

EUA
Autonomy Scorecard
Ireland
2014 update

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Introduction

The European University Association (EUA) released in 2011 the first “University autonomy scorecard”, benchmarking the level of autonomy that universities operate with across Europe. This was achieved through the development of a unique methodology, including a series of indicators that were scored and weighted. In this context, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) provided data for the Irish universities in 2010.

Following several developments in the field of governance of higher education, IUA sent a request to EUA to complete a new collection round of Irish data with a view to releasing an updated version of the Autonomy Scorecard for Ireland. IUA filled in a revised questionnaire during Summer 2014, which was subsequently analysed by EUA and complemented by an interview with IUA in September 2014. This report outlines the evolution reported by IUA for the period 2010-2014 as well as general trends in the field of governance and autonomy in Ireland.

The 2014 update helped clarify some elements that relate to the specificity of the situation in the Irish higher education sector since the country was hit by the economic crisis. Indeed, since 2009-2010 there has been a clear gap between the regular legal framework in which universities operate and the setting up of apparently temporary economic policies, resulting in a reduction in university autonomy. In 2014 it appears that these constraints have not disappeared and have effectively set the frame for a large part of universities’ activities over a longer period. Therefore the 2010 data has been updated to take better account of those constraints which already existed then but have either been reinforced or have to be considered in a different light because of their long-term effect.

The original scorecard methodology

The scoring system used by the University Autonomy Scorecard is based on deductions. Each restriction on university autonomy is assigned a deduction value based on how restrictive a particular rule or regulation is seen to be. A score of 100% indicates full institutional autonomy; a score of 0% means that an issue is entirely regulated by an external authority. In many cases, the law grants universities a limited amount of autonomy or prescribes negotiations between universities and the government. For instance, a system in which universities may determine tuition fees under a ceiling set by an external authority receives a score of 60% for that indicator.

The University Autonomy Scorecard uses weighted scores. The weighting factors are based on a survey conducted among EUA’s member National Rectors’ Conferences and thus reflect the views of the university sector in Europe. The results of the survey were translated into a numerical system, which evaluates the relative importance of the indicators within each of the autonomy dimensions.

For further information on the development of the scoring methodology and the weighting system, please refer to the full report: [University Autonomy in Europe II - The Scorecard](#).

The new data for 2014 have been used to update the scoring with the original method. It is important to note though that the scoring is accompanied by a more qualitative assessment of the development since the original data analysis.

This report analyses the four dimensions of the EUA Autonomy Scorecard and some general trends that have been observed. It starts with staffing and financial autonomy as the measures in these dimensions have the greatest impact on universities, before looking at organisational and academic autonomy. The last chapter shows the outcomes of the updated scoring (in percentage) and gives a short description of the main reasons for change.

Staffing autonomy

Evolutions detected through the Autonomy Scorecard in the field of university governance and autonomy in Ireland relate to a large extent to staffing matters. While a certain number of the restrictions were already in place in 2010, notably through the Employment Control Framework, there is still a downward evolution in this particular area of university autonomy. This is due to the fact that then temporary measures have been prolonged and reinforced, contributing to the creation of a new de facto framework for the universities' staffing policies. The steep decline in Ireland's score in staffing autonomy, from 82% (in the top cluster on the European scorecard for staffing autonomy) to 43% ("medium low" cluster), largely reflects this reality.

The moratorium on recruitment and, by extension, on promotions, leaves no room for manoeuvre to universities, at least as far as publicly-funded staff are concerned. Universities only retain autonomy as regards staff that are entirely funded from other sources (such as international student fees or philanthropic income) which make up a relatively small proportion of total staff at institutions.

In addition to the recruitment freeze, universities have to meet annual targets for headcount reduction (a further 1% reduction is required in 2014).

Also affecting Ireland's score in this area is the ever stricter state control over staff salaries. While in principle the Irish model resembles that of others – with salary bands prescribed at national level per broad staff category –, additional restrictions have effectively reduced the autonomy of universities in this important matter. Agreements concluded between the government and the trade unions include the use of a reduced pay scale for new entrants, who can be appointed at entry-level grade only, as well as revised career-average pension scheme. Existing staff have also undergone significant pay cuts, which have been decided at state level and thus bypassed the universities themselves. Moreover, concerns were raised about upcoming legislation which could give more control to the Ministry over staff numbers in universities.

Staffing autonomy is also reduced through collective agreements related to staff dismissal that were concluded during this period. It is important to note that universities were not a party to these agreements nor consulted during the negotiation process. The agreements concluded between the State Department of Public Expenditure and the trade unions make it mandatory for universities to provide upon dismissal (in the case of voluntary redundancy or expiration of a fixed term contract) payments of between two and three weeks of salary per year of employment.

It is important to note that all the above measures not only affect the universities' autonomy to decide over "pure" staffing matters; they also have an indirect impact on other aspects, in particular in areas referred to in EUA's Autonomy Scorecard as belonging to organisational autonomy. An example is how universities decide on their own academic structures by setting up faculties, schools, etc. While technically this is the exclusive competence of the university, the currently stricter controls on staff remuneration, which apply at the level of individual positions, makes it difficult to create executive positions for academic sub-units (for instance, heads of school), and therefore may impede altogether the setting up of these units.

Staffing regulations also have an impact on legal entities created by the universities (such as subsidiaries). Currently there is no framework governing the employment of university staff in such entities, effectively making dual employment impossible. It would be important, however, that staff employed at universities may also be remunerated for additional activities to foster more entrepreneurial attitudes. EUA understands that the university sector has submitted a proposal for regulating this matter to the Ministry but that the issue is still pending.

In the meantime this creates a strong barrier to greater entrepreneurialism in universities, even though the state precisely encourages universities to adopt such behaviours and diversify income.

Financial autonomy

Irish universities have a slightly lower score in the updated scorecard in relation to **financial autonomy** because of the expansion of the "top-slicing" practice. Previously, the State removed a percentage from the Higher Education budget ("top-slicing") and subsequently allocated these funds through targeted funding schemes for particular purposes, such as widening access for disadvantaged socio-economic groups. This portion of the budget has now grown to an overall level of about 10% and is redistributed through a larger array of specific measures, including competitive processes. An example is the recent national IT action plan, which allocates funds (and therefore student places) to universities through a call for proposals. This evolution is reflected by a minor change in the scoring (which leads to a change from 66% to 63% in financial autonomy). While this keeps Ireland in the second, "medium high" cluster (from 80% to 61%), further expansion of the top-slicing practice would push Ireland into the third, "medium low" cluster of the financial autonomy scorecard (from 60% to 41%). This particular trend also affects autonomy in academic matters as the number of student places is then partly determined by these initiatives.

Beyond the scoring, this evolution reveals a gradual change of nature in public funding, whereby block grants are reduced at the margin and targeted funding mechanisms become more and more frequent. While this trend falls outside of the scope of the indicators used in the Autonomy Scorecard, EUA nevertheless expresses its concern about this further restriction of university autonomy. Targeted funding schemes in particular should be kept to a minimum if no additional budget is provided.

Organisational autonomy

The stricter state control over university staff remuneration affects universities' capacity to decide on their own academic structures. As seen above, universities may not be able to hire executives for units such as schools because this is not integrated with the regulatory framework for remuneration. This can no longer be considered a temporary measure; therefore the score of Irish universities for that aspect has been correspondingly affected.

The other evolution in this field relates to barriers to the employment of university staff by university subsidiaries. The fact that the framework regulating this issue has not been adopted, although a proposal was submitted, is also reflected by the lower score.

As a result, the overall Irish score in the field of organisational autonomy falls from 81% ("high" cluster) to 73% ("medium high" cluster).

In addition, as previously mentioned, the sector raised concerns about upcoming legislation which could potentially give greater control to the Ministry over staff numbers in universities. This could have further implications on the universities' autonomy, in particular as it relates to the capacity to decide on academic structures.

Some other aspects, while they fall outside of the scoring mechanisms of the scorecard, are worth mentioning, as they are indicative of further implications on governance. The composition of university governing bodies has been a bone of contention in the sense that the sector has expressed the wish to move away from traditionally large, group representation based bodies. This would enable universities to select the right expertise at strategic level. This is consistent with the evolution observed elsewhere in Europe, and notably in the United Kingdom or in Northern European countries such as Denmark, Estonia and Finland, which top the organisational autonomy scorecard. Steps in that direction that were taken as part of the new regulatory framework for the Irish Institutes of Technology should also be considered for the wider university sector.

Academic autonomy

Ireland leads the 2011 scorecard on academic autonomy, as universities can freely decide on all aspects measured in this dimension. One significant development is that "Quality and Qualifications Ireland", a body created in 2012 out of the merger of the previously existing quality bodies, is now required to review and validate universities' processes through institutional audits. This is seen as a way to enhance quality assurance processes and minimise bureaucratic costs. However, this does not affect the scoring in 2014 as there was no substantial change made in this field.

However, this should not hide other trends that cannot be adequately measured via the scorecard methodology. The main concern of the sector as regards academic autonomy relates to the expansion of the top-slicing practice referred to above. As funds are removed from the block grants and re-injected in the sector via targeted and often competitive schemes, so are student places.

National action plans focusing on some disciplines (for instance IT training) redistribute student places to universities via the competitive reallocation of funds. It should be noted that until now this has involved only a fraction of the overall student population. Nevertheless, it is useful to flag the issue at this stage and warn against a further extension of the top-slicing practice from the general budget.

General trends

This 2014 update of the Autonomy Scorecard for Ireland reveals a decline of university autonomy, in particular in staffing matters. In some areas it is quite subtle and can only be captured partially by the scorecard metrics. It appears clearly though that there is an entrenchment phenomenon, with governmental control over human resources and finances having been consolidated over the period considered. The measures that the government took at the beginning of the economic crisis have neither been halted nor reversed.

In addition, Irish universities are also requested to enter into performance agreements with the Ministry (“performance compacts”), while targeted funding schemes also grow as a proportion of the block grant. Research activity is also being steered through a research prioritisation exercise. This is all the more paradoxical as public funding has been declining over the same period, representing a lower share of universities’ income and activities.

The financial situation of the Irish university sector causes particular worry. EUA’s Public Funding Observatory¹ reveals that public funding delivered to Irish higher education institutions has been cut by over 35% between 2008 and 2014 (taking into account the inflation over the period), which includes an almost 10% cut between 2013 and 2014, showing therefore no pause or upwards correction in this trend (see table below).

At the same time student numbers have increased by nearly 15%. This configuration places Ireland at the “periphery” of Europe in terms of funding, along with countries such as Italy, Lithuania, or England. In England however, increased tuition fees are meant to compensate the significant cuts made to the higher education budget, which is not the case in Ireland, where universities are not left with any significant margin for manoeuvre.

In the meantime, countries that Ireland often compares itself to in the field of higher education and research have maintained or stepped up investment. Germany, Norway and Sweden have all increased the level of public funding delivered to higher education institutions by more than 20%. This raises the question of the longer-term competitiveness of the Irish higher education system within the European Higher Education Area and internationally. There is a legitimate concern that the sector will emerge from the crisis fundamentally changed, with radically different student-staff ratios and funding base.

¹ EUA’s Public Funding Observatory: <http://www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/governance-autonomy-and-funding/public-funding-observatory-tool.aspx>

It will be important that public authorities fully engage in a constructive dialogue with the university sector to discuss adequate measures to restore and further enhance universities' autonomy as well as provide adequate, sustainable funding, in an effort to promote the sector's performance and competitiveness.

Evolution of public funding to higher education institutions between 2008 and 2014

Evolution public funding 2008-2014 ¹	Country/system	
	change adjusted for inflation (inflation calculated including provisional 2014 rate)	Nominal change (not adjusted for inflation)
Increase superior to 40%		Iceland
Between 20% and 40% increase	Germany ² , Norway, Sweden	Austria, Belgium (fr), Germany ² , Norway, Poland, Serbia, Sweden
Between 10% and 20% increase	Austria, Belgium (fr)	Belgium (nl) ² , Netherlands
Between 5% and 10% increase	Poland	Croatia, Portugal
Between 1% and 5% increase	Belgium (nl) ²	Slovenia
Between -1% and +1%	Iceland, Netherlands, Portugal	Slovakia
Between 1% and 5% decrease		
Between 5% and 10% decrease	Croatia, Slovenia	Czech Republic, Spain
Between 10% and 20% decrease	Czech Republic, Serbia ³ , Slovakia, Spain	Italy
Between 20% and 40% decrease	Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, England	Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, England
Decrease superior to 40%	Greece, Hungary	Greece

² in cases where 2014 data was not available, the trend is calculated on the period 2008-2013

³ Eurostat inflation data is unavailable, so World Bank data has been used (up to 2013).

Autonomy scorecard summary - Ireland

Autonomy dimension	Original scorecard 2012	Updated version	Change	Main reason
Organisational autonomy	81% "high" cluster	73% "medium high" cluster	-8%	Change due to further deduction on capacity to decide on academic structures and further deduction on capacity to create legal entities (because of impossibility to employ university staff in subsidiaries)
Financial autonomy	66% "medium high" cluster	63% "medium high cluster"	-3%	Higher deduction to reflect increase in top-slicing.
Academic autonomy	100% "high" cluster	100% "high" cluster	0%	
Staffing autonomy	82% "high" cluster	43% "medium low" cluster	-39%	Increased deductions on recruitment, salaries and promotions; Change in collective agreements on dismissal.

EUA's University Autonomy Tool is available online:

<http://www.university-autonomy.eu/>

The report: *University Autonomy in Europe II – The Scorecard* is also available from the link above.

EUA welcomes feedback on the report at the following address: autonomy@eua.be

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