A Model of Third Level Education for the 21st Century:

Realising Potential

ALBA Lecture by David Begg, TASC

A couple of weeks ago I heard Bernie Sanders observe that one in four black babies born in America will end up in Prison. Such is the state of inequality in the United States today.

Nearly fifty years ago another contender for the Democratic Party nomination for President, Robert Kennedy, made a broadly similar observation about the economy and society.

Speaking at the University of Kansas a few days before he was assassinated he said this:

‘The gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials.

It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile’.

The sad fact is that inequality has increased in the intervening years, not just in America, but in Ireland also. And yet as Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) have convincingly demonstrated, countries with higher levels of equality have higher overall levels of attainment in many different fields, including education.
The Nordic countries tend to be the best performers in this regard. They manage to combine low levels of income inequality with high levels of economic efficiency, competiveness and social cohesion.

Finland, for example, has one of the best educational systems in the world. A reform programme commenced in the 1980s has brought about amazing results. Finland has one of the most educated citizenries in the world, provides educational opportunities in an egalitarian manner, and makes efficient use of resources (Sahlberg, 2011:1)

It is perhaps a little unfortunate that the achievements of the Finnish education system has been used as a comparison that puts many people in education off it. But actually its key attributes are that teachers are valued more than doctors in Finland and are completely autonomous in the classroom.

The chief instrument that guides Finnish education policies and educational renewal is the Development Plan for Education Research 2007-2012. It emphasises securing equal opportunities, improving the quality of education, and dignifying teachers as the main source of good education. Furthermore this document emphasises the complementary principle by developing the education system as a whole.

You may wonder why I consider equality to be so important.

The reason is that education is not just a potential economic leveller, it is also an enabler of personal empowerment. I would like to look more closely at this in the context of higher education, and of course with particular reference to the Adult Learning BA programme.
The Finns’ focus on complementarity and the realisation that there are many pathways to learning is a critical insight. Diversity of approach, particularly at tertiary level, is important because many people may not have had the opportunity to stay in education at an early stage of their lives.

Re-entering the system after many years in the workforce can be very challenging and unfortunately many lack the confidence to do so. However, those who do almost always find that the experience reveals talents and abilities that they didn’t know they had. It is, I think, the great strength of the ALBA programme that it facilitates the release of this potential.

As the great Scottish historical novelist, Sir Walter Scott, put it:

‘All men who have turned out worth anything have had the chief hand in their own education’

I began by referencing Bernie Sander’s comments of the future of babies born in the United States. A recent report published by Pobal reveals that babies born in Ballymun come into a community with a male unemployment rate of 58 per cent, where only 4.6 per cent of the population have a third-level qualification. In the case of Darndale the figure is 2.8 per cent. Such inequality of opportunity is unsustainable in terms of social cohesion, it seems to me.

I have a long-term English friend called Alan Johnson. He is one of the most intelligent people I know, and the author of two best-selling books.

Alan was elected Labour MP for Hull and the Hessle in 1997 and very shortly after became a Parliamentary Secretary. After about two years there was a re-shuffle and he was made Minister for Higher Education. Never having attended University he thought that a mistake had been made. He rang No. 10
to point this out but the reply he received was ‘We know this Alan, that’s why we want you in the job!’

When you think about it, this was quite far sighted because nobody appreciates the value of education more that the person who never had access to it. Alan was an outstanding Education Minister who subsequently went on to become Home Secretary.

The point of this story really is to suggest that those who have come to higher education through the normal channels don’t always understand the needs of those coming through a less orthodox journey.

Some time ago I saw a heading in The Irish Times which ran ‘There Are No Votes in Third-Level Education’.

I have no reason to doubt the veracity of this statement but it is worrying if the public are indifferent to a topic of major importance to us all.

Student numbers are up by about 20 per cent since 2008 but public funding for higher education has fallen by 30 per cent over the same period. The student/staff ratio has risen from 16:1 to 20:1 compared to an OECD average of 14:1. In addition the sector has become one of the worst for precarious work, meaning that people have no security of employment.

It is hard to see how this can be sustainable in the long run either, for a number of reasons:

- We are now in the era of mass education. Growth at third level between now and 2030 will increase significantly due to the demographics of the population.
• Third-level institutions are supposed to be the driving force for R & D and innovation but it will be hard to build institutional capacity on the basis of precarious employment.

• The best and the brightest will not hang around if they lack the means to buy houses and form families as is the natural order of things.

• We cannot attract the international excellence which drives diversity and in many ways is the very essence of the third-level student experience.

There is a long-running debate about how to put tertiary education on a sustainable financial trajectory. A recent report by the Royal Irish Academy has suggested an income contingent student loans scheme – meaning that people only begin to pay back the loan when their income reaches a certain level.

I am not sure that this is the best approach. I recently spoke to a young man who had just started his first job having obtained a Masters Degree in Business Studies. He was being paid €23,000, which is just below the living wage. So many graduates are finding it so hard to establish themselves in life through a combination of low pay and precarious employment that we are in danger of placing an intolerable burden on their shoulders.

The argument for student loans is predicated on a belief that those who go through the tertiary system are privileged. In a way they are too, but I would rather see us think in terms of tertiary education as a public good accessible to all.

Thus I think it should be funded through the tax system. But this has a number of quite profound policy implications which it is necessary to address.
• First, the burgeoning cost of funding third level education will certainly impose an increased level of taxation.

• Second, the funding cannot be at the expense of primary or secondary education. Indeed, we know that there is now a huge body of evidence pointing to the critical importance of early years’ education in a child’s life.

• Third, is the question of corporate taxation: multinational corporations expect the higher education system to provide highly skilled employees and to underpin their operations with investment in research and development. In other words, they want to exploit higher education for profit but don’t want to contribute the tax revenue to sustain it.

• Fourth, universal access to higher education must mean exactly that. You should be able to access tertiary education regardless of where you come from or at which stage of the life cycle you are at. This might mean a change from the traditional entry route of school Leaving Cert to a more holistic approach that places a greater emphasis on prior learning and encourages applicants from so called ‘non-standard’ entry routes.

I do not think the need for diversity in access to higher education can be overstated. The Nobel Economist, Joseph Stiglitz, argues that societies need to understand the importance of life-long learning.

If we value life-long learning, it follows logically that we need to make it as user friendly as possible for people re-entering the system if they have been in the world of work for a considerable time. We need also to recognise that work is
itself a learning experience and the old saying about ‘The University of Life’ has perhaps more to it than is realised.

But the issues relating to education policy cannot be considered in isolation. We have to locate them in the broader context of the economy as a whole.

As the country emerges from a prolonged recession and once again experiences strong economic growth there is a real danger that we would fail to learn from the near death experience of the last eight years. Moreover, we are left with significant infrastructural deficits, and a possible long term social scarring effect, which will require investment into the future.

Frank Cluskey, a former Labour Party leader, once remarked that ‘you don’t go through Hell for the practice’. But we are not that good at learning from experience in Ireland. The 2008 crisis was the fourth time since independence that we have looked into the abyss of economic and social desolation. It happened before in the 1930s, the 1950s and the 1980s.

As a small open economy we are very exposed to volatility in international markets and it would be unwise to assume that the current favourable conditions for economic growth will continue indefinitely.

Moreover, even if conditions remain favourable there are other challenges to face including, inter alia, the following:

- The possibility of Britain leaving the EU.
- The need to transition to a low carbon economy.
- A twin demographic pressure which will at once increase the demand for education provision and at the same time increase health costs associated with treating chronic illness in an ageing cohort of the population.
• A totally inadequate pensions system which will see many people receive much less income in retirement than they expect.

• A long-term lack of capital investment which leaves us with a weak infrastructure which in some respects is worse than in Eastern Europe.

• A severe housing crisis.

• An inadequate childcare system.

• An industrial policy which is over-dependent on tax concessions to attract multinationals.

Some of these deficits interact in a way that compounds the overall problem.

Take, for example, health care. People are living longer but often with chronic medical conditions. The increase in longevity, while good in itself, means that pensions become more expensive to fund so that people take a bigger hit in their income when they retire. That may mean that they cannot afford to continue paying health insurance – at a time in their lives when they need it most. The result is that they may have to fall back on the public system thereby increasing demand on the exchequer.

In my opinion the debate about the so called ‘fiscal space’ in the election campaign has had the wrong orientation.

The demands on public investment that I have outlined over the coming years means that there is no fiscal space. We need to invest every spare penny in improving infrastructure and repairing public services.

In fact I would go further and suggest that we need to bring public spending at least into line with the EU average. It is about 10 per cent adrift of that now.
To return to education specifically, it is only if we are prepared to make that kind of investment that we will be able to ensure that we have an education system fit for purpose.

The importance of education for society was well captured by H.G. Wells when he said:

‘Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe’

Over the course of my lifetime I have witnessed the power of education to liberate people economically and socially.

The first Vocational School was established in Swords in 1956. Up to that time there were only two classes of people in North Fingal – big farmers and farm labourers. Access to second level education emancipated the working class people. They were able to get skilled jobs in industry for the first time.

Ten years later came the ground-breaking report *Investment in Education* compiled by people like Martin O’Donoghue and Paddy Lynch. It paved the way for free secondary education, free school transport and the establishment of Regional Technical Colleges. It was a massive leap forward coming at a critical time just before we joined the EEC.

In this regard it is important to stress that a university education is not the only route to a fulfilling career. Germany is the strongest economy in Europe and has traditionally favoured a dual system of education which gives parity of esteem to vocational education and apprenticeships alongside university degrees. Actually this system is practiced in several European countries including Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands and France.
Last week Sir John Armitt, delivering the Annual President’s lecture for Engineers Ireland, remarked that there was now a critical shortage of Engineering Technicians in Britain as distinct from Graduate Engineers. He said that it was a strategic error that the engineering profession had not accorded a higher status to Engineering Technicians in the past.

Generations of Irish parents may have been short-sighted in not valuing a good technical education as a viable alternative to a university course. The reality is that many young people do not really know what suits their talents best at 18 or 19 years of age. That, I suspect, is why there is such a high drop-out rate in the first year of college.

It may be an overstatement to say that education is wasted on the young but the mature student, who has experienced the world of work, will have a better sense of its importance.

I believe that we have again reached the kind of critical juncture that inspired *Investment in Education*. At one and the same time we must create the kind of sustainable economy that avoids boom and bust and prepare all the citizens to achieve the best they can in labour markets that are becoming more precarious and more polarised between well paid high end jobs and low paid private services.

This is not an impossible task but we have to change how we think about taxation and public investment. The small open economies of the Nordic region offer us an example of how it can be done. It is said of them that they embody three political ideals; the legacy of liberated peasants, the spirit of capitalism and the utopia of socialism. Equality, efficiency and solidarity, the essential principles of these three political ideals, merged into a consensus that enriched each other.
I have studied this region for many years and am persuaded that the Nordic model, or something similar, is the surest route to a secure future for our people. For anyone who may be interested my ideas are set out in a book just published by Palgrave Macmillan entitled *Lost in Transition: Ireland, Small Open Economies and European Integration*.

The challenge in education is to try to re-imagine the future in more inclusive and promising terms. With the passage of fifty years it is time, I suggest, to revisit the fundamentals. We need another *Investment in Education* report.

Is it possible to get beyond the point of doing too little, too late, too often? Is it possible to make the kind of public investment that for once puts us ahead of the curve?

I see hope in the fact that during this election campaign the public did not buy into auction politics in the way that was expected. Perhaps they can be persuaded that there is a better, fairer way of managing our affairs if a credible narrative can be advanced for it.

As the great economist, John Maynard Keynes, once wrote:

‘At the present moment people are unusually expectant of a more fundamental diagnosis; more particularly ready to receive it; eager to try it out, if it should even be plausible’.

In other words people are open to new thinking.

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