

Institiuid Teicneolaíochta na Gaillimhe-Maigh Eo

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)

Evolution of Irish Higher Education with particular reference to the Institute of
Technology sector

A paper presented by

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to an

Education Conference in GMIT

on

Saturday 27 November 2010

entitled

“Perspectives on a Moving Target:
Is Change the New Constant in Higher Education?”

INTRODUCTION

The theme of this conference is change in higher education in Ireland. While there are now many changes on the horizon, there were huge changes from the 1960s to now. In that decade, Ireland had a small elite system of higher education, catering almost exclusively for the professions and some employment outlets in the public sector. In 1965/66, there were a total of 20,698 full time students in third-level education in Ireland¹, with over eighty-five per cent of them coming from the top three occupational categories used in a 1966 study². By 1980/81, the total was 41,928 and 112,182 in 1997/8. By 2008/9, there were 145,690 full-time and 31,698 part-time students, a total of 177,388, in higher education in Ireland (see table1). This paper briefly traces the main policy and institutional changes which brought about this transformation, with particular reference to the Regional Technical Colleges (now Institutes of Technology).

Table 1: Enrolments in Irish Higher Education in 2008/9³

SECTOR	LEVEL	FULL-TIME	PART-TIME	TOTAL
University	Undergraduate	73,098	7,535	80,633
	Postgraduate	18,128	9,138	27,266
Total University Sector		91,226	16,673	107,899
Institute of Technology (including Dublin Institute of Technology)	Undergraduate	51,892	12,921	64,813
	Postgraduate	2,572	2,104	4,676
Total IOT Sector		54,464	15,025	69,489
Grand Total for Higher Education Sector		145,690	31,698	177,388

SCARCITY OF TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

After a depressing decade with no growth, massive emigration and a declining population in the 1950s, Ireland changed its industrial policy from protectionism to free trade, with a big emphasis on the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI) and the promotion of indigenous enterprises by various tax concessions, grants and subsidies. It was the start of modern industrialisation in the country. When the process of industrialisation accelerated in Ireland during the 1960s, it became apparent that there was a scarcity of technical, technological, scientific and management expertise. Various articles and reports drew attention to gaps in the existing labour supply⁴.

In October 1960, Dr Patrick J Hillery, Minister for Education, established a Commission on Higher Education and two years later initiated a survey of the Irish education system in co-operation with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Its purpose, *inter alia*, was to consider the human resource requirements of the Irish economy and recommend how such needs could be satisfied. A separate OECD report was published in 1964, *Training of Technicians in Ireland*,⁵ which recommended action to improve the existing facilities for the education and training of technicians. It also pointed out that ‘a further serious difficulty in the task of raising the standards of technicians in Ireland is the lack of a nationally recognised technician diploma. The absence of such a diploma deters

many parents from considering sub-professional technician careers for their children'.⁶ By 1965 and 1966, the OECD report commissioned by Dr Hillery was published in two volumes entitled *Investment in Education*.⁷ It generated a national debate on educational policy and provided the basis for many subsequent developments, including raising concerns about the human resource needs of a developing economy. It confirmed the inadequacy of the existing position for the provision of technical and technological education. In the early 1960s, there were only limited facilities for higher technical education in some of the main cities; the most important were five of the Colleges which now constitute the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and those in Cork and Limerick.

COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

The Commission on Higher Education issued its report in 1967 and recommended an expansion and diversification of the system but that it should not be overwhelmed by an obligation to satisfy the human resource needs of the economy.⁸ One of its most controversial provisions was a recommendation to establish a new type of institution, 'new colleges', to operate to the standard of a pass degree in three major fields, 'the humanistic, the scientific, and the commercial'.⁹ Course programmes were to 'have a stronger vocational bias than would be appropriate to university courses'¹⁰ and it was envisaged that these 'would be planned to provide a broad and balanced education together with a certain measure of specialisation'.¹¹ The proposal for the 'new colleges' was not adopted, and before the publication of the report the Government had decided to establish eight Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs), thus signalling a policy to develop a separate non-university sector. In the early 1960s, more people began to see expenditure on education as an economic investment, conferring intrinsic value on the individual and society as well as catering for the utilitarian needs of a developing economy.

STEERING COMMITTEE ON TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Dr Patrick J Hillery announced the establishment of a number of Technical Colleges throughout the country in a major policy statement on 20 May 1963. It was then envisaged that these colleges would provide what was called the Technical Schools Leaving Certificate, apprentice training and some higher level technician courses, but there was considerable ambiguity about their role. Following discussions between the Technical Instruction Branch of the Department of Education and the Vocational Education Committees (VECs), it was decided to establish colleges in Athlone, Carlow, Cork, Dundalk, Galway, Limerick, Sligo and Waterford.¹² While the proposal was supported by George Colley, who was Minister for Education from April 1965 to July 1966, little progress was made. It was his successor, the dynamic and innovative Donogh O'Malley, who brought the project to fruition. He is also remembered with affection as the Minister who introduced free post-primary education and 'free' school transport in 1967. On the suggestion of Seán O'Connor, then assistant-secretary of the Department of Education, the new Minister appointed a steering committee on technical education in September 1966, with Noel Mulcahy, a senior specialist in the Irish Management Institute, as chairperson.¹³ Its terms of reference were: 'to advise the Minister generally on technical education' and, in particular, 'to provide the Department of Education's Building Consortium with a brief for the Technical Colleges' and 'to ensure, in as much as it is possible, that their

brief will harmonise with any future thinking on third-level technical education'.¹⁴ The committee was also asked to advise on the need for a ninth college, to be located in Letterkenny, County Donegal. About the same time, the Minister appointed a consortium of architects, engineers and quantity surveyors, under the chairmanship of a prominent Dublin surveyor, Desmond McGreevy, to acquire suitable sites (if not already acquired by the local Vocational Education Committee), to design the buildings and supervise their erection in accordance with the requirements to be provided by the steering committee.¹⁵ The appointment of the consortium put pressure on the steering committee to expedite the preparation of its report. It also generated a political controversy in Dáil Éireann and in the media.¹⁶ In reply to a Dáil question on 16 February 1967, the Minister explained that he had appointed the consortium for the erection of the colleges at Dundalk, Galway, Sligo and Waterford, and as consultants in respect of the others, as the local Vocational Education Committees had already appointed local architects, but little progress had been made.¹⁷ The Minister's decision to give control of the entire programme to a single group was criticised in the media and by the President of the Institute of Architects in Ireland.¹⁸ The Minister told the Dáil, in response to another question, 'that the responsibility of the consortium was to plan and supervise the building of the colleges only'.¹⁹ He stressed that to appoint architects for each college would have been a waste of public funds as the design and structure of each required considerable research and investigation.

REPORT OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE (the 'Mulcahy Report')

The Steering Committee on Technical Education, which presented its report in April 1967, recommended that the Minister proceed with the provision of the eight Regional Technical Colleges and that a local one be provided in Letterkenny. It pointed out that Irish people generally did not have the opportunity to become technically skilled and highlighted the prevalent academic bias in the educational system.²⁰ Increased technical knowledge and skills were regarded as essential prerequisites for further economic growth as well as the promotion of innovation and enterprise.²¹ Investment in education was seen as an essential part of industrial development, especially in developing regions. The committee outlined the role of the Regional Technical Colleges as follows:

'we believe that the long-term function of the Colleges will be to educate for trade and industry over a broad spectrum of occupations ranging from craft to professional, notably in engineering and science but also in commercial, linguistic and other specialities. They will, however, be more immediately concerned with providing courses aimed at filling gaps in the industrial manpower structure, particularly in the technician area'.²²

The most important recommendation with regard to their role was the following:

'we do not foresee any final fixed pattern of courses in the colleges. If they are to make their most effective contribution to the needs of society and the economy, they must be capable of continuing adaptation to social, economic and technological changes. Initiative at local and national levels will largely determine how far this vital characteristic is developed. We are concerned that the progress of

these colleges should not be deterred by any artificial limitation of either the scope or the level of their educational achievements'.²³

In the initial stages, the committee envisaged the colleges providing senior cycle second-level courses with a technological orientation, apprentice and *post-* Leaving Certificate courses, various types of adult education and in some cases full professional programmes, but it was not prepared to set limits to their growth.²⁴ It was expected that the education to be provided in Regional Colleges would cover a very wide range of programmes and span diverse occupations in technical, scientific, commercial, catering and other fields of specialisation.²⁵

The report recommended that the Regional Technical College in Galway should be designated as the main centre outside Dublin for both craft and management education and training for the hotel industry and that extra accommodation for 500 to 600 students should be made accordingly.²⁶ Because of the existence of the agricultural colleges, the report did not recommend that specialist facilities be provided for agricultural education and training, but envisaged co-operation where appropriate.²⁷ Art and design education was to be provided in as many colleges as possible.²⁸ The committee found it necessary to indicate 'regional catchment areas' for each college for the purpose of making projections of student population, but they were not intended to have any other significance.²⁹ It endorsed the eight locations selected by the Government for Regional Technical Colleges, but recommended that Letterkenny should have a local one pending expansion when it might be raised to regional status.

The committee also recommended the establishment of a National Council for Educational Awards, which would be responsible for setting standards for admission to colleges, approving courses and syllabuses, awarding certificates and diplomas to successful students as well as negotiating reciprocal recognition with other countries. It recommended a flexible building design which would facilitate future expansion, and made specific proposals about equipment and the early recruitment of senior staff.

BUILDING SCHEDULE

The building of the Regional Technical Colleges commenced early in 1968. Donogh O'Malley, a person who excelled in performance and had the ability to cut decisively through inertia, red tape and bureaucracy, died suddenly on 10 March 1968 at the age of 47, and it was Pádraig Faulkner (Minister for Education from June 1969 to February 1973) who had the pleasure of opening the first Regional Technical Colleges.

Some students were enrolled in September 1969 in Carlow, Dundalk and Waterford, chiefly Leaving Certificate students and apprentices. (This development annoyed local post primary schools and their protests led to the phasing out of the second level provision within a few years). Five colleges commenced full operation in September 1970: Athlone, Carlow, Dundalk, Sligo and Waterford, followed by Letterkenny in 1971, Galway in 1972 and Cork in 1974. Two officials of the Department of Education deserve special mention for their roles in the early development of the RTCs, Seán O'Connor and Dr Finbarr O'Callaghan, both of whom earned enormous respect.

MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

It was envisaged by the Steering Committee that the Regional Technical Colleges would operate under new Regional Education Councils, with College Councils and small boards of management. This proposal was resisted by the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and they lobbied to have the colleges administered under the Vocational Education Act 1930. With membership from all political parties and none, the VECs became a formidable lobby and were successful in their campaign. The new Minister for Education, Brian Lenihan, announced in the Dáil that the Regional Technical Colleges would be administered under section 21 (2) of the Vocational Education Act 1930.

Each college was managed by a Board of Management operating as a sub-committee of a parent Vocational Education Committee (the one in whose functional area it was situated). The original Board consisted of seven members, one representative each from agricultural, employer and trade union interests, a representative of the Department of Education, a member of the parent VEC, the chief executive officer of that VEC and the College Principal. (The Board size was later increased to twelve to cater for other VECs in the region and industrial interests). Each College had a Council broadly representative of educational, agricultural, and industrial interests in the region, with the role of advising the Board of Management on the educational needs of the area. Each RTC was funded by the Department of Education through the parent Vocational Education Committee.

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL AWARDS

The National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) was established on an *ad hoc* basis in April 1972 and became a statutory body with effect from 16 July 1980 in accordance with the National Council for Educational Awards Act 1979. Its establishment had been recommended in the report of the Steering Committee on Technical Education and by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The functions of the Council were:

‘to encourage, facilitate, promote, co-ordinate, and develop technical, industrial, scientific, technological and commercial education, and education in art and design, provided outside the universities, whether professional, vocational or technical and to encourage and promote liberal education’.³⁰

It gave effect to these responsibilities through the approval of courses and the granting and conferring of degrees, diplomas, certificates and other educational awards. The major concern of the Council was to establish and maintain high standards in all courses for which it granted national awards. Consistent with the requirements of academic rigour, the Council was also concerned that courses had a practical relevance and career orientation. The Council exercised its function in Regional Technical Colleges, Colleges of Technology and other public and private institutions designated under section 20 of the NCEA Act. The Council had a number of sub-

committees and boards of studies as well as validation panels to assess course submissions. Members came from the universities, business and professional organisations, with some from the RTCs, all of whom provided gratuitous service. In general, they were impressed by the standards of courses and made a significant contribution to their improvement. The early courses in the RTCs had been devised by new college staff working closely with inspectors in the Department of Education. In turn, involvement with the NCEA and RTCs had a catalytic effect on many university staff in relation to their own courses. Several stated that they would not like to see their courses evaluated with the same rigour as they saw in operation on NCEA panels. The NCEA also appointed external examiners to monitor standards on all approved courses. In the early years, they came chiefly from the universities and practitioners in the disciplines.

Initially there were problems in relation to the recognition of courses because six colleges were in operation before the establishment of the NCEA. The Council granted temporary recognition to all national certificate courses already underway, which alleviated to the problems to some extent, but College staff, students and their parents were not satisfied until all courses were approved. After its establishment by statute, the NCEA developed a system of awards incorporating certificates (one year full-time course or part-time equivalent), national certificates (two years), national diplomas (one year *post* national certificate or three years *ab initio*), primary degrees (add-on and *ab initio*), graduate diplomas, masters' degrees (both research and taught) and doctorates.

HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY

Following a recommendation in the Report of the Commission on Higher Education, the Higher Education Authority was established on an *ad hoc* basis in September 1968 and given statutory recognition in 1972 under the Higher Education Act 1972. Higher Education Authority functions included the funding of universities and designated third-level institutions, the development of third-level education to meet the needs of the community, and an advisory role in relation to all third-level education. (The Institutes of Technology came under the aegis of the HEA in 2007).

LIMERICK

As a result of local pressure for a University, which started in the 1930s, the original decision to build a Regional Technical College in Limerick was reversed; a consequential proposal resulted in the establishment of a National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE) there in 1972. From the start, industrial placement, or co-operative education as it was called, became an integral part of all programmes.

A BINARY OR COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM?

On 16 December 1974, Richard Burke, Minister for Education in the Fine Gael/Labour Government, caused consternation when he made a major announcement in relation to higher education, including a decision to establish a comprehensive system of higher education rather than a binary one. The decision had not been preceded by a White Paper or any discussions, and, consequently, the issues involved were never properly considered or evaluated. There were also major changes for the universities, but Donogh O'Malley's proposal to merge Trinity College and

University College Dublin was dropped, and a second Higher Institute of Higher Education was announced for Dublin.

The announcement of a comprehensive system meant the removal of degree awarding powers from the NCEA. The City of Dublin VEC had submitted two applications for degree recognition to the NCEA and withdrew them. Within a short time, they were approved by Trinity College. It was then announced that the Colleges of Education were to receive their degrees from universities. The NCEA had to make special arrangements for existing students in the National College of Physical Education in Limerick. The first degree submission from a Regional Technical College came from Galway in respect of Hotel and Catering Management and it had been evaluated but not approved before the 16 December 1974 decision. A period of great uncertainty followed and in March 1975, the College was informed that the NCEA would be allowed to approve the award as 'a temporary arrangement' if all the specified conditions were satisfied. In July 1975, this arrangement was approved by the Council of the NCEA for all students graduating up to 1979.³¹

When the NCEA was re-constituted in February 1976, its powers to grant and confer awards applied to certificates and diplomas only. Because the NCEA had already granted degree recognition to the Galway course and, as no university was then in a position to validate it, the Council continued to assess student performance in accordance with the conditions of approval. Students on the first cycle of the course had followed the curriculum and assessment procedures approved by the NCEA for degree recognition and four passed the final examinations in May / June 1976. About September of that year, it was rumoured that the successful students were to receive 'advanced diplomas in hotel and catering management' rather than degrees, as the NCEA was not being allowed to honour its commitment. This rumour was later confirmed by the NCEA following a Council decision to that effect on 14 October 1976. A rubric was to be inserted on each parchment stating that it was 'of degree standard'. There were protests from students, parents, staff and the Board of Management, but the decision was not altered.³²

The annual conferring ceremony took place on Monday 15 November amid protests by students and great tension. Students from the hotel management course were left until last. The first student from the class to be called to the podium was presented with his parchment by Dr Tom Walsh, chairperson of the NCEA. The student read it and saw that it was called an 'Advanced Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management'. He told the chairperson that he was not accepting it, and handed the document back. There was consternation on the platform and rapturous applause from the audience. The same procedure was followed by the other three students. This was followed by three speeches, the first from Dr Tom Walsh, who criticised the students for what they did, the second by the Principal, Gay Corr, and the final one by Michael O'Sullivan, chairperson of the Board of Management, who said that the students were 'perfectly correct in their actions'. Gay Corr in a firm and courageous address said:

'Under normal circumstances I would, on an occasion such as this, spend some time outlining for you the progress of our institution over the past twelve months and the hopes and aspirations we have for the year ahead. This, however, ladies and gentlemen, is not a normal occasion; it is the first time at a graduation ceremony I have seen

students conferred with a qualification other than that for which they were assessed in their final examinations. It is also the first occasion on which I have seen the award being conferred described as 'equal to', 'equivalent to', or 'the same as' an award of another designation. Finally, and sadly, it is my first experience of seeing naked injustice being done to students who successfully completed their examinations simply because they were unlucky enough to fall outside the structure of some pre-determined administrative framework over which they had no control. I am, of course, referring to the graduates of our four year course in hotel and catering management. It is indeed ironic that the new Government proposals, whose declared aims were to upgrade the status of the technological sector of education, should have as its first casualties students in a Regional Technical College who must have their qualifications downgraded in order to meet Government policy. I would humbly submit, ladies and gentlemen, that if we are to build a better educational system in this country for our young people, then the structures we construct and the means we employ should be humane, based on justice and capable of treating all our children equally.'³³

The situation was well publicised locally and nationally with the Students' Union playing a big role. Many local and national organisations made representations to the Department of Education. Richard Burke was appointed as European Economic Community Commissioner in November 1976, and he was very happy to leave Irish politics.

Within a few days of becoming Minister for Education on 2 December 1976, Peter Barry, to his eternal credit, informed the NCEA that it could award degrees to the 1976 class in accordance with the decision taken in July 1975. At its meeting on 25 January 1977, the Council of the NCEA decided to grant a BA degree to the students who successfully completed the four-year course in hotel and catering management at RTC Galway in 1976.³⁴

A special conferring ceremony for the four students concerned was held in the College on 9 May 1977, at which the degrees were duly conferred by Dr Tom Walsh. Gay Corr in his address said:

'this degree conferring ceremony is a very significant occasion for this College as it is also for the career of hotel management in this country. Its importance, as far as the College is concerned, is that it demonstrates clearly the capacity of Regional Technical Colleges to achieve a level and standard in their courses comparable to the best available in higher education institutions both in this country and elsewhere. I am, indeed, proud that this College has been the first in our system of Regional Technical Colleges to have won degree recognition for one of its courses. It is, of course, a very important occasion as far as the practice of hotel management in this country is concerned. It marks the recognition for this first time that the study of hotel management is worthy of a degree award.'³⁵

In June 1977, a Fianna Fáil Government came into office and on 29 July that year, the Minister for Education, John Wilson, announced that the degree awarding powers of

the NCEA were to be restored. Discussion had commenced with University College Galway (UCG) in 1976 to have the hotel and catering management degree approved. However, both sides understood that any recognition was to apply for the future and not retrospectively. In September 1979, RTC Galway was informed by UCG that the Senate of the NUI had approved the proposal. This development was considered at length at a Board of Management meeting, and eventually it decided that the course should stay with the NCEA in accordance with the Minister's announcement of July 1977.

There were also major problems at NIHE Limerick and their early experience in having programmes reviewed by universities was far from pleasant. It, too, was happy to see the degree awarding powers restored to the NCEA. After 1977, public policy supported the binary system in Irish higher education, with regular reference to the danger of 'academic drift', which was interpreted in the RTCs as national certificate and national diploma work only. The Government White Paper, *Charting our Educational Future* (1995), emphasised the preservation of the binary system stating:

'The diversity of institutions and the separate mission of the two broad sectors will be maintained to ensure maximum flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of students and to the wide variety of social and economic developments.'³⁶

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND

Following some lateral thinking from officials in the Department of Education, Ireland was successful in securing funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) for the training of young people in four courses for technician level skills in 1975. Students selected for those courses had no fees to pay and, in addition, qualified for a weekly training allowance with no means test. The number of courses increased over the years. On the initiative of Gemma Hussey, Minister for Education from December 1982 to February 1986, all students on one or two year certificate courses became eligible for ESF grants from the academic year 1984/85. National diploma courses became eligible from 1989/90, but new students from September 1992 were subject to a means test. ESF grants were great for the recipients as well as facilitating access and participation. For the colleges, ESF records, controls and returns generated considerable extra administrative work.

STUDENT ADMISSION

In the early years of the RTCs, all applicants for third-level certificate or diploma courses who met the minimum entry requirements (Leaving Certificate in five subjects, including English and Mathematics, or equivalent) were called for interview. The minimum entry for an *ab initio* degree was Leaving Certificate in six subjects, including English and Mathematics, two of which had to be passed in higher papers at grade C3 or higher. Admission was based on Leaving Certificate and interview performance. Special consideration was given to mature applicants, those aged 23 on or before 1 January in the year of admission. The Central Admissions Office (CAO) was established by the universities in 1976 to process undergraduate admission, but

the RTCs did not join the system at that stage. A points system and interviews were continued in the RTCs.

By the end of the 1980s, each of the then nine RTCs had its own separate application procedure and in some cases a different points system; the College of Art, Commerce and Technology (CoACT) in Limerick had another system, while five Colleges of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) had three different procedures. In addition, each college had also different regulations in relation to application fees, offers, acceptances and deposits. The whole admissions system to the technological sector in Ireland during the 1980s became a labyrinthine web of bureaucracy and comically anachronistic.³⁷

The person who deserves most credit for bringing all colleges into a unified centralised system was Christina Murphy of the *Irish Times*. She regularly highlighted the chaotic system in operation and the problems it was causing for students and their parents. Another person who deserves considerable credit was the former Minister for Education, Mary O'Rourke, who promoted a reform of the system with sensitivity and decisiveness. Arising from the Minister's initiatives, the admission procedure was simplified and standardised in 1991 with the establishment of the Central Admissions Services (CAS), operated by the CAO office in Galway. A new procedure was adopted, under which a single application form and one fee (£18) covered all Universities, RTCs, CoACT and DIT. The form contained three lists: the first one where applicants could apply for ten University degree courses, the second where they could select up to ten certificate and / or diploma courses from the RTCs and DIT, and the third one where they could list three *ab initio* RTC degree courses. The closing date for all courses became 1 February. All the Technological Colleges operated a common points system that year. Places were offered in order of merit following publication of the Leaving Certificate results. A student could only accept one place if offered more. In 1992, further changes were made: a new Leaving Certificate grading system and a common points system for all institutions were introduced. CAS lists were reduced to two – one for degree courses and the other for national certificates and diplomas; the five primary teacher training colleges and the two colleges of domestic science joined the system; all colleges counted six subjects but only results obtained at one sitting of the Leaving Certificate (for points only but not for entry requirements), and the National University Matriculation examinations were used by the universities for the last time.³⁸

NEW INSTITUTIONS

It had been intended to transfer the higher education work of the Dublin VEC to the new National Institute for Higher Education at Ballymun, but the VEC was hostile to the proposal. On 1 September 1978, all the higher education colleges of the City of Dublin VEC were merged into a unified institution, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The new body decided to deepen its links with Trinity College, Dublin. Despite the opposition of the City of Dublin VEC, NIHE Dublin was established at Ballymun in 1980. Both NIHEs were established by legislation in 1980, but their awards came from the NCEA.³⁹

NIHE Limerick, led by its ambitious President Dr Edward Walsh, kept up the pressure for University status and started to describe itself as 'a university level

institution'. An international Study Group, chaired by Dr T P Hardiman, was appointed in November 1986 to consider the applications of the NIHEs Limerick and Dublin for university status. The Hardiman Report in 1987 recommended the establishment of both as independent universities. The relevant legislation was passed in May 1989.⁴⁰

RTC LEGISLATION

Relations were not good between the Principals of certain Regional Technical Colleges and the Chief Executive Officers of their parent VECs. Any official letter from the Department of Education went to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), who sent a copy of it to the relevant Principal. Some CEOs required all such correspondence to come to their offices first. Many Principals also felt that some CEOs of VECs had an inordinate influence on the main sub-committees of the NCEA. Shortly after the NCEA was established on a statutory basis in 1979, it was decided that the Director of the NCEA would meet only VEC CEOs, with assistant registrars meeting the Principals. Hitherto, the assistant registrars met the Heads of Schools in the various disciplines in the colleges three times a year and it was a satisfactory process, which was then terminated for three years.⁴¹ This change in practice caused considerable resentment and sowed the seeds for later developments. The Principals started to campaign for separate legislation for the RTCs. After the National Board for Science and Technology identified the absence of research and consultancy in the RTCs in 1980 as a major deficiency, the Association of the Vocational Education Colleges (AVEC), a body for the third-level VECs, decided at its 1982 Annual Conference to take the initiative and set up a working party to consider the issue.⁴² This committee, chaired by Dr Gay Corr, Principal of RTC Galway, recommended that research and consultancy should be an integral part of the work of the RTCs and that a framework should be established to foster them. As chairperson of the Association of Principals of the RTCs from 1987 to 1990, Gay Corr also played a pivotal role in the deliberations that preceded the enactment of the Regional Technical Colleges Bill in 1992.

Various organisations, including the HEA as far back as 1974, questioned the appropriateness of the VEC management structure to the evolving role of the RTCs. A number of reports recommended that the colleges should be established on a statutory basis, including the Green Paper, *Partners in Education - Serving Community Needs* (1985) and the Hardiman Report in 1987. Shortly after becoming Minister for Education in 1987, Mary O'Rourke, who had experience of Athlone RTC and Westmeath VEC, stated that she did not see any need to make any radical changes to RTCs structures. The campaign of the RTCs for separate legislation gradually bore fruit, despite the vehement opposition of AVEC. In 1991, Mary O'Rourke introduced two bills to establish the RTCs and Dublin Institute of Technology on a statutory basis. Introducing the second stage of the Regional Technical Colleges Bill in the Dáil during November 1991, the Minister for Education, Mary O'Rourke, said:

'The changed nature of the activities of the VEC third-level colleges over the years has led to concern about the limitation placed on them in having to operate under the 1930 Vocational Education Act. This Act, since it relates predominantly to second-level education, is inappropriate to third-level institutions in the way they must operate

today. Activity in research, consultancy and other industry and business linked areas is an important element of the role of higher education institutions in contributing to material development. The lack of adequate statutory provisions to allow RTCs to engage fully in these activities represents a serious problem. The bill as presented seeks to address this problem in two ways: firstly, it seeks to strike a reasonable balance between greater freedom and autonomy for the institutions in their day to day operation while maintaining traditional links with the VEC system, and secondly, it will enable the institutions to engage in research, development and consultancy work for business and industry as well as to enter into arrangements including participation in limited liability companies, so as to exploit the results of this work.’⁴³

The bills faced considerable cross-party criticism in the Dáil and were strongly opposed by the Irish Vocational Education Association.⁴⁴ Over a hundred amendments were tabled and it was reported the Minister had to order a VEC delegation to leave her office during the committee stage of the bills. There were three Ministers for Education involved with the passage of the bills in 1991/92, Mary O’Rourke, Noel Davern and Séamus Brennan (Minister for Education from February 1992 to 12 January 1993). Both Bills were passed and came into effect on 1 January 1993. Section 5 of both Acts defined the function of the sector as follows:

‘To provide vocational and technical education and training for the economic, technological, scientific, commercial, industrial, social and cultural development of the State with particular reference to the region served by the college.’

The legislation authorised a college, subject to such conditions as the Minister for Education may determine,

‘to engage in research, consultancy and development work and to provide such services in relation to these matters as the Governing Body of the college considers appropriate.’

Each college was to be managed by a Governing Body in performing the functions specified in the legislation, subject to such policies as may be determined by the Minister from time to time and to the operational programmes and budget approved annually by the Vocational Education Committee (the one in whose functional area the institution was situated) and the Minister. The legislation provided that each College was to have an Academic Council appointed by the Governing Body ‘to assist it in the planning, co-ordination, development and overseeing of the educational work of the college and to protect, maintain and develop the academic standards of the courses and the activities of the college.’⁴⁵

As a result of a study of college administration carried out by the Institute of Public Administration in 1993, a new management structure was agreed, to be implemented in three phases up to 1996, including the appointment of a Registrar and a Secretary/Financial Controller. The Dublin Institute of Technology Act 1992 gave statutory recognition to the informal body that operated from 1978.

Following the enactment of the Regional Technical College Act 1992 on 1 January 1993, the transfer of records and all supporting material from the VECs to the RTCs was, in general, carried out in a very professional manner.

DEGREES

From the start, there was opposition to the Regional Technical Colleges offering degree programmes and that was a major issue in the binary or comprehensive system decision. While they were not planned solely as institutions of tertiary education, RTCs soon began to cater for the increasing demand for third-level places. As demand increased, colleges were expanded to cater for the extra numbers, but there was still concern over 'mission drift'. In response to a perceived market need, RTC Cork enrolled students on four *ab initio* degree programmes in 1980 without any prior approval from either the NCEA or the Department of Education, and following immense pressure they were approved.⁴⁶ Gradually colleges started to provide add-on honours degrees to national diplomas to meet students' aspirations and labour market demand and in some cases to initiate new *ab initio* programmes, but it was always difficult to get approval, especially for *ab initio* provision.

Limerick College of Art, Commerce and Technology applied for and received recognition for a degree in economics from London University in 1986.⁴⁷ As Irish private colleges were not designated institutions under the NCEA, some sought and secured degree recognition from English institutions, which helped the RTCs to expand their degree-level work.⁴⁸ In fairness to the RTCs, most of their courses followed 'the ladder system', a two-year full-time National Certificate or part-time equivalent, a one-year add National Diploma, and a further year add-on to an honours primary degree. Gradually, more and more employers sought holders of degrees and parents and students aspired to degrees.

UNIVERSITY LEGISLATION

The long promised Universities Bill was published in July 1996 and following much opposition and over a hundred amendments, it was passed in 1997. It *inter alia* established the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and together with UCD, UCG and UCC, it became a constituent university of the National University of Ireland.

INSTITUTES OF TECHNOLOGY

A Steering Committee on the Future of Higher Education in 1995 recommended that the Regional Technical Colleges should be re-designated as Regional Institutes of Technology.⁴⁹ In 1996, the RTCs produced a proposal for the establishment of an Irish Technological University for the validation of all their awards. However, Waterford continued their campaign for a university, which started in the 1970s with strong support from the local Chamber of Commerce. In January 1997, the Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, announced that Waterford would be upgraded to an Institute of Technology. While the unity of the RTC sector was never strong, this decision was greeted with horror by the banks of the Lee and claims by other RTCs for similar recognition. The Minister appointed a group to advise her on the criteria

that should be used for such re-designation and how institutions should be evaluated, with Professor Dervilla Donnelly of UCD as chairperson.⁵⁰

The committee recommended upgrading all the RTCs (then eleven) under a new body to succeed the NCEA. Waterford was upgraded that year. In November, RTC Cork was upgraded and in January 1998 all the other RTCs were upgraded to Institute of Technology status under a provision in the Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992. The Minister announced an international review team chaired by Professor Donnelly to establish a process to evaluate institutions to make their own awards. In 1998, following external evaluations, Waterford and Cork were given the authority to make their own awards for all existing sub-degree programmes, a process followed successfully in the other colleges over the next two or three years. (This authority was later extended). Waterford was prevented from breaking away from the sector, but the campaign for a university continued.

Degree awarding powers were given to Dublin Institute of Technology from 1998/99, thus ending its degree-awarding relationship with TCD.⁵¹ However, its campaign and application to be classified as a university were not successful.

NEW QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Arising from the implementation of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, a new national framework of qualifications was established, with a structure of ten levels incorporating standards of knowledge, skills and competence for each level. There are five levels applicable to higher education as shown in table 2.

Table 2: National Framework of Qualifications, Level 6 – 10

Level	Qualification
10	Doctoral Degree
9	Master's Degree/Postgraduate Diploma
8	Honours Bachelor Degree/Higher Diploma
7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
6	Higher Certificate

Higher education institutions revised their programmes to comply with the learning outcomes specified for each level as well as implementing policies and procedures for access, transfer and progression.

Under the Qualifications (Education and Training Act) 1999, three new bodies were established:

- (a) National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established in February 2001 with overall responsibility for the framework of qualifications and standards of awards;

- (b) The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) was established on 11 June 2001 to carry out functions of the former National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) and some other organisations,
- (c) The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) became the legal successor to the NCEA on 11 June 2001 for higher level non-university programmes.

Institutes of Technology gradually obtained delegated authority from HETAC under section 29 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 to confer their own awards for all taught programmes at levels 6, 7, 8 and 9, as well as in respect of some research programmes, following peer group evaluations in all cases.

INSTITUTES OF TECHNOLOGY ACT 2006

The Institutes of Technology Act 2006, which came into effect on 1 February 2007, amended the Regional Technical Colleges Acts 1992 to 2001 to re-title them as Institutes of Technology Acts 1992 to 2006. It, *inter alia*, brought the Institutes under the aegis of the HEA (up until then they were under the Department of Education), which was a big step in achieving the ‘parity of esteem’ so often referred to in public statements. It specified reserved functions for Governing Bodies and obliged each Institute to adopt a Strategic Development Plan, an Equality Policy and a Disputes and Resolution Procedures Policy.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

In the early sixties, higher education was based mainly by four universities, Trinity College, UCD, UCG, UCC and St. Patrick’s College Maynooth, VECs in Dublin, Cork and Limerick, Colleges of Education and some other institutions like the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, the National College of Art and a few other seminaries.⁵² By the end of the century, the country had seven universities. The oldest is the University of Dublin, with one College, Trinity, founded in 1592. The National University of Ireland (NUI), founded in 1908, was reconstituted under the Universities Act 1997 with four constituent universities, Cork, Dublin, Galway and Maynooth. The University of Limerick and Dublin City University (DCU) were established in 1989. Two Colleges of Education, St. Patrick’s College and Mater Dei Institute of Education (for teachers of religion) are colleges of DCU. The Church of Ireland College, St. Mary’s Marino, and Froebel College are all associated colleges of the University of Dublin – Trinity College, and Mary Immaculate College is a college of the University of Limerick. Saint Angela’s in Sligo (majoring in home economics) is a college of NUI Galway. Thomond College in Limerick for teachers of physical education and some crafts was incorporated into the University of Limerick in 1991. The National College of Art and Design, which was established by statute in 1971, is a college of UCD. Other university recognised colleges include the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Shannon College of Hotel Management, Institute of Public Administration and Milltown Institute.

By the end of the twentieth century, there were fourteen Institutes of Technology in the country. In addition to the largest, Dublin Institute of Technology, established in 1978, and what were the eight original RTCs, Athlone, Carlow, Cork, Dundalk,

Galway-Mayo, Letterkenny, Sligo and Waterford, Tralee was raised to regional status in 1979 and a new one was opened in Tallaght in September 1992. Limerick College of Art, Commerce and Technology (which was originally established in 1852) became a Regional Technical College on 1 January 1993. Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (incorporating the former College of Art and Design) started in 1997 and Blanchardstown in 1999. A campus of RTC Galway was opened in Castlebar in September 1994. When a new name for the college was being considered in 1998, it was decided to call it Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (to recognise the campus in Castlebar). A campaign for an RTC in Tipperary resulted in the establishment of Tipperary Institute in 1998 (as a publicly funded company limited by guarantee).

HUGE EXPANSION

There was a huge expansion in third-level enrolments to 2008/9 in both sectors of the binary system, reaching a figure of 177,388, which is expected to increase in subsequent years. Completion of the post-primary school cycle was around 82 per cent by then and participation in higher education increased from 20 per cent in 1980 to sixty six per cent. There were 2.1 million in the workforce by 2007, a figure reduced to about 1.9 million now, with almost all graduates finding employment until the start of the recession in 2008. In recent years, there was a huge increase in State investment in research and development, especially in the universities. According to the Government's Report, *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* (2008), the objective of this investment is innovation and commercialisation which the report states 'will be the successful formula for the next phase of the development of the Irish economy.'

SURPASSED EXPECTATIONS

The opening of the Regional Technical Colleges initiated one of the most exciting developments in Irish education during the twentieth century. They brought a strong applied orientation, increased participation and an important regional dimension to higher education in Ireland. They made a huge contribution to economic development by providing suitable graduates 'over a broad spectrum of occupations, ranging from craft to professional level' as specified in the 'Mulcahy Report' for an expanding labour force, as well as facilitating participation, fostering social cohesion and becoming drivers of regional development. Alumni from the Regional Technical Colleges found ready employment in Ireland, except for the recessions in the late 1980s and from 2008. The high demand for places, even during a period of a big drop in the number taking the Leaving Certificate, is a reflection of the reputation they earned. They made a significant contribution to the attractiveness of Ireland for foreign direct investment and in the promotion of indigenous enterprises. Their geographical distribution was a big factor in increasing access to and participation in higher education. They also made a huge contribution to increasing participation from lower socio-economic groups and providing students with opportunities to develop their talents. The colleges developed the ladder system of progression, which facilitated the integration of further and higher education and were responsive to the demand for life-long learning and upskilling of the labour force. The colleges were responsive to providing new programmes to satisfy new needs, working closely with regional and community organisations.

There are new challenges and opportunities on the horizon. While there will be a drive for collaboration, rationalisation, mergers, and value for money, providing students with the opportunities to realise their potential having regard to changing needs remains the main objective of any third-level education policy.

In his poem 'From the Canton of Expectation', Seamus Heaney described the transformative power of widened educational opportunity to take a community from the 'high banked clouds of resignation' to new horizons, 'whose boat will lift when the cloudburst happens'.⁵³ The Institute of Technology sector aided a cloudburst for many individuals and communities in the past and hopefully that will continue in the future.

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