Technological Universities in Ireland: the New Imperative

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Abstract

Higher education in Ireland has been characterized for some time as having a distinct two-tier structure. The top tier is comprised of the university sector, which features a number of older and newer entrants. Firmly in second position based on research outputs, funding, status and societal esteem have been the Institutes of Technology (IoTs; Hazelkorn & Moynihan, 2010). However, the recent re-designation of DIT, ITB and ITT as Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), has challenged the status quo. Despite initial setbacks the success of TU Dublin will inevitably be followed by Munster Technological University and the Technological University of the South-East. The anticipated success of these alliances is acting as a catalyst throughout the entire IoT sector in Ireland. The emerging Technological Universities are forcing all of the remaining IoTs to redefine their roles and aspirations. In this new scenario the option of remaining an IoT in a sector that has re-cast itself to Technological University status is increasingly problematic. This new imperative is therefore forcing the remaining IoTs to explore future options in haste. No institution wants to hold the moniker of the 'last IoT'. However, the current trajectory of the remaining IoTs in their bid for TU status is highly problematic. The question of what will be lost in this transition is paramount. In addition, the almost unseemly haste in which the remaining IoTs are desperately searching for partner institutions is glossing over undercurrents that threaten the future stability of any resulting TUs. The requirement that merging IoTs adopt the term Technological University must also be re-examined if equity is a goal. Finally, the current dominance of the now dated Hunt Report must be questioned, as should the prohibition on mergers crossing the binary divide. This paper explores the experience of the former polytechnics in the UK as a comparator to predict potential outcomes for the Institutes of Technology/Technological Universities in Ireland, as well as highlighting spatial aspects of their development.

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Keywords: Binary system, Hunt Report, Ireland, Polytechnic, Regionalism, Technological University.

Introduction

> *It is important that the new TUs remain true to the spirit of regional development and providing access for all, as well as being engaged and responsive to industry, business, social and cultural needs* (Cunnane, 2018).

Higher education in Ireland is characterised by a distinct two-tier structure. The top tier is comprised of the university sector, which features a number of older and more prestigious Colleges (e.g. Trinity College Dublin [TCD] and University College Dublin [UCD]), and newer entrants desperate to improve their status and ranking (e.g. University of Limerick, Dublin City University and Maynooth University). However, firmly in second position have been the 14 Institutes of Technology (IoTs). The IoTs have traditionally focused on providing a more vocationally oriented education and have focused on both expanding access to non-traditional learners and having a more regional orientation. Therefore, despite their obvious strengths, on metrics such as research outputs and funding, as well as status and societal esteem, the IoTs are the 'poor relation' in Ireland's binary higher education system (Hazelkorn & Moynihan, 2010).

Interestingly the third level education sector in Ireland is often characterized as having been very stable. However, this broad-brush approach fails to acknowledge a host of developments in Ireland's higher education sector. These developments include not only the evolution of the Regional Technological Colleges into the Institutes of Technology (IoTs), but numerous other examples such as the re-designation of the National Institute of Higher Education (NIHE) Limerick and the NIHE Dublin into the University of Limerick (UL) and Dublin City University (DCU) respectively, and the creation of both Maynooth University and Tipperary Institute (TI).

Recent years have witnessed similarly dramatic new developments. The seven universities have absorbed the numerous small teacher training colleges throughout the State, while the IoTs have been offered what Harkin & Hazelkorn (2015: 9) refer to as the '*ultimate prize of technological university status*'. The formal creation of TU Dublin on 1st January 2019 marks the beginning of Ireland's first Technological University (TU). TU Dublin is comprised of

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three of Dublin's IoTs: Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT); Institute of Technology, Tallaght (ITT); Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown (ITB). Had such a development been restricted to Dublin alone, it is possible that the remaining IoTs throughout the State would have been able to continue largely in their present format. However, hot on the heels of TU Dublin has been the application by Munster Technological University (MTU; comprised of Cork Institute of Technology [CIT] and the Institute of Technology, Tralee [ITT]). The application for a Technological University of the South East (TUSE), which would comprise Waterford Institute of Technology [WIT] and the Institute of Technology Carlow [ITC], is also expected shortly, with even the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, stating *"Get on with it, we are waiting for you"* (Reddy, 2019). Although both of these consortia have each encountered significant hurdles enroute (McConnell, 2017; O'Brien, 2019a; Donnelly, 2019; Deloitte Ireland, 2019; International Advisory Panel, 2019), it appears politically impossible to halt the further development of these and other IoTs into TUs. The arguments in favour of the evolution of all of the remaining IoTs into TUs are overwhelming, whether they are cast in terms of rebalancing urban development in Ireland to help with Dublin's intense issues around housing and transport, promoting regional development, or rebalancing excessive Dublin centric funding.

The anticipated success of these alliances is acting as a catalyst throughout the entire IoT sector in Ireland. The emerging bids for Technological University status are forcing all of the remaining IoTs to redefine their roles and aspirations. In this new scenario, the option of remaining an IoT in a sector that has re-cast itself to Technological University status is increasingly problematic. As merging is a pre-requisite of becoming a TU, this new imperative is therefore forcing the remaining IoTs to explore future options as quickly as possible. The alliances between the IoTs to date have been of varying success and solidity. The proposed Munster Technological University alliance formerly included Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT). LIT was also formerly a member of an alliance of five IoTs seeking Technological University status, of which only Sligo IT, Galway-Mayo IT and Letterkenny IT remain members (the Ulster-Connaught Alliance).

Such is the level of unease at the prospect of being the '*last IoT'* that the staff in some IoTs (e.g. LIT) have specifically passed motions in their trade union (Teachers Union of Ireland; TUI) branches calling for an urgent engagement by the Board of Trustees in the TU process. It must be acknowledged that what is now occurring in the IoT sector is something of a

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scramble to find partner institutions ('*dance partners*') as quickly as possible (Harman, 2002). The prospect of an explicit three tier system of declining status comprised of the University sector, the Technological University sector, and an IOT sector made up of a few struggling stragglers is chastening. This haste is bringing with it its own set of problems, compounded by multiple other issues associated with the merger process. This paper seeks to explore the implications of the scramble to become Technological Universities taking a particular focus on the remaining 11 IoTs, and also paying particular attention to the spatial aspects of this issue. To highlight the anticipated future trajectory of the IoTs and TU Dublin in Ireland this paper will include a focus on the UK's former Polytechnics. However, it must be acknowledged that in doing so, it could easily have examined similarly parallel scenarios in a host of other countries, such as Australia (Harman, 2002; Mildred, 2002; Hatton, 2002; Curri, 2002), or Norway (Kyvik, 2002; Dahl Norgård & Skodvin, 2002).

The Polytechnic Experience

In examining the current and future development of the IoTs in Ireland, it is useful to explore in depth the radical shake-up of third level education in our nearest neighbour, the UK, since 1992. Somewhat similar to Ireland with its IoT and University divide, the UK was also characterised by a fundamental fracture between the Polytechnics and the Universities. Like the IoTs in Ireland, the Polytechnics in the UK offered a more vocational and applied training, exemplified in their distinct offering of 'sandwich' courses, four year degree courses featuring a third year placement in industry. The Polytechnics were also similar to the IoTs in their explicit focus on increasing access and serving their region (see Table 1). However, a radical change in UK Government policy in 1992 allowed these Polytechnics to become Universities.

 Table 1 Characteristics of the UK Polytechnics (Lewis 1991, p.25)

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- Teaching rather than research is the main function.
- Access is a prime consideration.
- Aptitude for higher education is a more important criterion for admission than formal entry requirements.
- Underprivileged and underrepresented segments of society are encouraged to benefit from higher education through the polytechnics.
- Strong links are fostered with local and regional communities, with industry, commerce, the professions, and the public services.
- Subjects and programs are closely related to the world of work.
- Part-time students form a significant proportion of enrolments.
- A substantial proportion of enrolments are in programs leading to a diploma rather than to a full-fledged degree.

Before continuing to explore the binary divide in more detail it is important to explore the issue of '*mission drift*'. It has been suggested that in the UK '*allowing the polytechnics to call themselves universities conceals the fact that the universities had become polytechnics*' (Pratt, 1997: 309). Similarly in Ireland it is clear the Universities have morphed to adopt many of the attributes traditionally associated with the IoT sector. This includes features such as widening access to non-traditional students, increasing the vocational relevance of their courses, engaging in more applied research, and focussing in more depth on their locality and region. Such a phenomenon has been termed '*vocational drift*' (Doern, 2008, p.7).

As well as acknowledging the existence of the vocational drift in Irish universities, it is equally important to understand that there is a significant threat to the often espoused vocational orientation of the IoTs as they aspire to and gain university status:

> *It's also important that they avoid developing with a big U and a small T in order to make impressions on World Ranking Tables, and thus be driven by the criteria of others rather than the communities they now serve so well* (Cunnane, 2018).

Cunnane's concern that the Institutes of Technology will become technological Universities, rather than Technological Universities is a very real concern. Experience from the UK's Polytechnics suggests that in many ways they lost much of their vocational orientation and

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became prey to '*academic drift*' (Doern, 2008; Lewis, 1991) seeking to emulate the traditional universities in terms of subjects and orientation. As such, they often became rather pale imitations of that sector, lacking a coherent philosophy and purpose.

Examination of the experience of the UK's polytechnics is useful given their essential similarity with the IoTs. Therefore examining their development over the last thirty years can yield insights into many of the issues that the IoTs can expect to face.

Trouble Ahead: Maintaining the Binary Divide & Nomenclature

However, although examining the polytechnic experience may be illuminating, there is one crucial factor which differentiates the UK from many other jurisdictions. This difference relates to nomenclature. A notable difference between the UK and many other countries in respect of the development of a more vocationally oriented provision at third level relates to the naming of the 'new' universities after 1992. It is important to note that the naming convention applied to these universities in the UK did not differ from those of the existing universities. However, Ireland will require the use of the term Technological University to refer to IoTs that become universities. This development is unfortunate as even in systems without such differentiation, memories linger and there is often a distinct clustering of HEIs in terms of status (Boliver, 2015; King, 1970; Dalton & Makepeace, 1982; Tight, 1988). The requirement to incorporate the term Technological in the titles of the TUs is broadly similar to what has happened in many other European countries, but is nonetheless unfortunate from an equity perspective. For example, the Netherlands has adopted the term Universities of Technology, while others, such as Finland, have used terms such as Universities of Applied Science to apply to such institutions.

It is important to note therefore that the differentiated terminology adopted in Ireland will help to explicitly retain at least some form of the binary system. This is particularly problematic as being able to describe themselves as a university is an important step in helping to overcome the inappropriate and outdated second class status that is often ascribed to the IoTs. Polytechnics have been referred to as *'an educational soup kitchen for the poor'* (Robinson, 1968), and alas the IoTs have often been regarded little better, despite their strengths. It must be acknowledged that although the IoTs have always catered to students across the social spectrum, they have disproportionately served those from less advantaged backgrounds vis-a-vis the universities (Higher Education Authority, 2019).

An important example of the importance of naming of higher education institutions may be seen in the form of Anglia Polytechnic. When all of the English polytechnics became universities in 1992 Anglia Polytechnic became Anglia Polytechnic University (APU). APU retained the term Polytechnic in its title as this was thought to hold worth with both employers and students, although it was the only university to do so. However, by 2005 the university had again changed its title, this time to Anglia Ruskin University.

Trouble Ahead: Normalisation

> *There is widespread agreement that processes of merging are 'spiced' with small and large problems and conflicts* (Skodvin, 1999, p.69).

Although Skodvin uses the term '*spice*' to refer to issues that can emerge in the merger process, such a term, although somewhat endearing, only serves to minimise the actual difficulties involved (Harman, 2002). The HEA (2013, p.18) accepts that mergers in the higher education sector are '*notoriously difficult*'.

The approach taken in Ireland, with its Hunt Report inspired rejection of IoT/University mergers is therefore remarkably similar to the development of the 'new' universities in the UK from 1992 onwards. Although there were discussions about potential mergers between Teeside Polytechnic and Durham University and Staffordshire Polytechnic and Keele University, no such mergers across the binary divide occurred in the mass transformation of polytechnics to universities in 1992 (Pratt, 1992). The only such development occurred almost a decade earlier when the New University of Ulster combined with Ulster Polytechnic to form the University of Ulster in 1984.

The experience of the University of Ulster (UU) is particularly worthy of attention given the high degree of geographical dispersion of the remaining proposed Technological Universities in Ireland. The University of Ulster merger combined the Coleraine based New University of Ulster, with Ulster Polytechnic (based at Jordanstown, just north of Belfast), Magee University College in Derry, and the College of Art & Design in Belfast. As Pritchard & Williamson (2008) note from their review of UU more than twenty years after the merger this dispersed model can generate '*considerable additional cost and tensions*' (Hinfelaar, 2012, p.6).

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Skodvin (1999, p.76) refers to the '*anger, bitterness and fear*' that are byproducts of the merger process (see Table 2). There is widespread agreement that it can take up to ten years for normalisation to occur following a merger (Skodvin, 1999; Millet, 1976; Goedegebuure, 1992; Mulvey, 1993), and for the '*wounds to heal*' (Harman & Meek, 2002; Harman, 2002). However, even this timeframe may be too optimistic. LIT is still reeling organisationally and financially from the asymmetrical merger with Tipperary Institute (TI). As Hinfelaar (2012, p.12) notes *'TI was recommended for closure, since it was deemed not to have delivered its potential and to have an excessively high cost base…TI had 339 full-time students and a staff of 120 which translated into a unit cost per student which was quadruple the norm'*. A decade after the merger, and five years after ring-fenced funding to support the merger has ended, Departments and Schools that ostensibly span across the Limerick and Tipperary campuses are still very poorly integrated, with numerous courses in Tipperary suffering falling numbers, declining CAO points, and threatened with closure.

Table 2 Skodvin's (1999) Lessons Learned from Mergers in Higher Education
- An International Perspective

- Mergers within higher education are complex, time-consuming and difficult processes.
- Mergers improve the future position of the new institutions.
- Mergers are characterized by the contradiction between maintaining the status quo and implementing change.
- The implementation of organizational goals often occurs at the cost of personal needs and job satisfaction.
- The merger process often results in stress and fear.
- Mergers are often characterized by too many 'top-down' processes and too few 'bottom-up' processes.
- Mergers are often the result of external factors, notably access to resources.
- Administrative and efficiency questions often dominate the merger process.
- The status of different departments and academic faculty are often the most difficult obstacles to the merger process.

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Trouble Ahead: Geography, Clusters & Regionalism

In examining the current and future development of the IoTs it is vitally important not to neglect a spatial approach. The Hunt report is credited with introducing '*new concepts, such as, regionalism and clusters*' into Irish higher education (Harkin & Hazelkorn, 2015, p.7). In support of this approach the HEA (2011, p.7) stated that '*clusters must happen*' regardless of mergers taking place or not. In fact, the HEA (2013) went further, following this up with a document which named specific Higher Education Institutions aligning into clusters. The link to future funding associated with this proposal helped develop at least some degree of impetus around this proposal. One particularly strong example of this regional approach resulting in a dynamic cluster is the Shannon Consortium, comprised of Limerick Institute of Technology, the Institute of Technology Tralee (ITT), Mary Immaculate College (MIC), and the University of Limerick (UL).

The Shannon Consortium is not the only cross-sector cluster that will undoubtedly be jeopardised by the development of the TUs. Other IoTs have also invested heavily in developing links with the University sector. Perhaps the most notable of these include Dundalk IT and Dublin City University, and Athlone Institute of Technology and Maynooth University. Such clusters were pursued with at least an open mind towards potential mergers and amalgamations. Such cross-sector developments were considered a valid future pathway by the international panel in the report *A Proposed Reconfiguration of the Irish System of Higher Education* (HEA, 2012).

Although it is important to remember that the UK's post 1992 ostensibly unified system '*was unitary only in name*' (Boliver, 2015, p.1), from a spatial perspective the Hunt Report's opposition to mergers across the binary divide is particularly problematic. As Skodvin (1999, p.75) notes international experience demonstrates that *'the most successful mergers took place between institutions which were physically not far from each other, or in the same place*'. As such, the potential developments that could have occurred between near neighbours such as CIT and UCC, DCU and DkIT, GMIT and UCG, Maynooth University and AIT, and LIT and UL (and MIC) have been prohibited.

Although it might be thought that the prospects of joining with an IoT might hold little attraction for many universities, such a view is perhaps blinkered. As well as the 'vocational drift' observed in many universities that has effectively narrowed the cultural gap between

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the two types of institutions, the IoTs also serve a significant number of students, and have a number of active niche research centres. Such an antagonistic view towards the IoTs also ignores developments in the types of academic contracts now routinely offered by universities in some countries. Many universities in the UK, for example, have now started to offer teaching focussed lectureships and have developed formal teaching focussed career structures. Subsequently the potential absorption of IoT lecturing staff that do not engage in significant research activity into a university context can be accommodated.

From a regional development perspective, and in terms of developing courses to meet the skill and training needs of local industry, there is considerable strength in regional clusters. However, the dominance of the Hunt Report's opposition to mergers across the binary university/IoT divide in Ireland will ultimately significantly undermine the time and effort spent in developing such regionally based relationships. For example, a future merger between LIT and AIT will undoubtedly undermine LIT's role in the Shannon Consortium, regardless of what rhetoric may emerge to the contrary. It would be naive to assume for example that a joint TU structure comprised of LIT and AIT would be able to maintain the same level of Shannon region focus displayed by LIT currently. Needless to say, AIT's focus on the Midlands will be equally diluted or intermittent. However, from the perspective of the Institutes of Technology the weakening and perhaps even the eventual large-scale dissolution of such clusters may not be a negative thing. Such clusters were ultimately not a meeting of equals and particularly in relation to doctoral registration and awards it was the University sector that largely benefitted. The move towards Technological University status across the IoT sector will help unshackle the Institutes from their subservient position. However, concomitant with this 'release' will be an inevitable reduction in the local focus of the IoTs.

The geography, relative size, catchments, and course offerings of the proposed new Technological Universities all provide challenges into the future (Dahl Norgård & Skodvin, 2002; Strydom, 1999). The intense drive towards Technological University status, combined with the apparent inflexibility of the tenets of the Hunt report, and wider geo-political developments are pushing 'shotgun marriage' mergers between IoTs that are somewhat nonsensical (Harman, 2002). For example, the current Connaught Ulster Alliance (CUA) proposes a Technological University comprised of the Institute of Technology Sligo (ITS), Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LkIT). There are a number of particular issues with this proposal. For example, Letterkenny

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Institute of Technology largely services the northern half of County Donegal (north of the Barnesmore Gap). As such it is not much of a competitor with the Institute of Technology Sligo. However, the same cannot be said for Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and the Institute of Technology Sligo, where there is intense competition in some geographical areas for students. Additionally, it is important to note that much of County Donegal, particularly north Donegal is the natural hinterland of Derry. As such, it is no surprise that LyIT and the University of Ulster were funded under the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) from the HEA to explore a '*blueprint for a significant upgrading of higher education capacity in the North West and border region through a strategic alliance*'. However, the retention of the binary system requirement imposed by the Hunt Report, combined with the Brexit vote, and continuing uncertainty over what, if any, agreement will be reached have effectively destroyed such initiatives.

The particular composition of the three IoTs that currently constitute the CUA is also important. In assessing this proposal it is important to understand the realpolitik of the future development of the CUA. Given that these three colleges are based on what is almost a perfectly straight line running NNE from Galway through Sligo to Letterkenny, it is almost inevitable that the future centre of power will be Sligo. Therefore, recent overtures from GMIT seeking to entice Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) to re-join this alliance must be seen as much to help shift the centre of gravity further south, as to strengthen and develop the CUA. This example helps to illustrate the political jockeying that has, and continues to characterise, the TU development process. Obviously such approaches are very distant from the ideal scenarios for a successful merger outlined by Skodvin (1999; see Tables 1, 2 & 3).

The ongoing tension provided by competition between IoTs sharing student catchment areas merging as part of the development of a Technological University is also a real issue impacting a number of proposed TUs. The competition for students between the Institute of Technology Sligo and Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology has been highlighted above. However, they are not alone in facing this issue. The proposed Technological University of the South East involves two IoTs (Waterford Institute of Technology and the Institute of Technology Carlow) in direct competition for students. In this light, a possible merger between Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) and Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) would therefore actually be aided by the poor transport infrastructure that exists between the Midlands and the Mid-West. Athlone is on the main Dublin to Galway motorway (M6), while

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Limerick is serviced by the M7 from Dublin. Similarly, the rail network between the two locations is equally problematic. As such the two IoTs are essentially non-competitive in terms of their student populations, a significant advantage in future relations.

Trouble Ahead: Developing a Research Culture

Developing and sustaining a more widespread and in-depth research culture, a crucial requirement for Technological University status, represents a significant challenge for most IoTs. Once again, clear parallels may be seen between the historical limited research profile of the UK's former polytechnics and the often fragile and constrained research output of the IoTs. It has been suggested that because of their teaching first orientation and a constant focus on the development of new courses the '*experience of research in polytechnics was not an entirely happy one…Where research did develop, it often did so despite rather than because of the system'* (Pratt, 1997, p.326).

It is obvious that the current IoT contract for lecturing staff is hardly conducive to developing a strong research culture. A primary element of this challenge is the heavy teaching load mandated in the IoT sector (18 contact hours for Assistant Lecturers and 16 contact hours for Lecturers). Combined with other duties such as marking, lecture preparation, mentoring, outreach, planning, quality & assurance related work, new course development, involvement in academic committees, continuous professional development, and various (usually unrecompensed) roles such as head of year, little term time is left for any involvement in research. Of course the current research contract, based on what is essentially a historical artefact (an agrarian economy's secondary school timetable) giving extended summers off, is also not conducive to developing a strong research culture. The extended summer break, often known anecdotally among lecturing staff as the '*Golden Handcuffs'* that help retain lecturing staff in the IoT sector, occurs at a time when many research active staff in the University system have at least 4-6 weeks to focus on their research and publishing, even after taking their own summer vacations. However, it is important not to focus too much on the summer break as the major impediment to research in the IoTs. The recent, and much needed focus on gender equity, through the Athena SWAN process across the higher education sector in Ireland, an impetus originally focussed on developing women researchers in science, would certainly support the optional provision of extended summer holidays for working parents with children.

After the heavy teaching load, the next most important impediment to the development of a research culture in the Institutes of Technology is the lack of a career structure that rewards research activity. Unlike the University sector, which has long had a career structure offering progression based on performance up to Professorial level, the IoT sector offers little or no incentive to engage in research. The transfer from Assistant Lecturer to Lecturer is virtually automatic and requires minimal research outputs. Advancement beyond Lecturer level is not merit based, but restricted to a very small and set quota of positions dating back decades. Responsibility for such inertia on this issue, which has undoubtedly hobbled the development of research in the IoT sector, should be borne equally between the main representative union, the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), the Department of Education, and senior management in the IoT sector.

Developing a research culture within the remaining IoTs as they position themselves for Technological University status will require significant changes. The first stage in this process is the continuing professional development of staff so that they meet the required percentage of staff holding doctorates. Even on a purely financial basis, this represents a significant challenge, given the costs of fees, travel and time allocations to support PhD studies. Other impediments in developing a research culture include basic issues such as limited access to online library resources in the IoT system, poor web infrastructures that often fail to market their research activities, and a lack of office space for staff and postgraduates. The issue of physical infrastructure is a particular concern for the IoTs because, unlike the universities in Ireland, they are legally prohibited from borrowing to fund such developments. Other challenges faced by the IoTs may be less obvious. For example Howell & Annansingh (2013, p.7) discuss the culture of '*limited knowledge sharing'* in an exemplar former polytechnic, in contrast to the university sector, a factor that may also impact the IoTs in Ireland.

Trouble Ahead: The Elusive Benefits of Mergers

Although critical mass and diversity in course provision are important reasons for mergers between higher education institutions, it is widely acknowledged that another significant motivation is financial (see Table 3). As Hinfelaar (2012, p.7) notes '*projected cost reduction is the clearest push factor for mergers brought into play by the government'*. However, in the context of the Irish public service, with its protectionist employment practices and distance restrictions (45km) in terms of redeployment, it is unclear how such reductions will be

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achieved, particularly given commitments to a continued diversity of course provision that presumably prevents the rationalisation of subject offerings.

Table 3 Gains from Higher Education Institution Mergers (Skodvin, 1999, p.69)

'The main force behind a merger is always some kind of assumed gain. The most frequent motive is the wish to achieve administrative, economic and academic benefits…
Administratively, the intention is to achieve economies of scale with regard to the number of administrators, and to get a more professional and efficient administration. And, furthermore, the wish to save money is also an important goal with mergers.
 Academically, there are at least three sub-intentions:

   (a) Eliminating duplicative programmes.
   (b) Increasing academic integration and collaboration, e.g. creating new multi- and interdisciplinary fields.
   (c) Diversifying academic profiles.

Perhaps the best demonstration of the absence of such economic savings in a merger of Irish HEIs may currently be seen in TU Dublin. Although the nomenclature of some positions has changed TU Dublin is currently paying five presidential salaries. In addition, although a merger between HEIs is often assumed to prevent duplication of courses, the reality can be starkly different. For example, rather than a rationalisation and elimination of courses the LIT - Tipperary Institute merger has seen the new development and duplication of courses across campuses (e.g. degrees in Social Care Work and Early Child Care & Education).

Trouble Ahead: Consultation, Identity & New Blood

Drawing on a host of international examples Skodvin (1999) identifies over a dozen characteristics of successful mergers (see Table 4). The troublesome issues of the current haste associated with the proposed mergers and the importance of proximity have already been addressed above.

Table 4 Skodvin's (1999) Characteristics of Successful Mergers in Higher Education
        - An International Perspective

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- The larger the difference between the merging institutions the greater the probability of success.
- Most successful mergers took place between institutions that were physically close to one another.
- Voluntary mergers are more successful than forced mergers.
- Mergers should be a long-term strategy.
- Visible and strong management leadership and strategic planning is essential in a successful merger.
- The involvement of committees whose members are constitutive of the whole institution is vital.
- A focus on the long-term positive end results of the merger is important.
- The development of a joint feeling of identity within the new organizational structure is essential.
- The development of shared goals and objectives is of paramount importance in a successful merger.
- Access to additional resources is essential in the merger process.
- Economic flexibility is required during the implementation phase.
- An advanced technical network is vital.
- In order to dampen conflicts and tensions, it is important to bring new blood into the new organisation.

However, other issues that may be particularly problematic for the remaining IOTs identified by Skodvin include consultation with and the inclusion of a broad spectrum of staff in the merger process. The institutional culture of many of the IoTs is more traditionally hierarchical than that of the universities and is typified by an adversarial approach between management and staff. Meaningful staff consultation is limited and recent research associated with the Athena SWAN process noted widespread reports of bullying, as well as perceptions of a lack of faith in management and a lack of transparency (e.g. LIT Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Data Team, 2019). Given the IoTs historical explicit orientation towards serving their local region the development of a new and shared TU identity with shared goals across a wider geographical area will also be particularly challenging.

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Trouble Ahead: Leadership

The issue of multiple presidential salaries at TU Dublin has already been noted above. However, the future development of TUs will obviously involve a jockeying for positions not only between IoT Presidents, but across entire executive management teams. Such wrangling has already been aired publicly between CIT and ITT in connection with their bid for Munster Technological University status (O'Brien, 2019b). It is interesting to note that Curri (2002) has outlined the importance of the personal ambitions of leaders involved in merger negotiations based in her analysis of New South Wales.

Another potential factor that must be considered in the choice of a President for new TUs is their background, philosophy and orientation. It is very interesting to note that TU Dublin is now led by an academic from the University, rather than the IoT sector. TU Dublin's new President, Prof. David FitzPatrick, is not only from the university sector, but from University College Dublin (UCD), an institution that may well be one of the most conservative universities in Ireland. Such choices may hasten Cunnane's (2018) fear of the development of 'technological Universities', rather than 'Technological Universities' outlined above. In the longer term such appointments may also threaten the integrity and cohesiveness of the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), the representative body for the IoTs and TU Dublin.

Unanswered Questions

As Goedegebuure (2012, p.2) notes the prospect of two or more HEIs merging is '*not for the feint-hearted*'. However, the remaining IoTs have little or no option but to contemplate just that. The success of TU Dublin and the subsequent application from MTU has served to hasten the scramble among the remaining IoTs to avoid being left behind. Remaining as a third tier IoT would clearly jeopardise the sustainability given the status associated with the University moniker. The current difficulties experienced by the MTU and TUSE consortia and subsequent delays may at first glance be assumed to help stem the urgency of applying for Technological University status among the 11 remaining IoTs. However, this seems unlikely and the delay may only serve to increase competition to be the next TU to be recognised. It must be acknowledged that this haste is forcing coalitions among IoTs that are essentially competitors, a factor that will undoubtedly foster difficulties into the future. How cohesive, or fractured, the new TUs will be remains to be seen.

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The current development of the IoTs into Technological Universities is beset by a considerable number of significant challenges. The question must be asked what will be lost in the transition to TU status? For example, how will the future TUs maintain their specific local and regional focus? A TU will require a single governing body, which will undoubtedly have a somewhat different geographical focus than just a solitary IoT. This begs the question why a single Technological University for Ireland was not developed with the IoTs being constituent Colleges? It also remains unclear how the differentiated mission of the TUs will be maintained. As the TUs develop, and are undoubtedly influenced by national and international league tables, Cunnane's fear of the development of 'technological Universities', rather than 'Technological Universities' (or 'Technological universities') may be realised. Alternatively, the apparent obsession with following the recommendations of the Hunt Report, which rejected mergers across the binary divide, must be questioned? Is this now dated report still relevant? The significant resources that have explicitly been spent on developing regional clusters may ultimately prove fruitless. How can the IoTs develop a research orientation within a constrained time-period while staff attempt to upskill, manage considerable teaching loads, and work within severely resource constrained environments? Ultimately, it must be asked why IoT lecturing staff would engage in research given the effective absence of promotional opportunities and reward structures?

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