*The Quality of Teaching in Higher Education, 20/1/2016*

Disclaimer : Mary Gallagher is representing her own views only and does not speak for all of the very diverse 3rd level sector, not even for the very diverse organisation that is UCD, and especially not for those involved in teaching STEM subjects.

**I A National Debate ?**

In 2011-12 I took the time-consuming risk of writing a book about the threats to academic standards and academic integrity in the university system across the Western world but especially in the English-speaking or global world-system.

There has been to date no public refutation of any part of that book. However, there has been no public response either. Yet, if only 10% of the analysis was well founded, it would have merited a national debate.

Although the intelligence underpinning the full report of the HE funding review group led by Peter Cassells is impressive, it is disappointing that the report seems to accept without question the staggering and unjustified costs (and/or prices) of HE (especially in England and the US). I believe that we will soon come to see these (and the associated debt bubble) for what they are.

When I wrote about the apparent collapse of academic standards and integrity at second and third level here, it was to say that the main cure for this collapse is to stop pretending that 85% of Ireland’s youth are academically inclined because this is a damaging lie. Germany, for example, avoids this damage : and that’s why apprenticeships rather than degrees are so highly valued there and why they attract such able people.

Either Irish school-leavers are up to fifty percent more academically inclined and talented than their European peers or else they are being misdirected into further academic endeavour when they would be better suited to following a more authentic, less pseudo-academic training, via apprenticeships.

An associated worry would be that universities and colleges might actually have less to offer the truly academically-oriented student and if that is so, of course, then we are in deeper trouble than most people think.

Certainly, the UK, US and Australia are the wrong models for us to be looking towards, because that is where the most intractable problems are coming from, the atrocious idea of student loans included.

If, as I believe, the Anglo (aka global) brand is toxic and is linked to the spread of zombie universities, shouldn’t we be looking to more free, responsible, sane, healthy and independent Northern European models instead ?

Does Irish HE have anything in particular going for it that other systems don’t ?

Yes : I think it does. Ireland’s doubleness : the fact that Ireland is in the Anglo world but (could be) not completely of it. Ireland is or could be at the very least bi-cultural, bi-lingual (though less so than Scandinavian countries for example) but it is, like Scandinavia, blessed not to have a wholly predatory, imperial, genocidal or ethnocidal past to carry or expiate.

The fact is, though, that our universities have chosen to copy the worst of the Anglo-Global world. Like all Anglo businesses, Anglo universities are in common market competition with each other and are all aligned, therefore, on virtually identical strategic plans. That’s why branding, distinguishing the university from its so-called competitors, is of the essence. And brands are synonymous, always, with extortionary prices.

**2. The Problem(s) with Corporate universities**

**Problem 1**

= Keeping Higher Education truly ‘Higher’, ie. critical and free, when the business model depends not just on massification, commodification, branding and the associated pricing, but also on the proliferating (US) business model based on the casualisation of precarious intellectual labour to keep educational costs down. More than 60% of academic labour in the US is untenured.

Insofar as the corporate university focuses on education, it is bent on increasing student throughput and retention (ie. not awarding fail grades) and staff performance. This is becoming in my view a terrible problem. Instead of addressing plunging staff/student ratios due an exodus of experienced staff and recessionary cuts, and instead of addressing the question of students who are not academic being misdirected into academe, what we see happening in the actual educational process at the chalkface is an almost irresistible dumbing down of academic subjects, and when even that fails, we see the shutting-down of ‘hard’ subjects. ‘Hard’ or ‘unpopular’ subjects are either disappeared or re-invented in line with market expectations or with the university’s strategic/business plan.

**Problem 2**

How are universities to inculcate critical – or higher order – thinking if they have developed an ‘on message’ corporate culture in which top-down decision-making has replaced open debate amongst the very staff who are supposed to ‘model’ this kind of thinking for their students ? If we think this is not a problem, then look at the accelerating convergence of Irish HE with the deeply authoritarian model prevailing in the West’s best-friend trading partners in the dictatorships and proto-dictatorships of Sth East Asia and the Gulf? This confirms at the very least a weakening of the priority of critical freedom in academe globally. How else are we to read the Japanese government’s September 15 almost comical instruction to all universities to move to close down their Social Science and Humanities departments?

**Problem 3**

HE’s two income streams are most easily maximised when kept separate. With the ever-increasing casualisation of both research and teaching and with their greater disassociation, it becomes harder to keep alive, especially at undergraduate level, any meaningful connection between the two.

**Problem 4**

We all know what the Leaving Cert Points Race and associated School Ranking System are doing to the minds and spirits of all of Ireland’s youth. Do we want HE to be just as proxy-driven, just as focused on certification, credits, performance measurement and management etc rather than on the intrinsic value of education (= making free, understanding what it is to be (diversely) human, enabling us to live useful, thoughtful, expressive and civic lives) ? If we do, then we should drop the idea of the national debate and just continue with business as usual.

**II The Teaching Industry**

Universities are going through a curious double convergence at present: 1. with the corporate world of business/commerce, 2. with the teaching-centred world of school.

The convergence of second and third level is made manifest in the burgeoning T&L (teaching and learning) industry.

How are the T&L vice-squads and remedial armies (by now embedded in most corners of HE) going to address the following 5 issues :

1. The fashion for favouring lucrative graduate and international students (who pay the most extortionate fees of all) over mere undergrads

2. Confusion over what constitutes a variable, healthy and satisfactory balance between cutting-edge research/ scholarship and undergraduate education

3. The assault on academic standards, integrity and freedom by managerialism within HE

4. The lose-lose equation of the casualisation of academic labour

5. The (self-)deception involved in dumbing down and in grade inflation and the associated risks of disappointing/selling short those many, many students with true critical or creative potential

Even the most ardent supporters of the T&L Revolution will have difficulty explaining how it can provide even a modest solution to any one of the problems I have named as such above.

This is because the T&L industry is focussed on **how** to teach/learn rather than on **what** humans should know/understand/think about etc., and **why**. It doesn’t take a philosopher to see that this effort, however well-meant, is, no more than the reform of the Junior Cert, not going to help our youth to find their way around the aforementioned obstacles to deeply constructive and meaningful lives.

Unless T&L enthusiasts grapple with the fact that a fake, inflationary, pseudo-academic focus is infecting all levels of Irish education but especially second and third, then they risk wasting their considerable effort. At second-level, this focus has resulted in catastrophes such as the near-total eviction of humanities content (ie. the what and how of cultural difference typically expressed in history and literature) from the syllabus in most language subjects.

**III The HE Worker’s Best Friends : the Alcoholic’s Prayer and the Hippocratic Oath**

If there is any time left, I would like to point to ways in which all this doom and gloom is being/could be relieved and, more especially, to concrete ways of maximising Ireland’s steadily expanding multilingual capacity and also its fairly unique insider/outsider advantage.