

Interim Statement to the Interdepartmental Working Group on the Development and Expansion of the Internationalisation of Irish Education Services

General

C.H.I.U. considers the issue of internationalisation of education services to be a key strategic issue for the universities and for government higher education policy generally. It is strongly of the view that the promotion of Ireland as a centre of excellence in higher education for international students must be considered as integral to overall national higher education policy and the strategic plans and policies of the university sector and of individual institutions. This issue is a key aspect of international competitiveness which is one of the specific areas the OECD Review of Higher Education has been asked to consider and report on.

While projections indicate a large growth in the global demand for international higher education, Ireland cannot be complacent about its attractiveness as a destination for students. The competition for the recruitment of foreign students is increasing. English speaking countries like the UK, Australia and New Zealand market themselves aggressively to recruit foreign students and a number of European countries are now providing and marketing their countries through English in order to attract greater numbers of foreign students. Ireland will have to match the professionalism of the marketing and recruitment campaigns of its competitor countries, ensure the quality of its educational services and overcome competitive disadvantages such as the high cost of living if it is to increase significantly the recruitment of quality foreign third level students.

Universities key to strategy for development and expansion of international education services

It is the experience of countries that are successful in the international students market that universities are key players in the marketing of their education services. Any strategy that does not take full account of this reality is unlikely to sustain success.

This realisation must have informed the establishment of the Working Group as indicated in the Background Note provided by the Department of Education and Science where it states that *“the group will focus primarily on attracting overseas students to the Irish third-level sector”*

HEA Fitzpatrick's Study

Arising from the C.H.I.U. strategic planning process, C.H.I.U. and the HEA identified the question of expanding the enrolment of foreign students by universities as one of the major challenges facing the university sector. Following consultations with the universities the HEA undertook to commission consultants to prepare a report on the issue. C.H.I.U. and the universities cooperated fully with Fitzpatrick Associates, the consultants engaged by the HEA, and we understand the report from the consultants is due to be published shortly. C.H.I.U. was only recently provided with a confidential copy of the report and is obviously not in a position to make a considered response to the report on behalf of the universities.

Universities consider that, as the Fitzpatrick's study has examined and made recommendations on many of the issues which the Interdepartmental Group has been asked to consider, and on which it has sought submissions, universities should be given a realistic opportunity to consider the report and present their views to the Interdepartmental Group. This is impossible before 15 September the deadline set by the Group for receipt of submissions.

C.H.I.U. sees little value in the universities restating to the Interdepartmental Group views which they would already have communicated to the HEA consultants. These already have been considered and evaluated by the consultants. C.H.I.U. assumes that in relation to the internationalisation of higher education services the Interdepartmental Group would naturally use the HEA report as a reference point for its considerations.

In this regard C.H.I.U. would wish on behalf of the universities to provide views on the conclusions and recommendations of the HEA consultants and to be afforded adequate time for the universities to consider the HEA report fully and to formulate views thereon. C.H.I.U. wishes in the meantime to provide some general views on a number of issues.

Partnership Process

The fact that the universities must be key instruments in implementing any policy initiative to expand the recruitment of third level foreign students argues strongly for involving them intimately in the formulation of the relevant policies. Policy must be informed by the experiences and insights of those who have operated in what is a highly complex business. In this regard C.H.I.U. is concerned that a partnership approach with the universities has not been adopted to the development of the government's initiative on the internationalisation of third level education. Any drive to expand the recruitment of foreign higher education students will rely heavily on the expertise, initiative, creativity and commitment of the universities. It would appear prudent that this reality be recognised by making meaningful provision for the active engagement of the universities in the formulation of relevant policy. C.H.I.U. would be happy to facilitate such engagement.

Government Policy

In the wording of the advertisement placed by the Department of Education and Science in the national newspapers on 1 August, 2003 requesting submissions to the Interdepartmental Group C.H.I.U. notes the reference to "*the intention to promote and expand the internationalisation of education services*". This reference would seem to suggest a policy position by government that universities in Ireland should increase their enrolment of foreign students.

The Background Note goes further in explaining as a reason for the government deciding to establish the Working Group “*that there is clearly a need for urgent action to ensure that Ireland plays a more significant role and achieves a much greater share of the overseas student market*”.

However, it is not clear whether a firm decision has been taken by government to promote and expand the internationalisation of education services. Such a decision would be a necessary first step in developing the coherent national policy that will be required in order to develop international education services successfully in what is a highly competitive market.

C.H.I.U. accordingly advocates that the government should make a clear and positive statement outlining the reasons why Ireland must be actively involved in international education. These would address the reasons advanced in section 7.31 of the Fitzpatrick Report as well as these covered under the heading “Advantages for Ireland” in the Background Note and should be formulated in partnership with the key providers.

Sound Basis for Policy

C.H.I.U. would enter a strong caveat against adopting the questionable notion of relying on expected “*spare capacity in colleges in the years ahead*” as a basis for expanding the recruitment of overseas students. Best advice available to C.H.I.U. from institutions and professional agencies with successful track records in expanding international student recruitment is that development of the international student markets cannot be successfully founded on the premise of merely filling surplus capacity. To succeed in developing any overseas market recognised principles of good trading practice must be observed. Simply stated they are that the market has to be cultivated with a guaranteed consistent supply of top quality products and that no business will sustain a foreign market by a hit-and-miss, irregular supply of surplus products produced essentially for the domestic market. This means that a thoroughly professional business-like approach to the provision of quality courses and services for foreign students and to developing and sustaining overseas student markets is vital to achieving and maintaining expanded markets. A long term commitment to the allocation and dedication of significant financial, manpower and infrastructure resources will be required to develop Irish Universities as a top quality internationally competitive destination for overseas students.

Experience also teaches that success is best achieved where universities have the freedom to act in the market enabled by a supportive national policy framework which streamlines and co-ordinates relevant state support services to facilitate and fast-track recruitment and provides education promotion services in targeted countries.

Promoting Ireland as a centre of educational excellence for international students

Universities must be centres of excellence for domestic as well as international students. This means taking the necessary measures to achieve the government stated “*strategic objective of placing its higher education system in the top rank of the OECD in terms of both quality and levels of participation*”. This will require substantially increased investment in universities commencing with a reversal of the cuts imposed on universities in 2003. As the following two facts clearly illustrate we have a long way to go to catch up on our competitors:

- Ireland is ranked 21st out of 27 OECD countries in terms of spend per HE student relative to GDP.

- Ireland's universities have higher student teacher ratios higher than those in most OECD countries -12th out of 14 countries

The comparatively low level of resources available to Irish universities results in lesser capacity to meet the particular tuition, health care, pastoral and residential needs of international students than that of our competitors. Irish universities are already skating on thin ice in marketing places for foreign students as students recruited soon find that the facilities and services available do not measure up to their reasonable expectations

Quality Brand

The Universities Act 1997 provides the statutory basis for quality assurance in the universities. The quality assurance procedures provided for cover all educational and support services for all students. It would be invidious and unacceptable to domestic students if "higher" standards were to be set or required for foreign students. Currently the implementation of improvements recommended by quality assurance evaluations are subject to resource constraints. Income earned from greater numbers of foreign students could undoubtedly help to fund desirable improvements in educational and other services.

C.H.I.U. could not support a separate quality system or procedures designed specifically for foreign students.

Universities are aware of concerns expressed by foreign diplomats about the integrity and quality of courses and services provided for international students by agencies operating in the private sector. They appear to be largely unregulated and are damaging the image of Irish education abroad. The accreditation of such agencies, their courses and their ongoing quality evaluation should be assigned to appropriate state agencies such as HETAC or FETAC.

A Single Agency

There is clearly a need for better co-ordination between different areas of government that impact on the recruitment of foreign students. In this regard the establishment of the Working Group is seen as a positive development. From a universities' point of view government can best be of assistance by concentrating on eliminating the barriers and impediments to the recruitment of foreign students and not on the creation of new structures. In this regard the universities are likely to have serious concerns about the proposal for the establishment of a "Strategy Board" recommended in the HEA report.

While there is clearly a need for coordination in creating awareness of Ireland and Irish education in targeted countries marketing will involve promoting a diverse range of clearly distinctive education products extending from short courses for teaching English as a foreign language to post-doctoral studies. Experience shows that the selling of university courses requires specialised knowledge and that the recruitment by universities of foreign students requires specific expertise and skills and must be undertaken in a highly professional manner. To this end, within any government strategy to expand recruitment of foreign students, universities must have the freedom to brand and market their courses and recruit students collectively or individually and to form consortia or engage agencies or agents. The universities are already examining the possibility of collectively engaging a marketing and recruitment agency.

In general, the support of an effectively co-ordinated grouping of relevant government agencies would be welcomed by the universities.

Financial Issues

A number of financial issues are raised in the Background Note in respect of which the following initial comment is offered -

Universities need to retain fees earned from foreign students, they are already underfunded.

As regards possible contribution by institutions to the international marketing of Irish education, the marketing of tourism is undertaken by Fáilte Ireland and trade by Enterprise Ireland, how are their budgets provided?

15 September, 2003