

The Price of Education

John J. Cleary

Introduction

The rapid changes within the Irish economy over the last two decades have naturally given rise to a debate about the role of universities in Ireland, specifically with regard to their function in promoting economic growth. I think that faculty members should not feel threatened by this debate because an open-ended discussion about the aims and functions of a university in society is not only a healthy sign of academic freedom but is also constitutive of the tradition of universities since their founding in the high middle ages. For instance, while the university of Paris grew out of a cathedral school, the university of Naples was expected to provide functionaries for the kingdom founded by Frederick Barbarossa. Thus there is nothing new about society making practical demands on its universities, such as the provision of well trained professionals. What is new, however, is the conflicting demands being made by the Irish government which expects that universities should serve as engines of growth in a knowledge economy, on the one hand, while addressing social problems like inequality, on the other hand, by providing the most academically promising students from underprivileged backgrounds with greater access to third level education. As a result, universities are often accused of being elitist institutions, while also being asked to become centres of excellence. Quite frankly, the government will have to make up its collective mind as to whether it wants university faculty to function as social workers or as scientific researchers. In this essay I claim that the current ideologies of accountability and accessibility contain a potential threat to academic freedom, and that they may also serve to undermine academic standards.

The latest initiative by the Minister for Education seems to involve making extra funding to the university sector contingent on internal 'reforms', while resolutely refusing to discuss the reintroduction of fees. Populist politicians clearly have no idea about what constitutes academic excellence at the international level or how expensive third-level research really is, especially in the sciences. In the past, Irish governments have sought education 'on the cheap' by delegating it to the religious orders, while the new agenda of privatization in education could lead to glorified grind schools at every level. The harsh truth is that our exam-oriented second-level system tends to produce students who are neither willing nor able to function well at the third level, never mind doing creative research at the so-called 'fourth level'. Everyone is by now familiar with the new breed of part-time students who refuse to read the whole course and who study only the bare minimum, while also expecting to get honours in their examinations. This is a generation of students who have no interest in mastering a discipline and who feel no shame at not being well educated, precisely because such an ideal is foreign to them. It is also a generation that has been over-praised by parents and other cheerleaders to such an extent that any word of criticism or any failure is either rejected or avoided by blaming teachers for being too demanding, or by claiming that the whole system is unfair. In effect, university students are refusing to take responsibility for their own education, and they are being supported in their consumerist attitude by supine parents and by craven educational authorities. Given the serious educational situation that I am describing, I want to argue that the way forward for Irish universities is to renew the tradition of an academic discipline with its own internal standards and corresponding excellences.

The Threat of Philistinism to Education

First, however, let me briefly describe the grim reality of the crisis we face in Irish education today. Almost every lecturer at our third-level institutions has experienced at first-hand the deformation in the minds of students that has been wrought at second-level by the obsessive focus on examinations and the so-called 'points race' for third-level places. As Frances Ruane remarks in her perceptive article (*Irish Times*, July 8, 2005), the type of learning involved at second-level is predominantly that of rote-learning, which fails to develop analytical skills in the students. By way of anecdotal evidence for this tendency, one might cite the increased popularity of grind schools where students are prepared for the Leaving Certificate examination at considerable expense to their parents, who presumably feel that these schools deliver results. Thus, instead of paying third-level fees for a decent university education, parents are prepared to spend money on grind-schools so as to obtain the most sought-after university places in medicine and law, which are free to qualified students though they cost a great deal to deliver. Financially, it is all very well calculated by middle-class parents, but not because they value a genuine education for their children; since what they want is the facsimile of success rather than the genuine article. Consequently, parents and students stubbornly insist on the Leaving Certificate examination remaining unchanged because it is held to be 'transparent' and 'fair'. When decoded, these terms usually mean that teachers (especially in grind schools) have found a way to prepare students for this examination without taking the trouble of giving them a genuine education. This is very convenient because, in the short term, they are providing what is demanded (the illusion of success) while concealing the fraud being perpetrated, which will only be discovered in the long-run and then blamed on the system, so that no one will ever have to accept personal responsibility. Indeed, the most difficult problem we now face is that of getting students to accept some responsibility for their own education. The cult of the victim, and its supporting theology (which we might call Victimology) has now become so pervasive in Irish society that it is hard to get parents to accept that in many cases the system is not failing their over-praised children but rather that students are actually failing to meet minimal standards, and therefore should fail. In fact, failure can be a positive outcome when it serves as a reality check on the unrealistic and unfounded expectation of both students and parents that academic success is some kind of right or entitlement.

As empirical evidence for the existence of a philistine attitude towards education among students themselves, I refer to the 'Education Today' feature in the *Irish Times* of Tuesday, September 20, 2005. It contained an interview with a very confident female student who had obtained maximum points as a result of her Leaving Certificate examination. By her own admission, she achieved these results by giving up extracurricular activities and by enrolling in a grind school for the last year before the Leaving Certificate. What did she learn in that school? Her own answer is very revealing:

I learned over the course of the year that doing well in the Leaving is about learning the formula for each exam and practicing it endlessly. I got an A1 in English because I knew exactly what was required in each question. I learned off the sample answers provided by the examiners and I knew how much information was required and in what format in every section of the paper. That is how you do well in these exams.

Through her brash self-confidence, this young woman unwittingly revealed the complete educational poverty of the Leaving Certificate examination. In response to the interviewer's gentle question as to whether students were being short-changed by this approach, the interviewee answered: 'You can only select a few topics and learn them really well. If you want a deep knowledge of biology, that's what university is for'. This is quite a promising response but, unfortunately, students later prove incapable of broadening their view of education at university because their model of learning through memorization is wholly flawed and deeply ingrained. Furthermore, students resist the broad education on offer and pursue the narrow exam-based approach that has proved successful for them in the past. Indeed, this smart young interviewee, who has fortunately chosen to study accountancy, betrays her own philistine attitude to education by saying:

There's no point in knowing about stuff that's not going to come up in exams. I was always frustrated by teachers who would say 'You don't need to know this for the exams but I'll tell you anyway'. I wanted my A1—what's the point in learning material that won't come up in exams?

Subsequently, in response to some outraged letters from readers of the *Irish Times*, our bright young philistine adopted the standard sophistic defence that she was only working the system to her own advantage, so that she should not be blamed for her attitudes. I have cited this interview at length because it could hardly be improved upon by the imagination if one were to conjure up the typical student who is succeeding in our exam-oriented system. The mind blanks in trying to imagine the typical student who is failing in that system but perhaps it is the genuinely creative individual who will become a great artist or an innovative entrepreneur, but certainly not an accountant.

Contemporary Shibboleths

State agencies (like the HEA) seem to have adopted an industrial or 'through-put' model for the universities, such that students who fail are regarded as faulty 'products' so that the ultimate blame is attached to the manufacturers. Thus, for instance, the faculty of the university and indeed the whole system is sometimes held to be 'failing' its customers. When stated like this, of course, it seems highly dubious as a model for education, yet there is no doubt that it is being applied to universities, as evidenced by the so-called benchmarking agreements. In response to such pressure, the universities have naturally followed the line of least resistance by lowering academic standards so that very few students will fail, and hence the system itself cannot be faulted. The inevitable result of this mistaken (though predictable) strategy will be the catastrophic collapse of standards, which can hardly be disguised for long by mission statements or five-year strategies. The usual rhetoric about adhering to the 'best international standards' is just the sort of empty boosterism that ends in disillusionment for all concerned, including the students who are shortchanged. This danger is looming through the fog of the current grade inflation within Irish universities, which is creeping into the system under the guise of transparency and accountability. Instead of holding the line on academic standards, university lecturers are now being forced to satisfy the unrealistic expectation of students that they are entitled to higher grades without the hard work that is normally involved in earning them. In addition, the consumerist attitude of many students, combined with a litigious rights-based mentality, sometimes leads them to abdicate personal

responsibility for their own education. When they do not invest time in their education, frequently they do not feel personally committed to their own development, nor do they participate actively in the process. Instead, they behave like passive consumers who want everything packaged and predigested by the lecturers, so that they can enjoy the illusion of being successful in examinations, which have become the only measure of educational achievement.

In order to prevent the collapse in academic standards at the university, I would make the following practical suggestions. First and foremost, we must convince our students to accept more responsibility for their own education, so that they will become mature and cultivated persons. Second, in order to prevent the fragmentation of their education, students must be persuaded to study the whole course and not merely what is likely to be examined. Otherwise, the tendency of modularization to fragment the traditional disciplines will be exacerbated by internal fragmentation within the modular system itself. Of course, lecturers can exercise some control over how students approach any given module by setting examinations that cover the whole course and not simply sections of it. Examinations alone, however, are not an accurate measure of any student's knowledge, so perhaps the continuous assessment section in every module can be used imaginatively to test progress within the discipline. We must find ways to reward creative imagination and analytical skill through continuous assessment, since the present examination system tends to favour memorization and the mere repetition of material culled from class notes and, increasingly, from the internet.

But here we encounter an emerging problem in contemporary education; namely, that the upcoming generations tend to rely more on electronic media for their information about the world. In plain language, it is very difficult to get young people to read books, unless perhaps they reflect a magical view of the world as found, for instance, in the Harry Potter books whose 'virtual' reality has much in common with that of video games. Of course, there is no denying this modern trend towards aliteracy among the video generation, but we should be aware of its dangers for our educational system. There are many disciplines in which it is indispensable that one be able to read and analyse written material in the form of books, articles, manuscripts and so on, even if these are available in electronic formats. In philosophy, for instance, it is unlikely that electronic images will ever replace written and oral formats for the communication of ideas, even though it is increasingly difficult to persuade students of philosophy to read books.¹ Therefore, to safeguard the integrity of such disciplines, we must insist on students reading the books prescribed for a course, as well as the secondary literature to be found in libraries. Conversely, we should reduce the volume of handouts and course notes being made available to students, as these tend to frustrate the whole process of reading and analysing the original material for themselves. Furthermore, the ready availability on the internet of prepackaged class assignments raises the spectre of plagiarism by students who are unable to distinguish between original research and merely copying from internet sites. Of course, lecturers can also purchase suitable software for detecting plagiarism by students, but this works only if they can be forced to submit electronic versions of their assignments. In my view, this self-perpetuating commercial cycle shows the dangers of electronic media becoming ends in themselves rather than useful means for a truly educational purpose. However, the only reliable defence against plagiarism is to teach students how to conduct genuine research through the formulation of interesting problems and

the pursuit of creative solutions. In effect, our teaching should emphasize problem-solving and complex thinking rather than the memorization of so-called facts. Where possible, facts should be presented as solutions to problems and, indeed, the priority of questions over answers should be emphasized. Needless to say, our examination system should be calibrated to reward truly intelligent and creative answers rather than the mere repetition of material that is copied or memorized from textbooks or class notes.² On the other hand, we should not be afraid to fail students who have not reached minimal standards for a course, as this is the only tool still under our control for protecting the integrity of our educational process. We are not quality-control managers in a factory, who must accept responsibility for faulty products, but rather we are guardians of a tradition who must ensure that it is not corrupted or even lost in transmission.

But we do not control the admission of students to the university, even though we are expected by the government to address the problem of 'accessibility' or, in other words, to increase the participation in third-level education of students from underprivileged backgrounds. In order to show that this problem cannot be solved (or even properly addressed) at the university level, let me briefly describe the problem in socio-economic terms. Despite the universal availability of free education at all three levels for the last decade in Ireland, the number of students from the lowest socio-economic class who attend any third-level institution still remains depressingly low and shows no sign of increasing in the near future. How are we to understand this problem? Well, we might begin by looking at the number of students from this socio-economic background who complete second-level education as far as the Leaving Certificate, which is the standard milestone to be passed by students who wish to go directly into third-level education. There we can find that the cohort from the lowest socio-economic class is significantly less than the corresponding cohorts from higher socio-economic groups, who sit the Leaving Certificate examination. So there is already a smaller number of underprivileged students competing for university places, and possibly they are also less competitive in the 'points-race', given the economic advantages enjoyed by their middle-class competitors. Therefore, without going into the more complex issue of culture capital, we can begin to understand that the problem of access to third-level education is compounded at the second-level and most likely is already beginning at the level of primary education. In one way, therefore, the current minister for education has the right instinct (educationally) when she proposes to invest more money in the primary sector but, in another way, her political instincts prevent her from even considering the question of university fees for those who can afford them. Thus, due to the political cowardice of this government, the universities are saddled with the problem of 'accessibility' while the economic means for addressing the problem are being withheld.

At the risk of prescribing harsh medicine, I would argue that university fees should be reintroduced, given the basic economic principle that what is free is not valued, and I would propose that student loans should be made available to those who wish to make an investment in their own futures. This would leave more money available for scholarships to be awarded to those who are genuinely underprivileged, and who have both the desire and talent to profit from a university education. In fact, such a policy would promote greater access for those segments of society that traditionally have been under-represented in third-level education. As the situation now stands, middle-class parents who could easily afford to pay university fees are investing that money

in grind-schools so that their children can get the points for the more sought-after (and more expensive) university places in medicine and law. Thus, in educational terms, the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer, since the underprivileged have decreasing rates of access to third-level education partly because there is no financial incentive for them to postpone taking up lower-paid jobs. Of course, the problem of accessibility is much more complex than this, involving intangible factors like culture capital, as well as the more tangible factors like household income and the median school-leaving age of underprivileged students. Indeed, we could also address the problem by invoking the notion of a tradition of learning and culture which is passed on within certain families, and which is typical of certain socio-economic classes but not of others.

Positive Notion of Tradition

Perhaps for some people my invocation of 'tradition' will already have raised red flags because such appeals are associated with 'conservatives' who wish to resist change and development. There is nothing quite so shallow as the type of thinking that simply equates tradition with lack of cultural progress and even with reactionary politics. But this common view is based on a misunderstanding of what constitutes tradition, especially the tradition of the universities within western culture. Any appeal to tradition, which treats it as if it were something fixed and sacred, fails to take account of the dynamic character of tradition (as the Latin '*traditio*' suggests) as an ongoing process of cultural development and renewal. For tradition involves not only the 'handing down' of the wisdom of the tribe from one generation to another but also the active reinterpretation of that heritage by each new generation which inherits the tradition.

I am also sceptical about the modern tendency to dismiss tradition as an oppressive force *within* society, or as being part of an ideology of the powerful, or as an artificial construction that masks vested interests in society. All of these views are more or less inspired by the Enlightenment ideal of *sapere aude*, as it was expressed by Kant, which put its faith in the capacity of human reason to liberate the human spirit from the evils of ignorance and oppression, masquerading as tradition. This is the Enlightenment drama of liberation which has played itself out over the past three centuries in Western societies, and in which a sub-plot has been the gradual freeing of the universities from medieval scholasticism, concomitant with the rise of the modern sciences.

From this historical perspective, however, I want to argue that it is crucial for academic freedom that the university itself should not become the prisoner of any ideology which tries to close down debate about fundamental ideals, including the purpose and function of the university itself. For instance, I would suggest that such a danger arises out of the two current mantras about the 'accessibility' of the university to the socially disadvantaged and also the 'relevance' of the university to economic development. On a more constructive note, however, I claim that the task of mastering a discipline is central to any university education, even where interdisciplinary studies are being actively pursued. In fact, without a proper grounding in the traditional disciplines, the current emphasis on inter-disciplinary work runs the risk of being superficial. One can only begin to understand the exciting questions that arise at the boundaries between disciplines when one has gained a certain mastery of these disciplines, which also involves self-mastery. Thus, if one responds honestly to the

demands of a discipline, this may help one to cultivate certain virtues of character, such as humility in the face of tradition, patience in pursuing research, modesty in presenting one's results, and willingness to accept criticism. The capacity for self-criticism is an essential part of the character of a good researcher at the university level, and humility is promoted by the fact that research is routinely subjected to peer review within every discipline and sub-discipline. Indeed, if one tries to avoid the humbling experience of having one's research evaluated by peers, then one will fail to meet the best international standards, since that is how they are established within every recognized field.

Rather than providing an ego-trip for the expert or professor, the demands of a discipline require complete humility in the face of the truth—not a revealed truth that panders to priestly pride but rather the intelligibility of the real world that always exceeds the capacity of any individual to comprehend it. In the face of such humbling truth, what is required is the Socratic wisdom to realize what we do not know, and this is the very antithesis to the cult of expertise currently being promoted as an ideal for the universities. Such genuine humility of the scientist or scholar is incompatible with the public-relations boosterism which is one of the chief products of the Celtic Tiger, if one is to judge by our politicians who try to claim credit for our economic success. The stark truth is that our success is largely due to multinational companies who have relocated in Ireland because of its low-tax regime and because it provides a friendly English-speaking base for invading the European market.³ Our continued success will depend on the availability of a properly educated workforce but that is now under threat from under-investment in our education system, which will undermine our competitiveness in science and technology. It appears that the government is finally waking up to the reality of this threat but only after the American ambassador has bluntly spelled it out.

Let me now briefly explore the traditional task of mastering a discipline by drawing on philosophy, which is the discipline I know best. Any discipline involves more than learning the subject-matter thoroughly because it also requires us to internalize the practices and habits that give rise to excellence in the relevant field. Perhaps the analogy with mastering the game of chess might be useful for thinking about the skills and virtues required for becoming a master of any academic discipline. Learning the rules of the game itself might be compared to the preliminary years of study when one becomes acquainted with any field such as philosophy; learning its characteristic approach to inquiry, discovering the type of questions or problems that belong to that subject. After that preliminary stage, which we might compare to an undergraduate education in philosophy, anyone who wants to achieve mastery should spend a considerable time as an apprentice to one or more genuine masters in the field, just as any aspiring chess-player must learn the game thoroughly from the grandmasters of the game by studying and internalizing their winning strategies. Of course, I don't want to suggest that philosophy (or any other discipline) is a competitive game whose principal purpose is to devise successful strategies for winning arguments, though some sophistic practitioners of the discipline often give that impression to outsiders. By contrast, I see the discipline more as a cooperative inquiry into fundamental and open questions, which is best conducted along the lines of a Platonic dialogue. However, just as for the practice of chess, there are internal standards of excellence within the practice of philosophy which can be cultivated by diligent students who follow the best exemplars within the field. These are the grandmasters of philosophy

who are acknowledged either by their contemporaries or by posterity as the leading exponents of the art of doing philosophy in any era. Such years of apprenticeship may be seen to correspond roughly to the years of graduate school in philosophy and to some subsequent years as a fledgling teacher of philosophy. It is through long years of intensive and diligent study that one becomes a professional within any field and achieves recognition as such by one's peers, who are the best judges of scientific standards.

In summary, we can discern by means of this analogy at least two of the principal functions of the university within society. First, to produce well educated undergraduates who reach a general level of proficiency in their chosen field(s) of study such that they deserve the recognition given to them in the granting of a degree by the university. As a result, they have a sufficient mastery of their subjects to enable them to make a useful contribution to society either as accountants, civil servants, doctors, lawyers, or teachers. Secondly, the university also reproduces itself, as it were, by selecting and training the next generation of researchers in the disciplines which are being practiced within it. These are typically selected from among the best and brightest students in each discipline who show the intellectual aptitude and character that is required for becoming specialists. Thus begins the years of apprenticeship mentioned earlier, which eventually produce another professional within the field.

Given this restatement of the traditional disciplinary approach, one might wonder about the possibility of interdisciplinary study and its place within a modern university. Such disciplines as philosophy and classical studies are already interdisciplinary in a very real sense. For instance, it is not possible to engage in philosophical activity today without considerable knowledge of related disciplines within the human and social sciences, like history, anthropology, politics and psychology. One reason for this is that philosophy draws on such disciplines for its knowledge of the human world out of which arise some of the most interesting and challenging philosophical problems of any era. In fact, it is noteworthy that the most difficult problems tend to arise at the boundaries between disciplines and usually cannot be resolved in any satisfactory way without drawing on the latest research within each discipline. For instance, contemporary philosophy of mind is engaged with problems which involve cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and computer science as essential resources for their elaboration and resolution. Another reason why philosophy is interdisciplinary in character is that it typically involves second-order reflection upon a variety of first-order fields.

Academic Freedom and its Importance for an Open Society

The Irish Universities Act of 1997 contains a statement on academic freedom, but the NUI Maynooth statutes do not contain any explicit procedures for the defence of such freedom within the university. I think that this is a serious oversight, in light of the history of this institution and given the external threats to academic freedom. Among the principal threats, I would identify the following as most important. First, the increasing control over the universities being exercised by government agencies like the HEA, which sets goals and priorities, as well as controlling the flow of funds.⁴ Under the guise of 'accountability', the government has systematically limited the range of choices as to what research will be undertaken (by controlling research funding) and also what is taught at the universities. The explicit demand being made

is for socially useful knowledge or for research that has direct application either to society or to industry. Second, such a pragmatic attitude towards third-level education is reinforced by the neo-liberal ideology of the free market, which views universities as producers of just another commodity within the knowledge economy. Thus a 'through-put' or factory model of education is considered to be a legitimate way of analysing the functioning of the university. Thirdly, Catholic universities in Ireland may be especially vulnerable to such pressure, due to their weak tradition of academic freedom, given that such freedom was generally seen by the Roman Catholic Church as a potential challenge to its spiritual authority and its centralized structure. By contrast, consider the robust tradition at Trinity College Dublin, which is owned and governed by its Fellows, and thereby retains its academic freedom and independence, despite being fully funded by the government.

In response to these threats, I propose the following strategies for supporting academic freedom within the Irish university sector. We academics must campaign actively for the reintroduction of fees, no matter how politically unpopular this proposal may be, since an independent source of income for the universities is essential for resisting the tight financial control now being exercised by the government. We must resist the demands for increased 'accessibility' unless the government provides additional funding for this purpose. The fact that NUJ Maynooth has received little or no financial reward for consistently exceeding the 15% target for the participation of mature students proves that the government is merely paying lip-service to a politically useful ideology, while failing to provide sufficient resources to make it a sustainable goal. The predictable result of this gap between aspiration and reality will be a collapse in academic standards for which the university faculty will be held accountable, so that there will be disillusionment all round on the part of 'consumers' and 'providers'.

On a more positive note, I believe that we academics must learn how to engage more actively with pressing social and political issues where we have some contribution to make to our own communities or to society at large. Unwittingly, we have weakened our own position by allowing ourselves to be perceived as living in ivory towers, so that it sounds like common sense for politicians to demand that our research be more 'relevant' or 'practical' when they want to promote a particular political agenda.⁵ However, we must resist the lure of populist causes and even learn how to be unpopular in our adherence to truth and integrity. In the past a good example was provided by the attempt to preserve the Viking heritage at Wood Quay, when some brave academics confronted Dublin Corporation and forced it to modify its policy of vandalizing historical sites. Today, perhaps another example might be the attempt to save the archaeological sites around the Hill of Tara.

In general, I think that the increasing influence of private corporations on university research is a mixed blessing in that it may have both positive and negative outcomes. On the positive side, private funding can stimulate very specific types of research within the universities which might not otherwise be conducted, precisely because of its pragmatic orientation. Such research can lead directly or indirectly to industrial products whose patent rights may provide valuable sources of income for the university or its faculty members. However, this commercial dimension to university research may also tend to block the free exchange of ideas and of research results, which has always been an important dimension of academic freedom. But perhaps a

more insidious result of the privatisation of the university may be the tendency of governments to reduce public funding in proportion to the increase in private funding. After all, that money could be more usefully employed elsewhere in buying votes! Thus, I would urge my academic colleagues to resist such creeping privatisation by demanding increased levels of public funding to support no-strings-attached research which has no immediate commercial or practical application. The history of European universities over the last five hundred years has shown again and again that such 'useless' research turns out to be the most significant in the long run.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to make the case for adopting a sceptical attitude towards the current dogmas of accountability and accessibility which are being espoused by the powers that be in their headlong rush to reform third-level education. I have argued that accountability involves the imposition of an inappropriate 'through-put' model on the universities which shifts responsibility for 'successful outcomes' from the students to the faculty. An indirect but entirely predictable result of such an approach is grade inflation, whereby every student is offered an honours degree, so that the university cannot be accused of graduating faulty products. With regard to greater accessibility to third-level education for underprivileged students, I have accepted that this is a worthwhile social goal but not one that the universities themselves are equipped to promote, as evidenced by the danger of a complete collapse in academic standards in order to ensure that everyone should enjoy the illusion of success. In fact, I have claimed, the government needs to adopt a new approach if it hopes to make progress towards its stated goal of increasing levels of participation in third-level education among students from the lower socio-economic classes. Instead of the current failed policy, I have proposed the reintroduction of university fees for those who can afford them, combined with a significant increase in grants and scholarships for underprivileged students who have the talent and desire to avail of a university education. Of course, such a policy would require a level of political courage which is rare among populist politicians who are intent on bribing the middle classes with their own money in the run-up to a general election.

But if my proposals are likely to suffer the same neglect as the National Spatial Strategy, the sceptical reader might wonder about the whole point of making them in the first place. Are we academics condemned to be routinely ignored by society at large, which is in thrall to the movers and shakers, and the politicians who do their bidding? Even if one is tempted to accept this melancholy scenario, I believe that we would be failing in our duty if we did not warn about the dangers for university education contained in the current government policy. If the present trends in third-level education continue, we will not realize the stated goal of creating world-class universities but rather we will end up with remedial universities which carefully disguise their low standards through grade inflation. In effect, we will have the educational equivalent of the special Olympics in which no student will be left without an honours degree, but we shall not fool our international rivals about our inability to compete. Given the cosy consensus governing much of our public discourse, my Cassandra-like warnings may seem unhelpful at best and downright contrary, at worst. But this essay is itself an exercise in academic freedom,⁶ and I would hope that readers will not be tempted to shoot the messenger. I know that many people will resent what I have to say but I prefer the hard edge of truth to the

comforting fluff of public-relations propaganda. We should always beware of placing too much faith in our own manifestos.

¹ See Skipper, R.B., 'Aliteracy in the Philosophy Classroom', *Teaching Philosophy* 28:3 (2005), pp. 261-276.

² I am reliably informed by people who have marked Leaving Certificate examination scripts that the Department of Education protocol for examiners favours predictable and pat answers that follow the standard formulae over creative and unpredictable answers, even though the latter may reflect a better grasp of the material involved.

³ From the Irish Exchequer figures for 2005, it appears that over one third of direct taxation is accounted for by corporation tax, which perhaps reflects the powerful presence of the multinational corporations within the Irish economy.

⁴ Codd, J. A., 'Academic Freedom and the Commodification of Knowledge in the Modern University', *Learning for Democracy* 1.1 (2005), pp. 69-87.

⁵ But the cynical disregard of the National Spatial Plan by the present government, when 'planning' the decentralization of the Civil Service, reveals the utter hypocrisy of politicians who chant the mantra of 'relevance' with regard to third-level research.

⁶ G. C. Moodie ('On Justifying the Different Claims to Academic Freedom', *Minerva* 34 (1996), pp. 129-50) has given a consequentialist justification of academic freedom, according to which 'substantially unconstrained criticism and debate, based where possible upon experimental and empirical evidence, encourage the formulation of new ideas and are necessary for the testing of all claims to knowledge and all pronouncements upon matters where knowledge is unattainable. This freedom is justified by its results: knowledge and the refutation of error' (p. 139).