



HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND, 1922–2016

*Politics, Policy and Power—A History
of Higher Education in the Irish State*

John Walsh



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October 2018

John Walsh

Contents

1	Ideas of the University	1
2	Universities in the Irish Free State	27
3	Church, State and the University	105
4	Higher Technical Education in Ireland	129
5	Ministers, Bishops and Teachers	155
6	The End of the Old Order	187
7	The Transformation of Higher Education	233
8	Reform and Resistance	329
9	Globalisation and the Primacy of Economics	387
10	Higher Education in the Twenty First Century	483

Bibliography	495
Index	513

List of Figures

Fig. 1	Dublin University OTC guard being inspected by Sir Robert Tate at Dublin Castle, 17 March 1920. Tate was a senior fellow of TCD. Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	179
Fig. 2	Postcard of Kildare St. Training College 1880–1900. Lawrence Collection, Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	179
Fig. 3	Students at De La Salle College, Newtown, Co. Waterford, 31 May 1924, Poole Collection, Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	180
Fig. 4	Student at the National University of Ireland, Earlsfort Terrace, 1940–60. Cardall Photographic Collection, Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	180
Fig. 5	President Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh, meeting delegates attending the Federation of University Women in Dublin, 13 August 1957. Independent Newspapers Ireland, Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	181
Fig. 6	Students in Front Square, Trinity College, Dublin, 1964. Wiltshire Collection, Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	182

x **List of Figures**

Fig. 7	UCD, Earlsfort Terrace, 1969. Wiltshire Collection, Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	183
Fig. 8	Patrick Kavanagh giving a poetry lecture, lecture hall in UCD, 1958. Wiltshire Collection, Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	184
Fig. 9	Central Applications Office, Postcard receipt from CAO to applicant, undated. Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland	185

Introduction

The scope of higher education is subject to conflicting interpretations and change over time. Higher level courses at degree and postgraduate level were almost exclusively the preserve of the universities in the early twentieth century. Primary teacher education in Ireland was envisaged as a post second level endeavour from the 1920s, but not explicitly linked to university qualifications until forty years later. Technical schools operated by Vocational Education Committees (VECs) in Dublin and Cork would not typically have been considered higher level institutions in the early 1900s, but several developed into colleges of technology within a reconfigured non-university sector from the 1960s. Post-compulsory further education and training was originally associated with the second-level sector and developed as a distinct sector in its own right only in the last two decades.¹ This study explores the emergence of the modern higher education system in the Irish state, tracing its origins from a fragmented tertiary space including traditional universities, teacher training colleges and technical schools in the early twentieth century to the complex, massified and diverse system of the twenty first century.

Burton Clark in a seminal analysis of forces of coordination in higher education, identified the state, academic oligarchy and the market as the three main elements within a 'triangle of coordination', which he envisaged as a continuum shaped by different forms of integration and influence within distinct national systems.² Clark's triangular model identified the dominant forms of integration in North America and Europe based on a cross-national comparison in the late twentieth century.³ Yet this analysis risks understating other 'forces of coordination', often rooted in international organisation or ideology. As Marginson and Rhoades point out, the Catholic Church was 'a powerful example of global influence on the structural and ideological underpinnings of higher education.'⁴ This applies with particular force to Ireland, where the rejection of neutral or 'godless' university colleges in the mid to late 1800s was a key inflection point in the triumph of ultramontane Catholicism. Higher education in Ireland evolved in a distinctive political and cultural context shaped by conflicting religious and national allegiances.

Hazelkorn et al suggest that Irish higher education remained 'essentially a self-referential system' in the twentieth century.⁵ While this captures the persistence of established structures, institutions and practices up to the late 1900s, it understates the power of international forces and ideologies over a wider historical timeframe. Conceptualisations of the university and higher education in Ireland were shaped by ideologies with an international reach, including ultramontane Catholicism, postwar social and Christian democracy and theories of human capital formation rooted in liberal economics. Cultural and political nationalism also framed the context in which higher education institutions functioned in the early to mid-twentieth century. More recently, the emergence of globalisation has exerted a profound influence on higher education systems in the developed world, contributing to a re-appraisal of policy, curriculum frameworks and institutional structures in Ireland. As Vaira notes, powerful supranational agencies such as the Organisation for Co-operation and Development in Europe (OECD) serve as 'institutional carriers' which promote and disseminate 'the wider rationalised myths' of globalisation, establish the legitimacy of

policies and institutional behaviours and define the context in which HEIs (and national systems) operate in the contemporary world.⁶

The interface between the state, academic institutions and other key institutional actors, including the churches, Irish language organisations, employers and trade unions, is the major focus of the study. Exploring the interplay between HEIs, domestic political, religious and business elites and supranational organisations such as the OECD and European Union, is essential to understanding the evolution of the modern Irish HE system. The study's focus on the influence of ideology and the role of supranational organisations in mediating dominant discourses is also intended to avoid the perils of 'methodological nationalism'⁷ and the familiar trap of using Britain (or England) as the chief reference point.

There is no detailed academic study of higher education (HE) in the modern Irish state from a historical perspective. As White noted in 2001, while research on education has greatly expanded over the past generation, the history of higher education has attracted relatively little scholarly analysis, particularly in comparison with other developed countries.⁸ Many of the texts on the history of Irish education, including Ó Buachalla (1988) and Mulcahy and O'Sullivan (1989) date from the 1980s and their access to state papers on education was restricted by the thirty-year rule.⁹ John Coolahan's excellent (and recently updated) survey of the history and contemporary structure of education in Ireland has a broad focus encompassing primary, second level and higher education from 1800 to the present day.¹⁰ Clancy (1989) and Ó Buachalla (1992) explore the massification and diversification of Irish higher education between the 1960s and the 1980s.¹¹ Tony White's work considered the transformation of the higher education system between 1960 and 2000, informed mainly by official publications and other published literature. Denis O'Sullivan (2005) explored the cultural politics underpinning Irish education as a whole, seeking to locate the transformation of the educational sector within a theoretical framework.¹² More recently, the historical development and current direction of teacher education in independent Ireland is explored by O'Donoghue, Harford and O'Doherty, in a detailed exposition informed by a range of secondary sources, while Richard Thorn has

published a study on the evolution of the Regional Technical Colleges from their foundation to the contemporary period.¹³

While higher education in Ireland attracted relatively little historical analysis until the early 2000s, there is an increasingly extensive literature on contemporary higher education policy. Patrick Clancy's detailed analysis of Irish higher education is the most recent major work in the field, considering the contemporary higher education system in a comparative context.¹⁴ Access and participation at higher level have been the subject of in-depth scholarly exploration since the 1970s (including successive HEA studies led by Clancy, a number of studies commissioned by the ESRI and most recently an edited volume by Loxley, Fleming and Finnegan) and this book has benefited greatly from their detailed engagement with the subject.¹⁵ Loxley et al also presented a detailed overview of policy and curriculum developments linked to various thematic areas, while O'Connor undertook an in-depth analysis of gender in higher education management.¹⁶ I have tried to avoid replicating the work or analysis of others, while drawing upon the growing body of literature in the field of higher education.

The book is informed principally by archival sources (particularly the departmental papers in the National Archives), many of which were not previously available or were not exploited for a study of higher education. The research also draws upon official publications, parliamentary debates and national newspapers. I have used extensively the reports of the Public Accounts Committee, which contain a wealth of data on education, particularly for the earlier chapters of the book. The records of the Catholic archdiocese of Dublin proved invaluable, particularly the voluminous McQuaid papers, in deciphering the close relationship between the bishops, their academic allies and public officials up to the 1970s. The book draws on a range of institutional records, including the minutes and correspondence files of the senate of the National University of Ireland and minutes and correspondence of the Board of TCD. Although the study is based principally on documentary research, I have also conducted a number of interviews, which were useful in understanding contemporary developments where government papers or other archival records are not yet available.¹⁷

The focus of the book is the history of higher education in independent Ireland from the creation of the Irish Free State until the end of the economic crisis triggered by the 'Great Recession'. As this study has a historical focus, it does not set out to offer a comprehensive exploration of academic practice, pedagogy or culture in contemporary higher education.¹⁸ Higher education in Northern Ireland is outside the scope of this book, as it forms a distinctive educational sector requiring examination in its own right, shaped by the policies of the British state, the regional priorities of the Stormont administration (1922–72) and the community division in Northern Ireland. While further education as a whole is not the main focus of this work, important aspects of FE, including the development of a national framework for apprenticeship and the emergence of post Leaving Certificate courses, are closely inter-related with the history of higher education.

The study is structured primarily in a chronological format, including a brief analysis of the historical context in the early twentieth century; the ideological underpinnings of Irish universities; the emergence of the Irish Universities Act, 1908 and the position of women in higher education. The earlier Chapters (2–5) reflect on the university-dominated sector up to the 1950s, the under-researched sphere of higher technical education and the close alliance between the state and the major churches in the training of primary teachers. Chapters 7–8 present an in-depth analysis of the transformation of the higher educational sector through diversification, expansion and massification in the second half of the twentieth century. The final chapter takes a more explicitly thematic approach to contemporary policy developments in the early 2000s, exploring internationalisation, teaching and learning, research, the rise of managerialism, access, gender, private higher education, financial sustainability and the impact of economic crisis. The closing discussion of the Hunt Report and ensuing contemporary initiatives gives an introduction informed by a historical perspective to an ongoing and still fluid process of policy and structural change.

The book considers how the exercise of power at local, national and international level impinged on the mission, purpose and values of higher education and on the creation and expansion of a distinctive higher education system. The transformation in public and political

understandings of the role of higher education is considered, charting the gradual and sometimes tortuous evolution from traditionalist conceptions of the academy as a repository for cultural and religious value formation to the re-positioning of higher education as a vital factor in the knowledge based economy. This study explores policy, structural and institutional change in Irish higher education, suggesting that the emergence of the modern higher education system in Ireland was profoundly influenced by ideologies and trends which owed much to a wider European and international context.

Notes

1. FE has recently begun to attract more scholarly analysis, notably by Rory O'Sullivan, "From 'Cinderella' to the 'Fourth Pillar' of the Irish Education System—A Critical Analysis of the Evolution of Further Education and Training in Ireland" (Ph.D. diss., TCD, 2018).
2. Burton Clark, *The Higher Education System Academic Organisation in Cross-National Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 142–3.
3. Ibid., 143–5.
4. Simon Marginson and Gary Rhoades, 'Beyond Nation States, Markets and Systems of Higher Education: A Glonacal Agency Heuristic,' *Higher Education* 43 (2002): 288.
5. Ellen Hazelkorn, Andrew Gibson, and Siobhán Harkin, 'From Massification to Globalisation: Reflections on the Transformation of Irish Higher Education,' in *The State in Transition: Essays in Honour of John Horgan*, ed. Kevin Rafter and Mark O'Brien (Dublin: New Island, 2015), 256.
6. Massimiliano Vaira, 'Globalisation and Higher Education: A Framework for Analysis,' *Higher Education* 48 (2004): 488.
7. Clancy, *Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective* (Dublin: IPA, 2015), 2.
8. Tony White, *Investing in People: Higher Education in Ireland from 1960 to 2000* (Dublin: IPA, 2001), vii.
9. Séamus Ó Buachalla, *Education Policy in Twentieth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1988).
10. John Coolahan, *Towards the Era of Lifelong Learning A History of Irish Education, 1800-2016* (Dublin: IPA, 2017).

11. Patrick Clancy, 'The Evolution of Policy in Third-Level Education,' in *Irish Educational Policy: Process and Substance*, ed. D. G. Mulcahy and Denis O'Sullivan (Dublin: IPA, 1989), 99–132; Séamus Ó Buachalla, 'Self-Regulation and the Emergence of the Evaluative State: Trends in Irish Higher Education Policy, 1987–92', *European Journal of Education* 27, no.1/2 (1992): 69–78.
12. Denis O'Sullivan, *Cultural Politics and Irish Education Since the 1950s: Policy, Paradigms and Power* (Dublin: IPA, 2005).
13. Tom O'Donoghue, Judith Harford, and Teresa O'Doherty, *Teacher Preparation in Ireland: History, Policy and Future Directions* (Emerald: 2017); Richard Thorn, *No Artificial Limits: Ireland's Regional Technical Colleges* (Dublin: IPA, 2018)—Richard Thorn's valuable study was published after the submission of the current study so the author did not have the opportunity to consult it in detail.
14. Patrick Clancy, *Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective* (Dublin: IPA, 2015).
15. Patrick Clancy, *Who Goes to College? A Second National Survey of Participation in Higher Education* (Dublin: HEA, 1988); Ted Fleming, Andrew Loxley, and Fergal Finnegan, *Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education* (London: Palgrave, 2017).
16. Andrew Loxley, Aidan Seery, and John Walsh, *Higher Education in Ireland: Practices, Policies and Possibilities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
17. The interviews fall into two distinct categories. A number of interviews were conducted with recent participants in the policy-making process who discussed their recollections on the basis of anonymity and confidentiality. These interviews have been anonymised and these interviewees are identified only by pseudonym (Interviewee A): The data has been kept confidential and is being used only for the purpose of this study. Interviews were also conducted with former policy-makers and academics, where anonymity could not be guaranteed or was not sought by interviewees. All interviews were conducted in line with the approval given to this project by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee.
18. For such analysis, see Andrew Loxley, Aidan Seery, and John Walsh, *Higher Education in Ireland: Practices, Policies and Possibilities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Coolahan, *Towards the Era of Lifelong Learning*; O'Donoghue, Harford, and O'Doherty, *Teacher Preparation in Ireland: History, Policy and Future Directions*, on teacher education.



1

Ideas of the University

The history of higher education in Ireland is inseparable from wider debates around competing ideas of the university and more broadly of the purpose of higher level learning. John Henry Newman first expressed his famous ideal of a liberal university education in Dublin, in a series of lectures entitled *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University education*. Newman's first series of lectures were delivered in May–June 1852 at the invitation of Paul Cullen, the newly appointed archbishop of Dublin and a leading proponent of ultramontane Catholicism, who sought an articulate critique of secular higher education. The *Discourses* offered a broad vision of university education, informed by a striking mixture of Oxbridge academic tradition and Catholic religious conviction:

That it is a place of *teaching* universal knowledge. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students; if religious training, I do not see how it can be the seat of literature and science.¹

Newman conceptualised the university as a place for intellectual formation and the cultivation of knowledge rather than training for the professions or vocational preparation for a useful function in society. Teaching rather than scientific research or ‘discovery’ was at the core of his vision of education. Moreover, his *Discourses* enunciated a distinctive humanist ideal of the purpose of university education: ‘Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward’.² Among Newman’s distinctive contributions to educational thought was to combine this broad conceptualisation of liberal education, influenced by the example of Oxford in the mid nineteenth century, with a defence of the importance of religion within the programme of studies.³ Newman advanced a subtle argument that while the university was not a centre of religious training, its essential function in teaching ‘universal knowledge’ required the teaching of theology and the separation of religion from secular disciplines was nothing less than the undermining of university education itself: ‘Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge. To blot it out is nothing short, if I may so speak, of unravelling the web of University Teaching’.⁴ Newman’s ideal was at odds with and in many respects a response to influential political and educational developments in his own time, notably the increasing emphasis on a more utilitarian model of higher education, associated with the foundation of the University of London in 1836 and the Queen’s Colleges in Ireland in the 1840s, which involved the application of learning in a secular context to the practical and scientific challenges of an industrialised society.⁵

An equally distinctive and perhaps more influential vision of the university was offered by Wilhelm Von Humboldt’s memorandum on the organisation of ‘intellectual institutions’ in Germany in 1810.⁶ Higher intellectual institutions, such as the university, had as their task ‘the cultivation of science and scholarship (Wissenschaft) in the broadest sense’.⁷ Von Humboldt envisaged the complementary activities of research and teaching in the service of knowledge as the fundamental attributes of a university: ‘At the higher level...both teacher and student have their justification in the common pursuit of knowledge. The teacher’s performance depends on the students’ presence and interest – without this

science and scholarship could not grow.⁸ The function of the state was to supply the organisational framework and resources for the practice of scholarship while preserving the autonomy of the intellectual life of the university: 'The state must understand that intellectual work will go on infinitely better if it does not intrude.'⁹ The Humboldtian ideal did not exclude state intervention in the university, but urged that it be kept to a necessary minimum and should avoid interference with the intellectual activity of the university where its intrusion could only be prejudicial.¹⁰ As Neave notes, this vision of autonomy was not always compatible with the increasing vocational demands for professional training in administration and business during the nineteenth century.¹¹ Yet Humboldt's ideal influenced the development of the research-oriented university in Germany, which combined a high level of state support and initiative with professorial power and autonomy.¹² Moreover, Humboldt's characterisation of teaching and research as the central, complementary purposes of the university has had a long-term resonance in shaping both scholarly understandings and institutional organisation of the university in Europe up to the contemporary period.

The Humboldtian ideal of autonomy was not universally accepted in Irish political discourse, where freedom was interpreted in the light of conflicting political or religious allegiances. Sir James Graham, who spearheaded legislation to create the Queen's Colleges as home secretary in 1845, insisted that the crown should retain the power to appoint and remove professors, ostensibly to protect students from proselytising: 'security must be taken that ...opportunities are not seized of making these lectures the vehicle of any peculiar religious tenets.'¹³ The majority of the British political elite adopted the principle of non-denominational education in Ireland from the mid nineteenth century, with the logical implication of no state endowment for denominational education at higher level. This conversion by the British government occurred just as Catholic opinion in Ireland, led by the Catholic bishops, moved firmly in the opposite direction. Cardinal Cullen, who condemned the 'godless colleges' precisely because of their secular, non-denominational status, was remarkably similar to Graham in his demands of any university serving Catholic students. The bishops would require the necessary power to exclude

‘bad books and bad professors’ to protect their co-religionists from proselytising by Protestant denominations or the equally baleful influence of ‘the new sect, of Secularists...’.¹⁴

A distinctively Anglo-Saxon model of the academy, characterised by the absence of formal state regulation and a traditional perception of universities as corporations in a ‘semi-private relationship’ with the state, was also influential in the development of universities in Ireland.¹⁵ Trinity College Dublin, the oldest university in Ireland which was established in 1592 under an Elizabethan charter, was obliged to secure the assent of the crown in relation to the appointment of its provost and amendments to the college statutes from 1637.¹⁶ Yet under the statutes the provost and senior fellows enjoyed a high level of autonomy in managing the affairs of the college and their autonomy was respected by governments throughout the 1800s. The presidents of the Queen’s Colleges were appointed by the government, but enjoyed considerable freedom in their academic affairs within the loose structure of the Royal University (1881–1909). The Irish Universities Act, 1908, gave considerable autonomy to the newly reconstituted National University of Ireland and Queen’s University, Belfast, vesting authority in university senates which following a five year transition period were mainly elected by academics, graduates and professional interests, rather than nominated by the government.

The ‘Irish University Question’

The development of the major universities on the island of Ireland was linked to religious and political divisions rooted in historical conflicts which cast a long shadow well into the twentieth century. Trinity College maintained a monopoly of posts and offices for an Anglican elite until the late nineteenth century: while all religious tests for posts and offices outside its Divinity School were abolished by Fawcett’s Act in 1873, the college remained closely associated with the Protestant ruling class and was a bastion of unionism up to the first world war.¹⁷ The debate over university education was entangled with the wider constitutional

struggle over the union during the late nineteenth century.¹⁸ A number of reforming initiatives for university education, embarked on with varying degrees of conviction by British ministers, failed in the face of the incompatible demands of conflicting political and religious forces. The most famous initiative was taken by William Gladstone, who proposed a grand plan for a single federal university in Ireland in 1873.¹⁹ The Prime Minister succeeded in uniting a remarkable range of mutually hostile interests, spanning the ideological spectrum from Trinity College to Cardinal Cullen, against the legislation, which was defeated by three votes in the House of Commons in March 1873: the dramatic defeat decisively undermined Gladstone's government.²⁰ Arthur Balfour, the leading architect of constructive unionism, almost a quarter of a century later proposed two new universities in Ireland, one in Dublin for the Catholic majority and the other in Belfast for Protestants, while leaving TCD untouched.²¹ But despite the advice of the Conservative *Spectator* that the 'Tory-Orange opposition is noisy but not formidable', the Conservative government backed away from legislation in the face of vehement unionist resistance.²² Successive governments set up commissions of enquiry into university education, the Robertson commission (1901–03) and Fry commission (1906–07), but neither was able to achieve consensus even among their own members.²³

A more modest initiative by Benjamin Disraeli's government in 1879 was successful in establishing the Royal University, as a degree awarding institution overseeing competitive examinations but not requiring attendance at any college institutions (with the exceptions of schools of medicine).²⁴ The 'Royal' allowed differing denominations to compete for the same examinations within a common institutional framework and opened up university qualifications to women for the first time.²⁵ Almost a quarter of the Royal University's 2173 graduates were women by 1900,²⁶ ensuring that university education in Ireland was no longer a male preserve. Its loose institutional structures facilitated a high level of autonomy among a diverse conglomeration of educational institutions, including the three Queen's Colleges and University College Dublin (UCD), administered by the Jesuits on behalf of the bishops. Moody points to the 'great and timely stimulus to higher education in

Ireland' given by the examining university at a pivotal time following the introduction of state support for intermediate schools in 1878.²⁷ Yet the Royal University was unloved by almost all the contending parties in late nineteenth century Ireland. William Walsh, archbishop of Dublin (1885–1921) expressed the view of most parties in arguing that 'The new University, then, was universally regarded as a temporary expedient...'²⁸

The election of a Liberal government in 1906 and appointment of Augustine Birrell as chief secretary in January 1907 paved the way for the resolution of the 'Irish university question'. Birrell quietly dropped the venerable plan for reconstituting the University of Dublin within a great federal institution, instead adopting the more limited scheme originally floated by Balfour as the template for his universities bill.²⁹ Birrell collaborated closely with Walsh in drafting the legislation.³⁰ Birrell dispatched an outline of the scheme to Walsh on 31 December 1907, commenting that 'It is Your Grace will at once perceive a Skeleton – but anatomy in such matters is of the first importance'.³¹ The legislation accommodated denominational realities rather than seeking to challenge them: 'two Universities Belfast Dublin – on the same Constitutional lines – with Governing Bodies which will reflect and represent the prevalent character of the place in which they are situated, the graduates of the University and so on'.³² Birrell's initiative left the existing University of Dublin intact, while establishing two new universities in Ireland, both formally non-denominational, but with a federal institution based in Dublin to offer higher education acceptable to Catholics and a single university in Belfast, mainly to serve the Presbyterian community in Ulster.

Birrell urged Walsh to sound out his fellow bishops by ascertaining 'general views and suggestions – so as to avoid as many Rocks of offence as possible'.³³ Birrell accepted that it was impossible to legislate on university education in Ireland without taking account of ecclesiastical power. This would be a lesson closely followed by his successors in Irish governments until the late twentieth century. Walsh supported the scheme, warning Birrell that the new federal university should be as well financed as Trinity College and the reconstituted Queen's University:

As I have already said to you, I think it a very good scheme...better than any other kind of scheme I can think of, excepting of course one that would give us equality with TCD...Are we Catholics to get as much as the two great Protestant Colleges and Universities will get? If so, we have equality in one most substantial point...³⁴

The bishops collectively accepted the federal framework of the university and the absence of religious tests, but set out as a key condition inclusion of the Catholic seminary at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth within the new federal university.³⁵

The universities Bill provided for the dissolution of the Royal University; the reconstitution of Queen's College, Belfast as a separate university and the establishment of a new federal university based in Dublin, incorporating the Jesuit college at University College, Dublin (UCD) and the Queen's Colleges in Cork and Galway as its constituent colleges. The new universities were established as non-denominational institutions financed by the state, with 'no test whatever of religious belief' relating to professors, students or graduates and a strict prohibition on any religious preference.³⁶ County and borough councils were empowered to provide scholarships supporting students to attend the new universities, funded by local government rates, provided that no scholarship was 'subject to or conditional upon any religious qualification'.³⁷ The other defining principle of the Bill was that in contrast to the Royal University the new institutions would be teaching universities, requiring attendance at lectures as a condition for examination and graduation. The legislation ensured recognition for graduates of the Royal University as graduates of one of the new universities and credit to students for previous courses and examinations.³⁸

The legislation delegated a great deal of authority to separate statutory commissions in Dublin and Belfast, which were given the crucial task of preparing the university statutes and making the first academic appointments for a seven year period.³⁹ The commissions were representative of local political and religious elites. Walsh was nominated to the Dublin commission, which was headed by Sir Christopher Palles, the first Catholic chief baron of the Irish exchequer and a close ally of

the archbishop; the commission also included Denis Coffey, president of UCD from 1909, two nationalist MPs and the presidents of the colleges in Cork and Galway.⁴⁰ Crucially, a clause providing for ‘affiliation’ of recognised colleges was included in the Bill, to facilitate the incorporation of St Patrick’s College, Maynooth and Magee College, an institution founded in 1865 in Derry for the training of Presbyterian ministers, within the new universities based in Dublin and Belfast respectively, although neither college was named.⁴¹

Birrell openly acknowledged that the Bill was designed to recognise cultural and denominational realities in Ireland:

The most anybody can say is that we are planting one University on what, I suppose, may be called Protestant soil, although there are many Roman Catholics in Ulster, and the other on what may be called Roman Catholic soil, although there are many Protestants in Dublin and Cork, and some even in Galway...There is no originality about this scheme - anybody who likes may claim it as his own.⁴²

The universities Bill was passed by the House of Commons with cross-party support in July 1908 by a decisive margin of 207 to 19, facing concerted opposition only from the Ulster unionist MPs.⁴³ Birrell’s achievement was recognised by MPs of various persuasions, with the Conservative MP Samuel Butcher joking that he ‘had to unite in his own person the views of a Roman prelate and a Nonconformist minister’.⁴⁴ The collaboration between Walsh and Birrell was fundamental to the success of the universities bill. The educational experiment initiated in the early 1900s signalled a pragmatic accommodation in university education between the British political elite and the Catholic bishops.

‘Nobody’s Ideal’

The verdict of historians on the Irish Universities Act has been varied. T. W. Moody commented that the educational settlement of 1908–10 foreshadowed the partition of Ireland little more than a decade later.⁴⁵ FSL Lyons followed a similar interpretation, suggesting that the

settlement marked a defeat for the concept of 'mixed' education at higher level at least in the southern part of the island.⁴⁶ Coolahan, however, noted that while the solution reached in 1908 was in gestation for a long period 'it proved remarkably durable', surviving for three quarters of a century without serious alteration.⁴⁷ The prospect of 'neutral' higher education free of denominational influence was bleak in the early 1900s, due to the sharp cultural and religious cleavages in Irish society, the denominational basis of primary and intermediate education and the incompatible objectives of the major political forces on the island.

Timothy Healy's famous comment in July 1908 that 'The Bill is nobody's ideal' was essentially accurate but also explained why the universities settlement proved enduring.⁴⁸ The universities act reflected a historic compromise between an increasingly powerful nationalist political community in Ireland and the dominant forces within the British state, albeit one which was restricted to higher education. The university settlement was the least divisive solution in an Ireland deeply marked by religious and political conflict and the only one which could command support from the most influential forces in nationalist Ireland, established institutions such as Trinity College and the British political elite.

The NUI was firmly under the control of Catholic, nationalist elites and conflict within the senate largely took the form of generational or political differences among these elites. The new federal university met long-term Catholic demands and also offered a framework for the pursuit of cultural nationalist aspirations. The university in Belfast won rapid acceptance despite the early hostility of unionist politicians to the legislation, not least due to the shrewd decision to adopt the name of the Queen's University of Belfast, which appealed to the loyalty of local elites and graduates to the original Queen's College dissolved on the foundation of the Royal University.⁴⁹

The first senate of the NUI was dominated by lay, professional, upper middle class Catholics, with a strong representation of lawyers, the medical profession and public representatives. Although it contained a number of Protestant nominees, the composition of the governing body reflected the predominantly Catholic cultural and ideological milieu which shaped the foundation of the new university. The proportion of Catholic clergy (4 out of 39) was relatively small, but carried

considerable weight—two archbishops, Walsh and John Healy, archbishop of Tuam, were nominated to the senate by the crown, as was William Delany S. J., the outgoing president of UCD.⁵⁰ The NUI senate, in contrast to the Royal University where nominations had been reserved to the Crown, was allowed to elect the first Chancellor, with successors being selected by Convocation which included the senate, academic staff and graduates of the university.⁵¹ Walsh was elected unanimously as Chancellor on 18 December 1908.⁵² The archbishop's prestige, position and long-term advocacy for Catholic higher education made him the inevitable choice.⁵³ While the senate's decision was made with the support of its Protestant members, Walsh's election indicated the predominantly Catholic nature of the new federal university.

The first senate of Queen's was largely drawn from the Protestant social and commercial elite in the north-east of Ireland, offering representation to commercial, medical and local government bodies, as well as local magistrates and graduates of Queen's college.⁵⁴ The senate was a predominantly unionist body, although the crown appointed five Catholic members and it also included liberal mavericks such as W. J. Pirrie, a Liberal peer and the Rev. J. B. Armour of Ballymoney.⁵⁵ The majority of the senate were external members from the professions, politics or the Belfast commercial elite. The governing body was designed, like its federal counterpart in Dublin, to reflect its local cultural and religious milieu. The Presbyterian General Assembly accepted the new university despite its earlier opposition to the legislation.⁵⁶ The 'affiliation' clause offered an avenue for recognition of Magee by Queen's University and two representatives of the college, including its president, J. R. Leebody, were appointed to the senate. The college authorities, however, instead succeeded in making an agreement with TCD in 1909, which allowed students in Magee to secure a university degree, by pursuing most of the arts course in Magee, but attending four academic terms in Trinity and undertaking the degree examinations.⁵⁷ Magee maintained its affiliation to Trinity until 1968, forging a distinctive linkage between the University of Dublin and Ulster Presbyterianism.

UCD had 656 matriculated students in 1910–11, with over half pursuing courses in the Medical Faculty; most of the remainder were undertaking Arts courses, including Law.⁵⁸ Queen's University was broadly comparable to UCD in its size, boasting an enrolment of 620 full-time students in 1909–10.⁵⁹ Queen's also had a strong tradition of part-time participation, mainly through an extensive programme of university extension lectures by the Workers' Educational Association; there were over 200 part-time students attending afternoon and evening classes in 1910–11.⁶⁰ The largest proportion of students were Presbyterian, accounting for between 40 and 50% of the student body in its first decade as an independent university.⁶¹ But Queen's also attracted a significant proportion of Catholic students: in 1915–16 Catholics accounted for over 25% of the total student body, surpassing the number of Church of Ireland students up to the early 1920s.⁶²

Catholicism was an important unifying feature of the early NUI. The Catholic primate, Cardinal Michael Logue, alluded to the calculation made by the bishops in accepting the NUI, at St Mary's College, Dundalk, on 6 June 1911:

They gave us what they hoped to be a pagan University, but, please God, let it be a Catholic University...turn loose upon it a lot of fine, young Irish Catholics, and they will soon make it a Christian institution.⁶³

He sounded the same note in an address at Maynooth on 25 June 1912, expressing the confidence of most bishops that the cultural and religious setting in which the new institution operated would prevail over formal rules and prohibitions: '...they have dropped that Pagan bantling down in the midst of us, and, please God, if we can, we will baptise it and make it Christian.'⁶⁴

Logue's confidence was justified. The NUI offered higher education in an institutional setting pervaded by the dominant Catholic religious milieu which produced its leaders and the large majority of its staff and students. UCD inherited its name, religious tradition and a substantial section of its staff from the Jesuit college on St. Stephen's Green.

About three-quarters of the professors appointed by the Dublin commission had been members of the faculty or former students in University College, St. Stephen's Green or the Cecilia St. medical school.⁶⁵ The transfer of students from the Jesuit college, Cecilia St. and the Catholic women's university colleges made up the largest proportion of UCD's student population, while most first year entrants were drawn from Catholic secondary schools.⁶⁶

Both of the former Queen's Colleges in Cork and Galway experienced a far-reaching and relatively rapid process of 'Catholicisation', which was well advanced before the foundation of the Irish state. UCC president Bertram Windle, a convert to Catholicism whose zealous devotion to his adopted faith was recognised when he was made a Knight of St. Gregory by Pope Pius X, exerted profound influence on the college in its transition to the NUI. He assured Walsh in 1908 of his determination to transform the college into a bastion of the Catholic faith: 'I look upon this university as one of the greatest – I think the greatest – opportunity that I have ever had and I hope to build up a College here in Cork which will be a centre of Catholic influence for the South of Ireland'.⁶⁷ Alexander Anderson, an eminent physicist and native of Coleraine, was the sole leader of a Queen's College to continue well into the early years of the Irish state, serving as president for thirty five years (1899–1934).⁶⁸ The college's governing body consisted mainly of lay Catholic notables and clergy by 1913 and Fr John Hynes BD, a dominant figure on the governing body, was appointed as registrar in 1916.⁶⁹ UCG's student population was drawn almost entirely from the overwhelmingly Catholic counties of Connacht and as the smallest and least well financed of the colleges it was particularly dependent on the financial support which it received from local county councils, making UCG highly responsive to its regional cultural and religious context.⁷⁰

The de facto Catholic tone and character of the university was reinforced by the admission of Maynooth. The senate agreed in February 1910 to approve St. Patrick's College, Maynooth as a recognised college of the university within the faculties of arts, philosophy and Celtic Studies for an initial four year period.⁷¹ This decision, which allowed clerical students in Maynooth to secure university degrees, was later

renewed indefinitely. Maynooth functioned both as a seminary and a recognised college of the NUI, offering secular courses of study in arts and science to clerical students as well as theological training for the priesthood. The most balanced verdict on the new university was given by Samuel Butcher, a member of the first senate but essentially a sympathetic outsider, who identified the aim of the act as ‘a University which should be Catholic in tone and spirit and yet academic in principles’.⁷² This was an apt description of the NUI well into the second half of the twentieth century.

The NUI from the outset was profoundly affected by the political and popular movement for Gaelicisation. The Gaelic League enjoyed its most striking success less than a year after the inauguration of the new university, when the NUI senate agreed by majority vote in June 1910 to introduce Irish as an essential subject for matriculation within three years.⁷³ McCartney argued that ‘essential Irish’ was imposed by nationalist UCD representatives, over the opposition of the Cork and Galway members,⁷⁴ a complaint certainly voiced at the time by Windle. But while the UCD representatives were in favour of ‘essential Irish’, the outcome of the debate was not primarily due to the superior clout of the largest college in the NUI. The advocates of ‘essential Irish’ commanded the big battalions, in the form of the overwhelming support of county and borough councils, whose support was necessary for the establishment of local authority scholarship schemes.⁷⁵ Although two college presidents and several bishops opposed ‘essential Irish’, the Gaelic League succeeded in mobilising a national movement for compulsory Irish which overcame substantial academic and clerical opposition within the senate.⁷⁶

The first world war and the 1916 Rising which ultimately created the conditions for the collapse of the union transformed the political context in which Irish universities had functioned. The revolutionary era between 1914 and 1922 saw a generational and ideological transition in the leadership of the NUI. The leading Catholic office-holders who had led the university at its foundation gave way to a more assertively nationalist leadership openly hostile to the British connection. Bertram Windle resigned as president of UCC in 1919, following