

Learning from the global phenomenon of "universities in crises"

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OPINION: One of the world's leading sociologists, **MICHAEL BURAWOY** suggests strategies for the survival of our universities in the face of massive financial problems

AS AN INFREQUENT visitor to Ireland I have always been impressed by the vitality and strength of Irish higher education. It has achieved much in the last 50 years, bringing State-funded higher education to some 65 per cent of school leavers, up from 5 per cent in 1960. It has been the backbone of the Celtic Tiger's amazing economic spring forward. All this is amply confirmed by the Hunt Report which underlines the need to continue this expansion.

Although written when Ireland was already in the throes of an impending crisis, Hunt has no premonition of an Irish State cast into the hands of defaulting banks or beholden to the IMF. This, however, now provides a critical context for assessing the report and its projected annual shortfall of €500 million – a sum that can only grow.

In this regard, Ireland is but a late-comer to a global pattern of "universities in crisis" whereby market fundamentalism, commonly known as neo-liberalism, turns education and research into commodities.

From a public good to be shared by all, knowledge has become a private good, monopolised by those with reserves of economic, cultural and social capital.

So, under this unexpected dispensation how might the €500 million-plus deficit be plugged? Here are a few common responses found in other countries.

The first is to turn to the private sector, for long a favourite move in the US, and now spreading across the world. If they are prestigious centres of learning and/or have good football teams, universities can seek out corporate donors, often alumni. Alternatively, under favourable patenting laws, research universities can develop "mutually beneficial" collaborations with industry.

My university recently struck a \$500 million deal with BP for research into non-fossil fuels. In some developing countries, such as Turkey or South Korea, millionaires mask their ill-gotten gains with their own universities as a form of symbolic capital.

A second strategy that has dumb-founded many Europeans is to increase revenues by introducing and/or raising student fees, whether through a deferred loan system or pay as you go. As students become consumers, so education leans in a vocational direction, which also dovetails with the interests of small business. Relatively low fees for domestic students can be compensated for by charging high fees for foreign students, and importing them in large numbers – a strategy well developed in Australia and the UK.

In this way, university education becomes a global business with global rankings, with multiple costs for all but the most successful, not least universities detached from local and even national issues.

A third strategy is to reduce costs. There are many ways of doing this: replace permanent faculty with part-time workers, or use short-term contracts. Only 30 per cent of academics in the US are tenured or in tenure track positions, down from 55 per cent in 1980. Distance learning or shortening degrees are other ways of diluting education to make it cheaper.

Whichever strategies are pursued, they all have grave consequences for the structure of higher education:

bloated administration earning salaries commensurate with corporate executives; sky-rocketing hierarchies within universities (between departments and within departments according to market value), and between universities (polarised between those standing above the fray and those mired in poverty); and, thus, inequalities of access and content that reflect and accentuate the inequalities in the wider society.

If you want to see the neoliberal university in full bloom, visit Russia where degrees cost what they earn on the market, where faculties survive with only three or four jobs, where universities rent out their premises if they bring more profit than classrooms.

There are exceptions. The Chinese and Brazilian states continue to pour resources into their universities in the belief that they fuel economic development and social justice. If nothing else, they understand that the university is essential for the knowledge economy of today and tomorrow.

There is still a choice, but it should be a public choice – subject to open debate not to anonymous decisions made in the corridors of power or by the logic of the market.

The Hunt Report is on the mark in advocating an engaged university, one that engenders, fuels and orchestrates public debate about issues we all face.

In a market-driven society, time horizons shrink, forcing us to live with the devastating consequences of short-termism. The public university might be the last bastion of forward thinking, the last bastion for a sustainable future. In Ireland, at least, where the university is still a tiger, it must not succumb to the whims of the market.

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