

# Charting the Contours of Union Recognition in Foreign-Owned MNCs: Survey Evidence from the Republic of Ireland



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from the first large-scale representative survey of employment practices in multinational companies (MNCs) in Ireland. Using data from some 260 MNCs, it investigates the contention that foreign- and Irish-owned MNCs differ in their approach to employment relations (ER). This paper finds evidence that Irish, UK and 'rest of Europe' MNCs are more likely to recognise trade unions, whereas US MNCs are the least likely to do so. More strikingly, there is a growing trend of union avoidance amongst unionised companies through the establishment of new non-union sites. Differences between foreign- and Irish-owned MNCs are also apparent. Overall, the evidence supports the view that a new orthodoxy is emerging in Irish ER whereby foreign-owned MNCs are introducing home country practices that are at odds with the more traditional pattern existing in Irish-owned MNCs.

**Key Words:** Multinational companies; Employment relations; Trade union recognition; Double-breasting; New orthodoxy; Country of origin.

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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of how multinational companies (MNCs) manage their operations has been a long-standing area of academic debate and research. Indeed employment relations (ER) researchers have long been interested in the question of whether significant ER differences exist between foreign-owned and domestically owned firms. On the one hand, Hiltrop (2002) reported that the human resource management (HRM) practices of European companies were very different from their non-European counterparts. On the other hand, Rosenzweig and Nohria (1994) found that HRM in foreign subsidiaries did in fact resemble local practices. Nowhere has this debate being more keenly contested than in Ireland, where contrasting views have been presented on whether ER differences exist between foreign-owned and domestically owned MNCs (see Roche and Geary, 1996; Turner et al., 1997a, 1997b, 2001; Geary and Roche, 2001).

Yet, despite the extant research on MNCs in Ireland, we have no overall, authoritative picture of the ways in which MNCs manage ER. Indeed, it has been suggested that much of the work on MNCs lack representativeness as they reflect sample bias towards the larger, most global and widely known US manufacturing firms (Collinson and Rugman, 2005). The aim of this paper is to address this gap by profiling trade union recognition in a fully representative sample of foreign- and Irish-owned MNCs in Ireland and to examine any country-of-origin effects.

This paper begins by setting out the context in which the research takes place, illustrating the importance of Ireland as a setting for studying MNCs. The paper then summarily reviews the extant literature on ER in MNCs and subsequently outlines some of the limitations of research conducted to date on MNCs in Ireland. It then outlines the methodology employed before setting out the findings, followed by a discussion on the implications.

## IRELAND AS A LOCALE FOR STUDYING MNCs

The level of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ireland, relative to the size of the economy, is one of the highest in the world. Indeed, Ireland has been described as one of the most globalised countries on earth (Kearney, 2002) and is one of the 'most MNC-dependent



economies in the EU' (Gunnigle et al., 2005: 241). The stock of inward FDI per head of population for 2000 was twice the EU average (Barry, 2004), while in 2002 and 2003 levels of FDI into Ireland were equivalent to the totals attained by the ten-member Central and Eastern European bloc, averaging \$25 billion annually (Enterprise Ireland, 2005). Ireland continues to attract a large share of inward FDI despite the post-9/11 and dot.com slowdowns. Indeed, only five countries (Luxembourg, China, France, the USA and Spain) registered larger absolute FDI inflows in 2003 (Begley et al., 2005; Collings et al., 2005; Forfás, 2005). According to the industrial promotional agencies, there are almost 1,000 foreign companies employing 135,487 employees in Ireland (Industrial Development Authority (IDA) Ireland, 2007), with most of the top global pharmaceutical companies, information and communications technology (ICT) companies and medical technology companies located here. Given the country's recent economic success, and the key role played by MNCs therein, Ireland represents an interesting locale for the evaluation of ER in MNCs.

## EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN IRELAND<sup>1</sup>

### Trade Unions in Ireland

Trade unions play a prominent role in Irish society and enjoy considerable social legitimacy in the country (Gunnigle et al., 2001). The return to national-level collective bargaining in 1987 accorded unions a key role in decision-making on economic and social issues. As a social partner, unions exert significant influence, not only on wage levels, but also on other socio-economic issues such as taxation, social welfare and housing. Ireland is characterised by relatively high, but falling, levels of union density (Visser, 2006). Recent data present mixed news for trade unions in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2005). Whilst trade union membership over the past ten years has increased to 521,400 members, trade union density has fallen over the same period from 45 to 35 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Union density levels are particularly low in the private sector. Some feel this could be as low as 21 per cent, meaning that, for the first time, public sector union membership is outstripping private sector membership (*Industrial Relations News*, 2005). Traditionally, union

density has tended to increase during periods of economic growth (Roche, 2000). However, despite the phenomenal economic growth which Ireland has experienced over the recent past, union density has in fact declined significantly. The posited reasons for this decline in union density in Ireland reflects those proffered in the international ER literature. These include the decline in employment in traditionally heavily unionised manufacturing sectors; employment growth in sectors (especially private services) seen as union-averse; the growth in atypical forms of employment; the hardening of employer attitudes towards trade unions and collective bargaining; the shift in policy away from encouraging inward investing companies to recognise unions by promotional agencies; and, of importance to this paper, the negative impact of MNCs on union density (Roche, 2001; European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO), 2005).

### **Country of Origin Effect on Collective Employee Representation**

There are many influences on MNCs' ER behaviour that may cause variations between companies. Girgin (2005) outlines a useful framework for analysing influences over the behaviour of MNCs and categorises them into three main levels: macro, meso and micro levels. The macro level refers to the home and the host countries' national business systems. The meso level refers to the industry sector. Finally, the micro level refers to the company, which is characterised by such variables as age, size, ownership structure, employee relations, management style and organisational culture. For the purposes of this paper, the widely cited explanatory variable 'country of origin' is used.

The country of origin effect is well exploited in the literature as an important potential source of potential variation in ER policy and practice. It is argued that the country in which the MNC originates exerts a distinctive effect on the way labour is managed (Ferner, 1997). Girgin (2005) argues that the ER behaviour of MNCs is shaped by the national business environment from which they emanate. Such behaviours are said to be derived from the national business systems in which MNCs are embedded: that is, the existing national models of employee representation that prevail in their



country of origin. American MNCs, for example, have displayed a particular tendency to avoid trade unions and collective bargaining (De Vos, 1981; Kochan et al., 1986).

Focusing specifically on the Irish literature, it is possible to identify two contrasting perspectives. Firstly, an early body of literature on ER in MNCs laid the foundations for the so-called 'conformance thesis' of Irish ER. This argued that the ER practices of foreign-owned MNCs operating in Ireland conformed to the prevailing traditions of larger indigenous firms, notably in conceding trade union recognition and in relying on adversarial collective bargaining as the primary means of handling ER matters. For instance, Kelly and Brannick (1985: 109) found that 'in general, MNCs are regarded as no different than Irish firms and the trend seems to be one of conformity with the host country's institutions, values and practices'. Enderwick (1986), in reviewing the impact of MNCs on ER in Ireland, identified a number of theoretical propositions as to why foreign-owned MNC subsidiaries might utilise different ER practices to those prevailing in indigenous organisations. However, his empirical appraisal found no supporting evidence, with the majority opting to recognise trade unions and engage in collective bargaining (see also Roche and Geary, 1996). Consequently, this early body of research pointed towards a dominance of host-country effects whereby foreign-owned companies largely conformed to the pluralist-adversarial ER model prevailing among indigenous firms.

However, a second countervailing perspective has since emerged which argues that a 'new orthodoxy' now characterises Irish ER. This posits that foreign-owned MNCs no longer conform to prevailing local ER practices, pointing towards a 'country of origin effect' (Roche and Geary, 1996; Turner et al., 1997a, 1997b). Though there is some debate around the reasons, this literature broadly posits that foreign-owned MNC operations have increasingly adopted ER approaches more reflective of their own (home country) policies and practices. This evidence is most pronounced in the union avoidance strategies of US MNCs in Ireland, particularly those that have established operations since the 1980s. Indeed, as postulated in the more general ER literature, American companies operating in Ireland appear much more likely to adopt different ER

practices to indigenous companies (Gunnigle, 1995; Gunnigle et al., 1997; Geary and Roche, 2001; Collings et al., 2008). Both Gunnigle (1995) and Gunnigle et al. (1997) point towards a significant increase in trade union avoidance among US-owned firms establishing at greenfield sites. Geary and Roche (2001) similarly found a dramatic rise in non-union workplaces among US employers entering Ireland since the mid-1980s, a trend corroborated and developed in later case evidence (see Gunnigle et al., 2005). This latter work noted the growing phenomenon of 'double-breasting', whereby previously unionised companies establish newer sites on a non-union basis (see Beaumont and Harris, 1992). Indeed, Collings et al. (2008) point towards important changes in the broader ER system in Ireland, which they trace indirectly to the influence of FDI in Ireland, particularly American FDI.

### **Inadequacies of Research to Date**

While previous research provides some interesting insights on ER practice in MNCs operating in Ireland, a recurring theme throughout this literature is the lack of representativeness (see McDonnell et al., 2007). Kelly and Brannick's (1985) study was based on only 27 responses from a sample of 37 MNCs. This sample was chosen from a population of 200 MNCs which was developed by using limited sources, namely the Industrial Development Authority (now IDA Ireland), Federated Union of Employers (FUE) (now IBEC) and various trade unions. However, a difficulty with relying on such sources is that such bodies generally just keep records of companies that they support/assist, in the case of the IDA, or which are in their membership or are involved with in some particular respect, as is the case with the FUE and trade unions. Consequently, companies that are not aided or assisted tend to be omitted. Furthermore, there is no common definition of what constitutes an MNC among the sources and thus the studies may well not be comparing like with like.

The Cranfield–University of Limerick (CUL) study of ER and HRM policy and practice relies on periodic surveys of a sample of all large organisations in Ireland (see Gunnigle, 1995; Gunnigle et al., 1997; Turner et al., 1997a, 1997b). The sample frame consisted of the 'top' companies (both trading and non-trading)<sup>3</sup> in Ireland obtained from the *Business & Finance* list. This source also



suffers from a number of weaknesses, and used in isolation cannot be classified as representative. However, as acknowledged in publications, this study focuses primarily on larger organisations. As also acknowledged, MNCs only represent a proportion of respondents and no attempt is made to ensure representativeness among the subset MNC respondents. Nor do any of the above studies emanating from the CUL study attempt to identify Irish-owned MNCs and thus it was impossible, for example, to compare Irish-owned and foreign-owned MNCs.

The UCD workplace study of management practices in Ireland was conducted in 1996 (see Roche and Geary, 1996; Geary and Roche, 2001). As with the CUL studies, this did not focus on MNCs *per se*, but sought to examine practice in a representative sample of all workplaces in Ireland. The total study population was derived from a listing provided by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). Our investigations indicate that such listings were primarily derived from databases provided by the main industrial promotions agencies (IDA Ireland, etc.) and from selected other conventional sources. Some of the problems associated with exclusive reliance on these sources have already been outlined. Publications emanating from the UCD study provide quite limited detail on sample size: for example, no detail is provided on the breakdown of companies by country of origin. However, given that the MNC population represented a sub-sample of the total number of respondent firms, it appears that the number of MNCs studied was quite small. Again, as with the other Irish studies reviewed, the UCD study does not identify Irish-owned MNCs as a distinct category.

This unrepresentative nature of research on MNCs is not just confined to Ireland but is seemingly an international issue also. For instance, Collinson and Rugman (2005) highlight 'sample biases' in the literature towards the largest, most global, well-known, US-based manufacturing firms. Furthermore, Edwards et al. (2006) found that many of the studies on MNCs in the UK have been partial in coverage, based on small numbers and failed to assess the limitations of their population listings and sampling frames.

In conclusion, two key issues emerge on the extant literature on MNCs operating in Ireland. Firstly, much of this research relies on

small sample numbers and indeed some do not set out to look specifically at MNCs. Secondly, this empirical research has generally excluded two key categories of MNCs: namely (a) foreign-owned MNCs which are not assisted or aided by the main industrial promotions agencies, and (b) Irish-owned MNCs. These omissions are likely to bias findings on key aspects of practice and behaviours of MNCs. For example, Whitley (1999: 128) argues that 'the more dependent are foreign firms on domestic organisations and agencies, both within and across sectors, the less likely are they to change prevalent patterns of behaviour'. This could potentially be significant as it may suggest that those firms which have tenuous links to state agencies may be less restricted in implementing practices which are at odds with host traditions. Therefore, there is a strong need for a representative picture of MNCs' ER policies and practices in Ireland.

### METHODOLOGY

Based on the above critique the aim was to carry out the first representative survey of MNCs operating in Ireland and this paper draws upon some initial results of the research.<sup>4</sup> The research process involved two stages. The first stage was to identify a comprehensive database of MNCs operating in Ireland. To date no comprehensive list of MNCs operating in Ireland exists, with much of the extant research on MNCs in Ireland based on unrepresentative databases (McDonnell et al., 2007). Thus the first task in developing a comprehensive listing of MNCs in Ireland was to define an MNC. The research distinguishes between foreign- and domestic-owned MNCs:

- Foreign-owned MNCs: All wholly or majority foreign-owned organisations operating in Ireland, with 500 or more employees worldwide and 100 or more employed in their Irish operations.
- Irish-owned MNCs: All wholly or majority Irish-owned organisations with 500 or more employees worldwide and at least 100 employed abroad.

Having defined the MNC, every available source, including the industrial promotional agencies (e.g. IDA Ireland and Enterprise



Ireland), a private consultancy firm specialising in company information, the publication *Major Companies of 2005*, and the *Irish Times*' list of top companies were used. Each of the sources taken on their own did not provide an adequate picture of MNCs in Ireland. Having combined the lists and adjusted for double counting, what is believed to be the first comprehensive list of MNCs operating in Ireland was developed, recording 563 foreign- and Irish-owned MNCs. In order to present a representative picture of MNCs in Ireland the total population was stratified by country of ownership, sector and size, giving a sample of 423 companies. The difference between the total population and the stratified population is largely a result of the 'stratifying out' of US MNCs, who dominate the number of MNCs operating in Ireland. Of the 423 companies, 46 were subsequently removed from the population due to (a) going out of business, (b) not meeting the selection criteria or (c) double counting. This left a total of 377 companies. An additional 37 companies were subsequently added from the residual population to compensate for these losses, bringing the total valid sample of companies to 414.

The second phase of the research consisted of structured interviews at an organisational level of MNCs operating in Ireland, unlike much of the previous work, which focused at the enterprise level. As a result where an MNC had a number of sites, an effort was made to speak with the most senior person responsible for ER and who could answer for all of their Irish operations. In cases where this was not possible, respondents were asked to answer for the largest site/division in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> However, the questions explored specific to this paper were generic enough that all respondents could answer for all of their Irish operations. To assist with the fieldwork, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) was contracted. University of Limerick researchers along with the contracted ESRI team conducted the fieldwork, which began in June 2006 and finished in February 2007. Respondents were asked to report on various aspects of organisational structure and also on four aspects of HRM: pay and performance management, employee representation and consultation, employee involvement and communication, and training and development. A total of 260 interviews were carried out, giving a response rate of 63 per cent. The survey

**Table 1: Profile of Respondents**

<b>Country</b>	<b>% (N)</b>
Ireland	18 (47)
USA	39 (101)
UK	14 (35)
Rest of Europe	24 (63)
Rest of World	5 (14)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100 (260)</b>

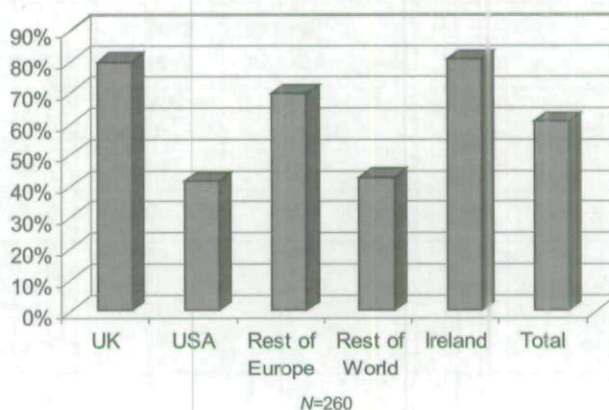
responses are broadly representative of the total population and for the purposes of this paper have not been re-weighted. Due to small cell sizes five different categories of country of origin have been identified.<sup>6</sup> As Table 1 outlines the majority of responses were from US MNCs, followed by MNCs from the rest of Europe and Irish MNCs.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### **Trade Union Recognition**

The first issue addressed is the level of engagement<sup>7</sup> with trade unions by MNCs in Ireland. As depicted in Figure 1, over half of all MNCs in the survey, 61 per cent, recognised trade unions for purposes of collective employee representation in at least some of their sites. This figure is quite high given that much of the extant research often depicts MNCs as union-avoiders; for example, Cooke (2001) noted that foreign-owned MNCs have become more and more aggressive in their efforts to avoid union representation. This high figure may be explained by a number of reasons, most of which relate to the parameters of the research. Firstly, the size threshold used in defining an MNC means that only organisations with a large number of employees were examined. This is significant as the literature suggests that larger organisations are more likely to recognise unions (Beaumont and Harris, 1989; Roche, 2001). Secondly, unlike much previous research in this area, the focus of



**Figure 1: Engagement with Trade Unions**

the investigation was at an organisational rather than establishment level. Consequently, if a multi-establishment MNC recognised trade unions at just one site, then this case was categorised as a unionised MNC. This figure is also higher than findings in the parallel UK study (Edwards et al., 2007), which found 47 per cent of MNCs recognised a trade union. However, comparatively, levels of union density have on average been 10 percentage points higher in Ireland than in the UK over the past 30 years (see Visser, 2006), and thus one may expect union recognition to be higher among MNCs in Ireland. Moreover, the UK study only investigated recognition levels among the largest occupational group (LOG) of employees, whereas this study examined all occupational groups.

It would appear that there is a pronounced country-of-origin effect with regard to union engagement. Irish, UK and 'rest of Europe' MNCs are more likely to engage with trade unions, whereas US MNCs are least likely to engage with unions. Over 80 per cent of Irish and UK MNCs engaged with trade unions, whilst rest of Europe MNCs also score high at 70 per cent. However, just 42 per cent of US MNCs engaged with unions. This is unsurprising given the preference of US MNCs to avoid unions (De Vos, 1981). Bundling all foreign-owned MNCs, there is evidence of a significant difference between foreign- and Irish-owned MNCs with 56 per cent of foreign-owned MNCs engaged with unions versus 81 per cent of Irish-owned MNCs.

**Table 2: Union Recognition and Country of Origin**

	<b>UK</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>Rest of Europe</b>	<b>Rest of World</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Total</b>
No sites	20%	58%	30%	57%	19%	39%
Some sites	14%	12%	11%	7%	9%	11%
Most sites	3%	10%	6%	0%	21%	10%
All sites	51%	7%	29%	7%	47%	25%
The company's single Irish site	11%	13%	24%	29%	4%	15%

As outlined in the methodology section, some MNCs may have more than one site, and thus it is useful to provide a breakdown of the 61 per cent of MNCs engaging with trade unions. Of the 61 per cent of MNCs that engaged with unions, 21 per cent recognised trade unions at some or most sites, 25 per cent at all sites and 15 per cent at their single sites (see Table 2). This would suggest that MNCs that recognised unions and have more than one site are more likely to recognise unions at all of their sites. Again there would appear to be a country-of-origin effect. Irish, UK and European MNCs who recognised trade unions and have more than one site are much more likely to recognise unions at all of their sites, while US MNCs are much more likely to recognise trade unions at just some or most other sites.

### **Trade Union Recognition in New Sites**

Picking up on the double-breasting issue identified by Gunnigle et al. (2005), all MNCs that recognised unions were asked if they had established a new site over the past five years and, if they did, if they recognise unions in these new sites (see Table 3). In total, 54 unionised MNCs reported that they had established a new site(s) over the past five years. Looking at the incidence of union recognition amongst these MNCs, just half of the MNCs (50 per cent) recognised a trade union in each of those new sites. Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of MNCs recognised unions at some or most of their new sites, whilst just over a quarter (26 per cent) did not recognise



**Table 3: Union Recognition at New Sites by Country of Origin**

	<b>UK</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>Rest of Europe</b>	<b>Rest of World</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes at each new site	71%	0%	36%	100%	71%	50%
Yes at most new sites	7%	10%	21%	0%	7%	11%
Yes at some new sites	14%	10%	21%	0%	7%	13%
No at new sites	7%	80%	21%	0%	14%	26%

unions at any of their new sites. Based on these findings two issues are of note. Firstly, there appears to be a strong anti-union sentiment evident amongst the quarter of MNCs that do not recognise unions at any of their new sites, even though they had previously engaged with unions. Secondly, while 24 per cent recognise unions at some or most of their new sites, by default this means they also *do not* recognise unions at some or most of their other new sites. This would suggest that these MNCs have a preference for operating on a non-union basis also, but possibly faced with stiff opposition or strong pressure from trade unions have conceded recognition in some of their newer sites. In effect, half of MNCs (50 per cent) are engaging in some form of double-breasting. There is also a discernible country-of-origin effect. Irish and UK MNCs were much more likely to recognise a union at each of their new site(s). However, US MNCs were least likely to recognise a union at new sites. Indeed, there is no instance of a US MNC recognising trade unions at all of its new sites. European MNCs demonstrate a more mixed pattern.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The evidence on trade union recognition and avoidance provides support for the emergence of a new orthodoxy in Irish ER. However, one must exercise caution as only one measure has been used – namely trade union recognition. Notwithstanding this there is a significant difference between foreign- and Irish-owned MNCs regarding trade union engagement, 56 per cent versus 81 per cent respectively. Although there is no directly comparable research to

this piece, some previous studies have indicated a difference between foreign- and Irish-owned companies; for example, Turner et al. (1997a) found a 2 per cent difference and Geary and Roche (2001) found a 22 per cent difference. None were as substantial as the findings of this paper.

A recurring theme throughout the findings is the possible impact of a country-of-origin effect. Much of the literature identified earlier outlined the usefulness of the country-of-origin effect in explaining patterns of ER, and this is borne out in the findings. Clearly the strong anti-union sentiment characteristic of the US national business system is evident among the US MNCs operating in Ireland, with these MNCs to the forefront in union avoidance. This finding is not unexpected, since much of the literature suggests that US companies are much more likely to be different in terms of ER practice to both Irish and other foreign-owned companies. US MNCs are thus in the vanguard in this move away from engaging with trade unions. The pluralist traditions of both the Irish and UK ER systems appear to resonate amongst MNCs from these systems, with both UK and Irish MNCs reporting high level of union engagement. Explaining the findings of the European MNCs is more difficult as this category contains a number of different European countries, and thus is open to the influences of different national systems. Notwithstanding this, a European category has been identified in the literature as being more likely to engage with trade unions, and the findings here point towards a similar pattern with high levels of union recognition amongst European MNCs.

Finally one of the most significant findings of the research to date is the existence of 'double-breasting'. Previous research has pointed to the emergence of this phenomenon in recent times, with *Industrial Relations News* (2004) outlining that more and more unionised companies are establishing newer non-union sites and Gunnigle et al. (2005) also finding evidence of US MNCs engaging in this type of behaviour. As pointed out in the findings, half of unionised MNCs that have established a new site over the previous five years has engaged in some form of double-breasting. Building on previous research this is indeed a worrying trend for trade unions in Ireland. The trade union movement has struggled



over recent decades to establish a presence in inward-investing companies, particularly those companies in the ICT and financial services sectors. However, unions could at least point to their strong base in longer-established MNCs in sectors such as pharmaceuticals and medical devices. However, these findings point to a progressive erosion of this base and a union failure to hold what they have.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The subject of ER covers a range of topics including trade unions, collective bargaining and pay determination, employee voice and partnership, industrial action, negotiations, and discipline and grievances. This paper specifically focuses on trade union recognition.

<sup>2</sup> The measure used is of union members as a proportion of 'employees' in paid employment, excluding the self-employed, very few of who are union members.

<sup>3</sup> 'Top companies' refers to the name given to the research listing (see <<http://www.businessandfinance.ie/publications/top1000.html>>).

<sup>4</sup> This research is part of a large-scale international study of employment practices in MNCs undertaken in five countries (Canada, Ireland, Mexico, Spain and the UK). A summary of the findings of the Irish study can be found in Gunnigle et al. (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Just 12 per cent of respondents could only answer for the largest site or division in Ireland.

<sup>6</sup> The 'rest of Europe' category consists of MNCs from the European region excluding Ireland and the UK. It should be noted that the number of MNCs in the 'rest of the world' category is quite small and are quite a disparate group in terms of country of ownership, encompassing firms from southern and central Asia, the Americas (excluding the USA) and the Antipodes. Therefore, caution is advised when interpreting results for this ownership category.

<sup>7</sup> By engagement it is meant that an MNC recognises trade union(s) for the purposes of collective employee representation in at least one of their sites.

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