

‘Enhancing Human Capital?’ Language and the Neoliberal University

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1. Neoliberal restructuring of higher education

Universities occupy a particularly special place in this new economic configuration and the creation of new national, regional and city-based innovation systems. Knowledge society proponents envision universities as the engines of economic growth. They are to become essentially what the “coal mines were to the industrial economy” (Castells and Hall, 1994:231). They are to do this providing the new epistemic materials for post industrial production, by becoming the setting for entrepreneurial innovation, business incubation and technology transfer and by providing a well-trained and flexible labour force that can continuously be retrained with useful skills as economic conditions and needs of corporations change. Universities...[...] must be significantly retooled and reorganised ...[...]. They must undergo a creative destruction whereby unproductive strategies of a by-gone era are dismantled and reconfigured. In this retooling, universities must be streamlined, remolded and remade by the forces of the market in order to become more rationally organised, economically responsive, “accountable” and to produce economically useful products...[...]. They must be redirected to serve the interests of the national, regional or local economy rather than following their own independent pathways...[...].The particular ideas of harnessing knowledge more directly for production become intertwined with neoliberal politics.

(Ward 2012:131)

2. Ireland, austerity and higher education.

Ireland’s specific experience of what David McNally has termed the ‘neoliberal mutation’ largely stems from the government’s historically unprecedented decision, in 2008, to offer a blanket guarantee on deposits and bonds in six banks. Having offered a blind guarantee for at least €440 billion of bank debt, thus underwriting what have been revealed to be fundamentally corrupt and mismanaged banks, the government exposed the state to the possibility of sovereign, public default in the event of a private bank ‘credit event’. As investor confidence drained, a period of post-sovereignty, which consolidated the transfer of vast sums of private debt to the public in Ireland, was implemented. The EU-IMF loan agreement, signed in late November 2010, involved the transfer of €17.5 billion from the National Pension Reserve and other funds to the international loan fund, and was structured through a series of coercive ‘policy conditionalities’ specifying spending cuts, tax rises and privatizations.

As a consequence, public services of all kinds have been cut, and public investment programmes suspended. In education, a series of cuts from 2008 have in effect targeted supports for the socio-economically marginalized, from eliminating language supports for migrant children; to teacher cuts at schools previously qualified for additional supports due to their designated ‘disadvantaged’ status, to the withdrawal of a suite of educational supports for the Travelling community. Yet the reduction of the education budget co-exists with an

excitable political discourse concerning the education systems poor showing in the Pisa rankings, and fears that the teaching of maths and science subjects may hinder progress to STEM subjects at third level, and thus diminish Ireland's attractiveness as a base for foreign direct investment.

The university sector exists in a similar bind. The release of the 2012 World University Rankings saw a widespread recognition of the chronic under-funding of the sector, underlined by the absence of any Irish university in the Top 100. The 'austerity' cuts were first implemented in 2008, when the Higher Education Authority instructed the universities to reduce staff by 3% over two successive years, a reduction exacerbated by the already high staff student ratios across the sector during a period of record student numbers.

Concomitantly, university staff were subject to the series of pay cuts and new forms of deduction implemented across the public sector between 2008-10, reducing salaries by anything up to approx 21%. The so-called Croke Park Agreement, a public sector pay deal in place until 2014, has stemmed this trend, but has opened the door to the fast-tracking of new forms of managerialism that have yet to full play out.

(Tittley 2012)

3. Keywords

Keywords refers to ...[...] as recurrent and conventional ways of talking which circulate in the social world and which contribute to ways of thinking about the social world. As J. R. Firth (1957: 29) expresses it in one of his more cryptic utterances: "We are in the world and the world is in us". The general idea of "keywords" is fairly clear, although the metaphor is rather vague. Keywords are the tips of icebergs: pointers to complex lexical objects which represent the shared beliefs and values of a culture. ... As Wierzbicka (1997: 156) phrases it, keywords are a "focal point around which entire cultural domains are organized" (for German, she gives examples such as *Heimat* and *Vaterland*). There is also a long tradition of French-language work. In the 1950s Georges Matoré (1953) discussed *mots clés* (= 'key words') and argued that lexicography is a sociological discipline. Also from the 1950s is an article by Émile Benveniste (1954) who discusses the word *civilisation*, which is used rather differently from the word *civilisation* in English. His work is based on still earlier work by Lucien Febvre from 1930. This tradition was continued by Michel Foucault, who had his favourite keywords (e.g. *labour*, *madness*, *prison*) (Hacking 1986: 27).

Williams proposes a rather small set of around 120 words which are important in the culture: ...(1) First, Williams identifies words intuitively, on the basis of his extensive scholarship. He then uses the attested citations in the 12-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* as empirical evidence that his keywords have undergone historical shifts in meaning which have led to complex layers of meanings in contemporary English. They are "difficult words", as he puts it. (2) Second, only some of his keywords are in widespread use (e.g. *country*, *expert*, *family*, *genius*), whereas many are from an intellectual discourse and most native speakers of English would not have the slightest idea what they mean (e.g. *alienation*, *dialectic*, *hegemony*, *utilitarian*). But Williams has no explicit theory of the organization of the vocabulary (e.g. core versus specialized) or of text-types or discourse communities which could explain this distinction. (3) Third, Williams assumes that keywords do not just label, but help create, conceptual categories. He talks of "significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought" (Williams 1983: 15). Work on keywords necessarily implies a constructivist Whorfian perspective. (4) Fourth, Williams' particular interest is a marxist-socialist analysis of the social order. In his article on the discourse on the miners' strike in 1984-85, he discusses four "slippery" keywords / phrases: *management*, *economic*, *law and order* and *community* (Williams

1985). He discusses "the key issue in the whole modern organization of work": whether workers can control their own production or whether *management* simply means 'employer' (even in nationalized industries).

(Stubbs 2010: 23-24)

4. Contesting neoliberal keywords

At the end of the summer semester, the Humanities staff of an Irish university filed into a meeting to discuss the strategic plan for the faculty as well as the need for an increase in staff workloads due to further cutbacks in funding. Two documents were on the agenda. The first, the 'vision' document, dealt with issues around the four principles of the university's 2012-2017 vision – namely, 'enterprise', 'engagement', 'translation' and 'transformation' and their implementation via academic and operational 'excellence'. The second, the 'workload' document charted the need to expand programmes and research outputs amid the 'challenges' of the 'changing internal and external landscape', identified as reduction in funding, decreased staffing levels and increased student numbers. The chair of the meeting, the Executive Dean, by way of introduction, outlined at length the contents of the first document. He then asked if there were any questions. A rather long silence ensued, as those present studied the 'vision' document. Finally, one academic raised the question whether, as a Humanities Faculty, we should be using the language of business and suggested that a language more suitable for the subjects we taught could be found. A stream of contributions followed. One declared that he certainly 'did not engage his students with the concepts of enterprise' since he taught literature – actually, the works of Samuel Beckett – adding that he had just about had enough of this language of the market. Another, from the School of Irish, questioned the suitability of this document for educational institution, since she, personally, prioritised humanist principles in her teaching rather than those relating to 'enterprise'. A French academic asked why this 'pro-capitalist document' was being produced now, just at a time when capitalism was failing. A Professor from Communications enquired who was author of the document and whether it was simply a document passed down from somewhere else. One young academic, perhaps hoping to diffuse the situation, suggested that 'enterprise' could be taken lots of different ways. The Chair, admitting that he had put the document together, agreed that a critical Foucauldian approach might be relevant here in order to read the document different ways. This part of the meeting continued (uncharacteristically for this type of meeting) for over an hour. At the end of the discussion, it was agreed by all that a rewriting of the document was absolutely necessary.

5. **Faculty ‘vision’ document July 2012** (as this was a draft document, all references to the university in question have been omitted).

The University strategy is underpinned by the four corner stones of Enterprise, Engagement, Translation and Transformation.

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, over the next 5 years, will contribute to the attainment of these strategic goals as follows:

TRANSFORMATION

The Faculty will:

- Strengthen our students’ capacity for critical thinking based on sound disciplinary knowledge, as this represents the most sought after skill in post-graduation work and indeed in life.
- Develop our existing programmes to ensure that we are equipping students with a structured inter-disciplinarily, allowing them to continue to meet the future needs of society and employers.
- Champion our access programme, which is a tangible expression of our commitment to making the transformational experience of a good university education available to all.

ENTERPRISE

The Faculty will:

- Harness the social context of economic development in enterprise, planning and research and reflect this in our teaching and research.
- Identify those aspects of enterprise that are beyond the purely for-profit domain particularly those linked with society, culture, ethics and public policy.
- Engage our students with concepts of enterprise in our taught programmes to reflect not only business development, but also to reflect the social, ethical and cultural innovation and public policy and governance aspects of enterprise.
- Develop internship programmes and international placements for students and graduates, to strengthen students’ experiences and skills for life post-graduation and aim to further our students’ employability potential.
- Work with employers and other societal stakeholders to meet society’s needs.

ENGAGEMENT

The Faculty will:

- Support research programmes on issues of societal importance and translational significance.
- Encourage staff to be actively engaged in national debates as experts in their field e.g. through published research, in the media and other public fora.
- Promote the engagement of our experts in governmental policy processes to bring a strong evidence base from our research to national policy making.
- Engage with our local community both from a staff and student perspective through a range of initiatives.
- Foster an ethos of active citizenship in our academic programmes, exposing students to the social context within which their disciplinary knowledge sits.
- Facilitate our students to understand and engage with the wider world, by highlighting a critical understanding of the international and intercultural dimensions of their chosen field of study, by promoting and supporting opportunities for studying abroad.
- Increase the number of international and year abroad students to come to study in our Faculty as well as those students who wish to take full-programmes in the Faculty
- Foster national and international research linkages. [.....]

TRANSLATION

The Faculty will:

- Commit to translating our research into action to meet societal needs nationally and internationally.
- Focus our research and teaching in areas of societal importance and in particular will develop national centres of excellence in our key areas of expertise.

- Support a high level engagement between our researchers and public policy communities in government and civil society so that the outputs and evidence from our research have the greatest possible impact in producing evidence led policy making.

THE FACULTY'S KEY GOALS

The Faculty will:

- Build on our strengths and further enhance the learning experience of our students.
- Ensure that our graduates are; rounded individuals, effective leaders and innovative entrepreneurs engaging in all sectors of society i.e. public, private and not for profit. Our students are highly attractive to employers and their capacity to generate employment and lead in the creative, social and business sectors will be further strengthened by the honing of their skills and abilities through our programmes [..]
- Be publicly engaged, with strong national, regional and local community links, with active expert inputs to public policy processes and national debate.
- Be a Research Intensive Faculty, with high levels of high quality publications, a strong profile in attracting external research grants, excellent PhD programmes and hosting national and global research centres in our key areas of expertise.
- Be an internationally focused Faculty, engaged in world-class international research networks, researching contemporary global challenges and with a high proportion of international students, in a supportive multilingual and multicultural environment.
- Strengthen and expand the strategic position of the Humanities and Social Sciences.
- Support staff to develop and expand their careers in teaching, research and academic management.

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