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Education Opinion

Irish universities risk undermining their autonomy through self-inflicted wounds

Universities are in many respects authors of their own misfortune – which threatens to become a misfortune for all of us

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The University of Limerick. The chancellor of the university is reported as having recently told staff and students that the university will be subjected to 'extreme oversight' by the Higher Education Authority due to spending concerns. Photograph: Liam Burke

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Our universities are again in the crosshairs of the media and the political system, and on the face of it for good reasons – financial deficits, overspending and apparent failures of governance and management at the institutional level.

Time, and the outcome of ongoing reviews, will give a fuller and truer picture but there is no doubting the reputational damage that current controversies relating to certain universities are causing and the risks they pose to all universities – to their autonomy, which has been a central pillar of their effectiveness, and to the strength and legitimacy of their claims for more public funding.

It is a fact worth repeating that our universities are overwhelmingly well-governed and managed, and deliver considerable benefits for individuals, society and the economy. And so they should be substantially funded by taxpayers. The view that some universities arrogantly disregard their public duties is an overblown caricature.

There is a high level of respect in the Irish administrative and political system and generally for the autonomy of universities to manage their internal affairs – a principle reconfirmed in the European Strategy for Universities (2022) as a fundamental principle of European higher education. Autonomy, however, has to be balanced by reasonable external oversight and accountability.

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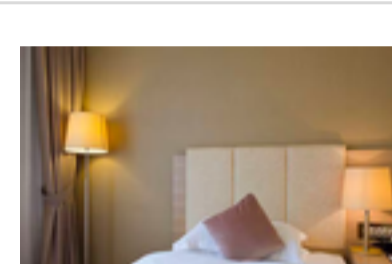
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This balance between autonomy and accountability is a very fine one, and is one easily disrupted, even by the universities themselves.

Problems in successive years relating to overpayment of academic staff, problematic property transactions and inadequate response to whistleblower allegations have shaken that balance and opened the door to those who would more tightly regulate the sector.

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When, as has happened, a university stands on its autonomy and shelters in the impotence of government to intervene in the public interest there can be only one outcome in the longer term – government, through legislation, will give to itself the necessary powers.

The Higher Education Authority Act 2021 was in many respects an inevitable response of the Government to its impotence to respond to previous controversies. The Act now provides powers to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to impose "remedial measures", including those relating to funding, in circumstances where there are significant concerns regarding the governance of an institution, its performance or its compliance with its obligations.

As a demonstration in practice of what this means the chancellor of the University of Limerick is reported as having recently told staff and students that the university will be subjected to "extreme oversight" by the HEA because of concerns surrounding the acquisition of houses for student accommodation.

The Higher Education Authority Act had from the outset the potential to dilute institutional autonomy due to the new powers of intervention by the HEA in internal university affairs. It might have been hoped that the powers would need to be used infrequently, if at all, as universities – individually and collectively – recognised the hazard they posed and would act in their own best interests. And yet, just 18 months after enactment, here we are!

There is now a clear danger that the response from the political system will be that even stronger powers are needed to regulate the universities.

We can expect robust exchanges, with some grandstanding, at the Public Accounts Committee. It is hoped that, after the inevitable fire and fury, politicians will see the value that institutional autonomy brings to the effectiveness of our universities and their reputation, national and international, and resist that all too reasonable urge to "put manners" on the universities.

But it's not enough to point fingers at politicians. Universities and their representative bodies have to understand that their status as autonomous institutions brings a heightened level of accountability to act responsibly in all circumstances, especially when it comes to the use of public funds. They need to understand, if they do not already, that the actions of one have implications for all.

This is nowhere more relevant than in the issue of funding. Successive governments have failed abysmally to put in place a sustainable and appropriate level and model of funding for higher education. But the failure of governments is all too easily, and for them conveniently, masked by misuse by universities of such public funding as is made available.

Controversies like those currently roiling the sector take the ground from under those supporting the universities' case for additional public funding.

Universities are in many respects authors of their own misfortune – which threatens to become a misfortune for all of us.

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