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Setting Goals for Success

Ireland evaluates its 5-year strategy for
attainment in internationalization

BY DAVID TOBENKIN

IN SEPTEMBER 2010 THE IRISH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS RELEASED A REPORT, *Investing in Global Relationships: Ireland's International Education Strategy 2010–15*, designed to guide the country's international higher education policy for the next five years. A key part of the International Education Strategy (IES) was a laundry list of hard metrics that called for growth of international students at Irish institutions in a variety of areas.

Now, four years into the plan, there is progress toward achieving at least some of the metrics, though many challenges remain. But perhaps more dramatic than such numeric expansion are continuing steps at both the government and institution levels that aim to maintain the quality of an expanded and internationalized Irish higher education system. Those efforts reflect recognition that the caliber of the international students that Ireland's higher education institutions attract may be as important as the raw numbers of international students who are drawn to study in the Emerald Isle.

Hitting the Numbers

Irish higher education appears on the path to achieving at least some of the IES' numeric and related goals. The IES report, for example, had called for an increase in the national proportion of full-time international students from approximately 10 percent to 13 percent from 2010 to 2015.

"It's likely that we will [reach some numeric targets in the IES]," says Jan O'Sullivan, the recently appointed Minister for Education and Skills, in an interview with *International Educator*. A Department of Education and Skills report evaluating progress toward achieving the IES was expected by the end of 2014.

"The higher education system is broadly on target to have international students accounting for 15 percent of total full-time student numbers by 2020," stated the Irish Higher Education Authority's (HEA) May 2014 *Higher Education System Performance First Report 2014–2016* (System Report), referring to data through the 2012–2013 academic year. "In terms of where incoming students come from, we can report that there is good evidence of alignment with Enterprise Ireland's target markets, with 45 percent of international students currently from the tier one priority markets of USA, China, India, and the Middle East."

"Since 2010 Ireland has made great strides in terms of attracting international students from North America, Malaysia, India, China, MENA (Middle East and North Africa), and Brazil," says Karole Egan, senior vice president, education, North America, at Enterprise Ireland, which is charged with marketing and promoting Irish higher education abroad. "In the past two years more than 1,700 Brazilian students have elected to study at Irish higher education institutes through the Science Without Borders scholarship scheme funded by the Brazilian Government. Ireland's higher education institutes are also seeing progress in India and Saudi Arabia. Twenty-seven formal [memoranda of understanding] have been agreed between Irish institutes of higher education and their Indian counterparts, and applications from



University of Limerick students embrace global themes.

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Indian students were up 120 percent in 2013. And there are currently 1,500 Saudi Arabian students studying in Ireland under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.”

Still, many challenges remain. Comments in a November 2012 report by Enterprise Ireland highlight the real tension inherent in attempting to rapidly upscale internationalization at higher education institutions in a country with a population of only 4.6 million that is still recovering from a severe recent recession.

“The international education sector in Ireland is faced with a number of impediments to progress: limited resources; inadequate staffing; systems which are unfit for purpose; uneven academic buy-in and potential capacity issues,” said the report, *International Students in Irish Higher Education 2011–12*, Enterprise Ireland’s most recent report on international student recruitment.

Even the later System Report noted that responses that the HEA had received from individual Irish higher education institutions raised some concerns, including, in some cases: “an absence of overt links between internationalization strategies and quality assurance; very ambitious targets from near standing start amongst smaller institutions; insufficient demonstration of an emphasis on risk management; lack of demonstration of international student support; [and] a lack of balance between inward and outward student flows.”

A Focus on Quality

The IES report noted that “quality will be at the heart of Ireland’s international education offering.” O’Sullivan, asked if achieving a particular international student statistical benchmark was most important, chose instead to emphasize the importance of maintaining

Students at the University of Limerick.



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quality: “Quality is the most important element of this,” says O’Sullivan. “So if we don’t reach all of the numbers, I wouldn’t consider that to be as significant as ensuring that we have a quality product, that our reputation is maintained. So that would be where my focus would be. That’s one of the reasons why the minister for justice and I have recently launched new rules to strengthen the quality regulations for international education. We are concerned and we don’t want to get into a situation where the quality of Irish education is questioned.”

The new rules to which O’Sullivan alludes include a September 2014 policy statement tightening standards for Irish higher education institutions providing education to non-European Economic Area (EEA) students to be able to receive immigration and work authorizations for those students. The policy statement’s attempt to assure quality came after four higher education providers were suspended by the Irish Naturalization and Immigration Service (INIS) for immigration purposes in April 2014 and a number of providers shut down at short notice in response to quality-related issues and scrutiny.

Ireland is also unveiling an International (Quality) Education Mark that will establish standards for higher education institutions serving international students and that would be necessary for such institutions and their non-EEA students to gain access to the country for extended studies, for international students to gain permission to work, and for higher education institutions to participate in government branding and marketing arrangements and other capacities through which they would become associated with the Irish state. Applications for the mark were expected to be required from higher education institutions as of January 1, 2015.

The emphasis on quality reflects the fact that for a small country like Ireland, a large part of the draw of higher education internationalization relates to soft diplomacy, Irish economic growth and international economic influence, as well as the impact that international student graduates can have upon the wider world. That impact generally increases with the quality of the international students, the length of their stay in the country, and the number pursuing higher and technical degrees.

“We are unusual in Europe in that we have strong demographic growth in Ireland,” says O’Sullivan, who says that the five-year IES will be followed by a successor plan. “So it’s not just about looking for numbers to fill places. It’s about having that added value, that extra dimension, and the importance of that international connection, whereby it’s not just about quality of experience for



Students studying in a lab at Trinity College Dublin.

the students. It’s also about making connections internationally that are of economic benefit as well as of personal benefit to the individuals concerned.”

The Enterprise Ireland report noted some hopeful signs in that respect. “The composition of Ireland’s international student cohort is also changing in important ways,” it notes. “PhD student numbers have increased by 35 percent [from the preceding year, 2010–11] and now account for 20 percent of Ireland’s international students—Ireland’s performance in this area is above international norms. There has also been a 6 percent increase in full-time degree student numbers. International students have increased under all the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math’s) fields.”

A new logo and tagline was unveiled in 2011 by Enterprise Ireland, featuring the “Education in Ireland: World-Class Standards, Warmest of Welcomes” tagline and a logo also including the Irish shamrock symbol. It was subsequently rolled out in the six priority markets: North America, Malaysia, India, China, Middle East and North Africa, and Brazil, Egan says. By 2014, there were more than 2.4 million online interactions with the brand compared with less than 1,000 in 2011, Egan says.

At the Institution Level

At the institution level, some Irish universities report strong progress toward increasing their numbers of international students. “The number of international students of all categories has increased at Trinity over recent years at a pace at least consistent with the goals set out in the IES,” says Sinéad Ryan, director of internationalization at Irish university Trinity College Dublin. “Our institutional goals, as set out in Trinity’s new Strategic Plan 2014–2019 published on



October 22, 2014, involve having 18 percent of our students from outside the European Union by 2018–2019.”

With internationalization continuing as a central institutional strategy, Ryan says that Trinity’s Global Relations Strategy’s priority areas include staff and student mobility, alumni engagement, the internationalization of the educational experience, international student recruitment, and the development of global relationships.

She notes that a senior academic, professor Jane Ohlmeyer, was appointed Trinity College Dublin’s first vice president for global relations in 2011 and a successor in that position, professor Juliette Hussey, was recently named. Ryan says that in-country advisers have been appointed to serve Trinity’s priority areas, the United States, India, and China, and to embed internationalization across the university, a network of global officers was appointed.

An on-campus international hub, the Trinity Global Room was officially opened in November 2013 to reflect the university’s endeavors toward building global relations and a multicultural campus that encourages students to develop a global vision. Staffed by a team of student ambassadors, the facility features a wall of plasma screens with access to more than 300 television channels, a resource library

with international reading materials, and state-of-the-art conference and seminar facilities for internationally themed events. Since it opened, the Global Room has facilitated more than 300 internationally themed events on campus, Ryan says. A blog (<http://tcdglobal.wordpress.com/>) run by the Global Room student ambassadors reflects the Trinity student experience for prospective international students and has had more than 8,500 hits since its establishment in January 2014, Ryan says.

Panpan Lin, a 26-year-old Chinese native, recently graduated with two master’s degrees from Trinity College Dublin, including a master’s in philosophy in textual and visual studies and a master’s of science in interactive digital media. Choosing Ireland and Trinity in particular for her graduate studies reflected a variety of factors, she says.

“When I applied for my first master’s degree, I was looking for an interdisciplinary course which combines literature with visual art,” says Lin. “There aren’t that many universities offering courses with such a focus. Trinity happens to have this master’s of philosophy in textual and visual studies. In addition, I found that the tuition fees at Trinity were more affordable than universities in other countries.” Lin says the two master’s degrees together will cost her €23,170, which her family is providing.

Professional and social considerations also affected her choice, Lin says. “I was more after the universities than the countries. I would like to become an academic. Having a more international educational background, especially by gaining a degree from a famous university abroad, would help me greatly whether I decide to work in universities in China or abroad. I love literature and that is another important reason why Ireland and Trinity were so appealing to me. Also, safety is the first concern of both myself and my parents, and I found that it is easy to make friends in Ireland and people are always ready to help.”

The University of Limerick also reports success in achieving internationalization objectives, says Josephine Page, director of the International Education Division at the University of Limerick. She notes that two goals of the university’s internationalization plan, University of Limerick Strategy Strategic Plan (*Pioneering and Connected: 2010–2015*), were to increase outgoing student mobility by 30 percent and to promote cultural diversity through the recruitment of international students by increasing the number of non-European Union students by 50 percent.

“Our university has a very international focus, with more than 2,500 students from over 100 countries in 2014–15,” Page says. “One in three undergraduates spends one semester or more overseas as of late 2014. In the 2013–14 academic year, 13.5 percent of the 14,000-person student body is international, with about half of the international component including non-EEA students. We have exceeded both our plan’s goals for sending students abroad and for the number of international students on the campus.”



Trinity College Dublin student Panpan Lin came to the university from China to earn two master’s degrees.

Page says that focusing on serving the needs of international students has helped achieve the Plan's goals. "We offer excellent student support and a supportive campus environment," Page says. "An International Student Barometer™ survey was undertaken by independent research group i-Graduate [in 2012] and involved 238 institutions worldwide including the seven Irish universities. Across the four surveyed categories of 'Living,' 'Support,' 'Arrival,' and 'Learning,' University of Limerick was voted as having the best overall living experience in Ireland and was fifth in the world."

Another Irish university expanding international activities is University College Dublin (UCD), says Alex Metcalfe, director of international affairs.

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and international students to learn alongside."

He notes that international (non-Irish) students have grown from 19 percent of the total UCD student body in 2009–10 to 24 percent of the 26,354 total students in 2013–14, with the number of international students growing by 36 percent over that period.

Metcalfe says that UCD's academic program design has helped facilitate internationalization at the institution. "The highly flexible, fully semesterized and modularized curriculum at UCD facilitates

Trinity College Dublin



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international credit transfer and collaborative program development,” Metcalfe says. “It has allowed us to develop innovative and popular study abroad programs in subject areas like agriculture, engineering, nursing, and science, in which student mobility has traditionally been perceived to be difficult.”

Some Irish higher education institutions have long been highly internationalized, such as Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), a not-for-profit independent health sciences institution based in Dublin since 1784.

“RCSI has always been very internationally focused,” says Hannah McGee, dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at RCSI. “We are the largest medical school in Ireland, with students from more than 60 countries in our undergraduate classes. Our class sizes are around 330 students per annum, with approximately one fifth each from Ireland/EEA, North America, Middle East, Far East (particularly Malaysia), and the rest of the world. We also run the first established Graduate Medical Programme (established 2006) with on average 65 students per year—half Irish/EEA and half North American.”

RCSI runs a number of its core education programs overseas, including full undergraduate medical and nursing degree programs in Bahrain, owned and run by RCSI since 2004, which includes about 1,200 students. Another overseas program is a joint undergraduate medical degree program with University College Dublin (UCD) established in 1996. That program intakes 150 new students per year, taught half in Dublin and half in Penang, Malaysia, notes McGee.

RCSI provides a noteworthy example of how limited national capacity and supply has driven Irish higher education internationalization, McGee says. “International students are the mainstay of RCSI—within Ireland the numbers of health professional students sponsored by the Department of Education and Skills for national workforce planning is necessarily limited,” says McGee. “This is true for all universities. We have excellent programs of study and clinical training opportunities, and an international market demand for such courses from a reputable educational system such as in Ireland. Hence we and others see this as a high-level Irish ‘product’ that has financial and also cultural advantages

Students at Trinity College Dublin



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to a small island nation. In tandem, the Department of Education and Skills has made internationalization of education an explicit national policy.”

Ireland’s 14 institutes of technology, which are university-level institutes focused on teaching and learning, purpose-driven research, and public service, and which operate a unique system in that they allow students to progress from two-year associate degree programs through primary degree to master’s and PhD programs, are also attempting to increase international recruitment numbers.

“Increasing the number of international students is important to us for a number of reasons,” says Sinead Day, international affairs manager at Waterford Institute of Technology. “Many of our graduates will become global citizens and we wish for them to pursue their studies in a multicultural environment, which is reflective of the world in which they will work. Many of our industry partners regionally are either multinational or global enterprises, or are Irish companies which are heavily dependent on their export trade. We wish for our graduates to have experience of study overseas, international students on campus, foreign languages, and links with international industry partners. Our international engagements help our academic profile, allow us to link with research units internationally, help us when we enter competitive bidding processes for research funding, and help further develop our own staff through mobility opportunities and access to international research agendas. International student recruitment is also a source of income to WIT, to the city, and region. It helps profile our city and region internationally, which has led to an increase in the number of overseas visitors to our city.

“We have achieved [the IES target of increasing total student numbers by 50 percent from the IES’ start numbers] in terms of our full-time, non-EU students registered on programs at WIT,” says Day. “In terms of degree seeking, study abroad, and exchange students, we have in excess of 850 international students out of a total full-time student population of almost 6,000 and we have almost 200 students who pursue short-term summer programs at WIT. Our incoming exchange numbers have remained stable, and our

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outbound exchange numbers have risen by about 15 percent.”

The increase in international students has reflected a conscious strategy to internationalize, Day says.

“WIT set up a self-financing international education unit in 2002, and I was appointed international manager,” Day says. “We began to recruit students from India and China into undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Students were

interested in Ireland because English is our first language, and the story of our economic success had reached international shores. As income began to flow inwards, our unit expanded and we became involved in many more international projects with an increasing number of countries. Basically, success in international markets involves having the right team with a certain skill set who are able to network and build profile, and win projects internationally. You must have access to seed funding, and have the flexibility and resourcing to go in new directions quickly. Layers of constraint and bureaucracy will mitigate against an institution in international affairs, as the pace of development internationally is fast, and partners who are building profile like to see results. Ultimately, you need a very strong curriculum which meets the needs of international markets, and a very strong international reputation which will act as a pull factor. Increasingly in a world where social media dominates and has overtaken more traditional forms of marketing, one’s reputation and student’s firsthand experience of an institute and its promises is what counts.”

Day says maturation of an internationalization program may, counterintuitively, be demonstrated by how little a centralized higher education institute body was involved in establishing it.

“The test of this for me is when you discover that an international project has been launched or completed, and that you had very little to do with this!” Day says. “Not having to handhold or be responsible for every last international engagement across our Institute is for myself a measure of success.”

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DAVID TOBENKIN is a freelance reporter based in the Washington, D.C., area.