Science or Science Fiction? The application of scenario techniques to the study of possible futures for learners in higher education

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Introduction

"You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us,' Scrooge pursued. 'Is that so, Spirit? 'The upper portion of the garment was contracted for an instant in its folds, as if the Spirit had inclined its head. That was the only answer he received"

Dickens (1986 p. 74)

Context

➢ The urge to reflect anew on the future of Irish higher education, specifically the IoT sector, is highlighted by ongoing strategic planning by the HEA and the individual IoTs.

➢ In addition there is an increasing amount of literature on this subject (Avila and Léger, 2005; Enders, 2005; Fink and Marr, 2005)

➢ as well as new policy papers on future directions for the IoT sector (OECD, 2004; Government of Ireland, 2005, 2006, 2007; HEA 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2006a; 2006b; 2007a; 2007b).

Background

➢ The higher education system in Ireland comprises the university sector, the IoTs and the colleges of education; all are substantially state funded.

➢ The seven universities are autonomous and self-governing.

➢ The IoTs, in emergence since 1971, differ from the universities in that they are centrally managed by the Department of Education and Science, but since 1999 the IoTs have through *Delegated Authority* become self awarding bodies.

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Methodology

a six stage modified scenario development design was used

1. a policy and literature review (drivers and realms)

2. Delphi panel

3. Questionnaire based on sixty scenario statements

4. Data analysis

5. Seminar

6. Scenario writing

Scenario 1 Access: sustaining the widening participation agenda

➢ Continued increases in numbers attending HE

➢ 2nd generation migrant workers

➢ Excess demand for places

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Scenario 2 Curriculum: utilising delegated authority

➢ Strategic alliances to create critical mass

➢ Reduction in number of science and engineering departments

➢ The end of languages

➢ Placements and GDPs

➢ Postgraduate expansion

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Scenario 3 Resources: attracting funding and staff

➤ The end of *free education*

➤ 3 way split in contract: teaching, academic enterprise and research.

➤ Large scale rather than small scale

➤ End of funded masters programmes

➤ Increased competition for jobs

Scenario 4 Management: competition or collaboration?

➢ Delegated authority = competition

➢ Funding = collaboration

➢ University status

Scenario 5 the external environment: meeting social and economic needs

➤ Academic inflation

➤ Post boom economy

➤ Knowledge economy, the needs of FDI

Conclusion

➢ The scenarios presented in this paper provide an account of the probable/possible course of change.

➢ The changes presented may not happen. This may be because of an external shock, the action/inaction of staff, stakeholders or students, a shift in government thinking either in Ireland or at a European level.

➢ However, the aim of this study is to stimulate conversation and aid the development of appropriate strategic responses.

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