciplines in which those admitted to membership of the Academy specialise, and, not least, in the variety of submissions published in the *Proceedings*. This is not to suggest that demand for structural change will not intensify, or, if specific structural changes are recommended by the National Strategy Group and accepted by the Department of Education and Science that they can or indeed should be resisted. The precipitous manner in which the recommendation of the *Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes* (better known as the McCarthy Report) that the National University of Ireland (NUI) might be dissolved in order to save money was taken up and announced in January (*Irish Times*, 21 January 2010) illustrates the speed with which decisions can be made, and, still more significantly, the determination of politicians and officials to subject education at third level to tighter government and administrative control. This need not necessarily be a retrogressive development, but the manner in which the fate of the NUI was decided, and announced, does serve to highlight the potential magnitude of the strategic and structural changes with which the third-level education sector could soon be faced, and the necessity that third-level educators and administrators brace themselves and be ready to contemplate some disagreeable decisions.

Moreover, coming on top of the reduced budgets, the likely contraction in personnel that will result from the current round of natural and incentivised retirements, and the diminished attraction of academia because of reduced pay levels and a more difficult work environment, any attempt to engage in major structural change could have profound consequences that will impact on all aspects of academic life. The consequences for academic publishing are a matter of particular concern for those anxious to ensure that the research infrastructure is not significantly depleted. The implications of contracting library budgets for commercial and institutional publishers of academic work (such as the Royal Irish Academy) is as yet unclear, but suggestions by some publishers that book sales may have fallen by as much as one-third, the closure of major book chains, and the contraction of others are obvious manifestations of an exceptionally difficult economic environment. To date, this had not caused any detectible diminution in academic publishing or increase in the size and number of remainder lists. Indeed, the recent announcement that *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (1889–2006) and its predecessor *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* (1787–1906) is now available online, free of charge, through JSTOR's Ireland collection is greatly to be welcomed as a further boost to the standing and status of this journal. Coming, as it does, within five years of the redesign of the journal, and the inauguration of the practice of publishing individual articles on-line on the Academy's website in advance of their appearance in hard copy form, it suggests that *Proceedings* is well positioned to negotiate the challenges that beset the economy and the educational sector. The publication in 2011 of a thematic issue devoted to domestic life attests to the commitment of the editorial board to respond after a proactive fashion, and of its determination that *Proceedings* shall continue to be one of the major journals in the field of Irish Studies and an attractive outlet for young as well as established scholars. Yet there can be no room for complacency. The increased availability of journals and journal articles on a variety of electronic platforms, the pressure librarians are under to find money to bind and space to store lengthy runs of journals, and intense international competition pose serious challenges in the immediate as well as the medium term. If journals are to continue to prosper, they require a steady flow of high quality research, which is dependent in turn on the vigour and dynamism of the entirety of the third-level sector. *Proceedings* remains as committed as it has been at any point in its history to the publication of such work; its task will be assisted if it can continue to function in an environment that promotes and supports academic inquiry, and the scholars and students who are determined to continue to produce work of world class quality.

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