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Needs of the language community and sustaining demand for Irish-medium university education

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Abstract

The continuous development of both Irish itself and the linguistic skills of its speakers are essential for the wellbeing of the language community. Because of the unavoidable power of English in every Irish-speaker's life, language development is a conscious, personal action no matter how one first acquires one's Irish. Because of this, the continuing use of Irish as a community language depends on individual attitudes and motivations. Universities play an important role in language development and in promoting its value as a powerful communication tool and medium of education. The language community in turn needs graduates who have high level competency in the language as well as a wide variety of other skills. Of the large numbers who claim to be able to speak Irish, only a small percentage would be able to follow a full third-level course through the language. Indeed, for many Gaeltacht Irish speakers and those who have come through the Irish-medium schooling system, reading and writing easily and accurately is a challenge. As we are discussing Irish-medium third level rather than Irish-language studies at third level, we are dealing with the requirements

of the whole community. To this end Irish in the second level and its status in the community need to be developed as well as at university level, and for mutual benefit.

In this paper, I will focus on the role of universities in the community, and on some of the difficulties involved in trying to attract students to courses taught through the medium of Irish, as well as those involved in recruiting staff to provide that education.

University education and the community

Let us begin by addressing the very nature of universities. We are inclined to view universities as pedagogic institutions, attended by young people, the majority of whom are between the ages of 17 and 22, where they study within the framework of taught, academic courses. This interpretation of university education is inherent in the State bureaucracy, as, unlike the situation in other European countries, Irish universities receive the majority of their annual funding from the State according to the number of students in attendance, rather than according to their role in society and in research. This illustrates the perception within the State structures, and the politicians who devise them, of the role of the universities. Frankly, a lot of mystery and secrecy surrounds the allocation of funds by the State to third-level institutions, which leads one to conclude that not all students are considered to be of equal value by the Higher Education Authority. Nonetheless, the impact of university education and of universities is much broader than the third-level education which they provide.

Universities are a driving force in Irish life. It is in universities that research is conducted on matters social, sociological, economic, artistic, and, of course, in the sciences, such as engineering and information technology, among others. They are local centres of learning, particularly here in Ireland, with national and international links. They influence all aspects of public life. Not only do graduates of our universities work in all fields and in all parts of the country and abroad, but the end results of this education and research impact on people who have never even attended a third-level institution. The public listens to news reporters in the broadcast media, for example, and are influenced by the expertise of their guests. University graduates are well represented in documentary and entertainment television programmes. It is university graduates who educate children and who control business and State organisations at both a local and national level. Although not always

discernible from the government's dealings with universities, it is recognised that universities are central in society and in national learning, and that they are essential, not only to educate the State's middle classes, but also in the constant development of the country's cultural and economic life. That, primarily, is their *raison d'être*, and the reason for the presence of so many universities in the world's developed countries.

Universities will face many problems in the future in trying to fulfil this versatile role according to the financial model of the State, and the role of the Irish language in the third-level system needs to be considered in that context. It is estimated that the number of Irish students in the 17–22 age bracket will decline in the coming years. Simultaneously, an increase in the number of mature and part-time students is anticipated, a situation which is already becoming apparent in the University of Limerick. Courses targeting this new student population are currently under development, and attempts are being made to adapt schedules, and teaching and delivery methods, to their needs. Furthermore, the university is now seeking potential students abroad, to sustain an increase in student numbers. Attempts are being made to encourage young people from North America, in particular, to undertake complete undergraduate courses in Limerick. However, we are also aware of the fact that universities in America and England are doing their utmost to attract students from this jurisdiction to their campuses. This demonstrates the additional challenge facing the universities. New results and services are being sought. Above all else, it indicates that universities are attempting to serve public life as society transforms and reshapes itself. They are not only happy to do this, but it is imperative that they do so, to preserve their institutional soul and integrity. If one accepts that the universities, and indeed, the Institutes of Technology and other third-level colleges, are willing to serve all markets for their services, and furthermore, that they endeavour to identify and develop new markets in education, one needs to seriously consider the role of Irish and Irish-medium education in this era of the information economy. Is there any certainty that there is, or will be, a demand for third-level courses through Irish, or will universities have to create this demand?

The Irish-language community and university education

The work of universities, in both teaching and research, is of essential importance to the Irish public, which is primarily an English-speaking one,

to bring added value in wealth creation and intellectual renewal. It is reasonable to say, accordingly, that this is also a need of the Irish-language community, to ensure that their language, culture, their society, and local economy, among other things, are developed to the same extent. This view is too simplistic, however, as the 'Irish-language community', which is a dispersed 'language community' or 'speech community' as opposed to a distinct ethnic group, cannot be distinguished from the larger English-language community in Ireland in an efficient and transparent way for the purpose of language planning. Even if the community were based in one place, or if an institution were physically located in one area, it is unlikely that the student numbers would be sufficiently large to be considered viable under the current higher-education funding model.

A defining characteristic of the Irish-language community which must be recognised is that it is bilingual. Its members inhabit two worlds, the world of Irish and the world of English, and they feel at ease, to a certain extent, with both languages. All Irish-speakers are also speakers of English, who, consequently, have the same educational options as do speakers of English in Ireland. The second sociolinguistic fact which must be acknowledged in regard to speakers of Irish, is that few of them are more proficient, or equally as proficient, in the writing and reading of Irish as they are in English.

I will return to the significance of that extraordinary and uncomfortable fact later on, but it is worth noting that for a majority of Irish-speakers, it is easier to pursue a university course through English than through Irish. Few have the experience or practice of working with Irish at an appropriate level, even young people who proceed to university directly from secondary schools in the Gaeltacht or from Gaelscoileanna. And why would they, when the universities, that is, the intellectual and socio-economic driving force of the country, operate almost exclusively through the medium of English in an English-speaking world? Hardly any undergraduate courses are currently available through the medium of Irish, apart from programmes relating to the Irish language itself and a handful of other courses admitting a limited number of students every year.

To be frank, academic institutions play a very small role in the daily life of the speech community in general, and their Gaelic or Irish-language aspect is even less visible, either in the Gaeltacht or outside it. Their link with their language is not evident to the community, and neither is the potential for linking higher education, language and community development. The opposite is the case in regard to English. The English language remains

'unmarked' in the eyes of the public and the State, and the central position it occupies in development goes unquestioned. To the majority of English-speakers, a 'language question' refers to any language other than English. According to that logic, Irish-medium education is superfluous, something which is not essential, but which is provided at the margins or which is of secondary concern, as used to be the case in Canada when French-medium education was being deliberated, or in regions of Spain before the arrival of democracy. Unfortunately, advocates of education through the medium of Irish will have to prove their case to English-speakers, and as was outlined above, many speakers of Irish are also included in that category.

The Irish-language speech community and students: Course types

Those who are concerned with admissions and marketing issues in universities view the public as customers or potential customers. In the terms of their own discourse, they cater for a market. If they truly believed in their product, they would be willing to invest in the creation of a market for it. If a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses through Irish were available, the programmes would have to be attractive to a bilingual community, who could choose between them and all other courses available through the medium of English. Irish-language academic programmes would have to be of the same standard as, or of a higher standard than, programmes available through English in the same field, in this country or abroad. It would be preferable, in fact, if their equivalents were not available through the medium of English. That was one of our arguments in Limerick when the Irish-medium MA in Sociolinguistics was at the design stage. Such a course is not currently available through English or through Irish in any other university in this country, and only a handful of similar postgraduate courses are offered internationally. In the case of courses offered through the medium of the Irish language, but which are not explicitly concerned with the language or its literature, it is clear that the courses themselves and those who design them must be leaders in the field, and very different from their predecessors. This need for innovation increases the challenges facing those involved in such projects, because permission and approval must be sought from university and State authorities, who tend to be conservative and hesitant about anything which deviates from long-established norms. The approval for the new postgraduate course in sociolinguistics in the University of Limerick was not unduly delayed, once external sources of funding were secured, in

particular from the Higher Education Authority's targeted initiatives scheme, but the course staff had an extra workload in having to prepare documentation in Irish, and then having to translate it all into English, to enable the various committees in the university's appraisal system to read and approve it.

There were a number of delays in publicising the course at first. The University's Academic Programme Review Committee requested that the title of the course and its constituent modules be in English. The course staff refused to provide this, as there was the risk that only the English-language translation, that is, the version considered unmarked by monolingual speakers of English, would be reproduced in University documentation. Although the stance of the assessors was nonsensical, in my opinion, because they knew what the title of the course meant from the translated documentation they had read about it, their action reflects an attitude which is prevalent in institutions which do not cater for the Irish-language community, and an attitude which is prevalent among Irish people in general, that being, that Irish is superfluous and that an English-language foundation is necessary for all courses, even those in which English will not feature. This course, as with other Irish-language courses in this country, is taught in an institution in which Irish is not central in its administration and way of thinking.

Although all lectures and tutorials are delivered in Irish, we have to use English-language texts. It would not be possible to provide comprehensive courses entirely through the medium of Irish without costly, long-term investment, particularly in human resources. The Irish-language community is not sufficiently large to fund such a scheme, and, therefore, we are entirely dependent on the goodwill of English-speakers towards the Irish language to secure the necessary resources. The most fundamental challenges facing us are to foster demand among Irish-speakers for the project, and to gain the support of the majority of the Irish public. This means having to seek funding from a large section of the population who will not want to use this excellent service. Despite the institutional difficulties involved, there is evidence that the public would be supportive of such a service. According to the three surveys that examined the attitude of Irish people towards the Irish language between 1973 and 1993, for example, approximately 70% of the those questioned agreed with the statement 'that the Government should provide All-Irish schools wherever there be a demand for them' (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliaáin 1994: 27), although the results of those surveys did not indicate a particular demand for such schools. Irish-language education activists must build on that support in a way that sways public opinion in their direction.

Types of students

Firstly, one should not restrict the pool of potential students to young people who have just completed the Leaving Certificate. Education is a lifelong process, now more than ever, and if this is the case in regard to the English language, then it is even more relevant in regard to the Irish language. The universities must create a market for these courses, based on high standards and their distinctiveness. It would, of course, be possible to attract students. It is a certainty that some Irish-speakers would like to attend courses through the medium of Irish, particularly that section of the wider public known as 'the Irish-language community.' This refers to that section of the Gaeltacht population who are fluent in Irish, and another element of the population who were either reared through Irish or who have made the conscious decision to use it as the dominant language in their personal lives. That said, this still constitutes a small community, less than 5% of the total population according to the national surveys, and their number is even less if estimated according to the daily use of Irish as recorded in the Census of 1996. It would be difficult to provide a wide range of academic courses solely to cater for that market. Were an academic programme designed that was unique and more attractive than some of the courses available through English, it is conceivable that a high percentage of the population who have Irish, but who are not members of the speech community, would also apply to those courses. This would necessitate a large investment of time and resources under a definite national plan. Prior to making such a course available, one would need to consider some of the difficulties associated with the recruitment of students, both currently and in the future.

The linguistic challenge: the standard of spoken and written Irish

Most of my own research is concentrated on the Gaeltacht, although some of the ideas I propose here result from research that was carried out with colleagues in Limerick and in Tralee on the populations of Gaelscoileanna and of conventional schools in Munster. If courses in a wide range of fields were made available in Irish universities, it would be desirable that both staff and students would have a very high standard of Irish. One would automatically insist on high standards of English in the case of English-medium courses, and one should also expect this in regard to the Irish language. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

In quantitative research carried out recently (2000–02) among Irish-speakers in the Múscraí Gaeltacht region, Co. Cork, only 57.7% of respondents felt that they did not have any difficulties in the reading of Irish (Ó hÍfearnáin: 2003). That is to say, even in the absence of testing or further investigation, more than 40% of these Irish-speakers from the Gaeltacht thought that they had difficulties in reading the language. Approximately half of young speakers, between 15 and 19 years of age, those potentially of university age according to general assumptions nowadays, considered themselves to have reading difficulties. Very few respondents read regularly in Irish, and in the qualitative interviews that were conducted during the winter of 2001–02, it was apparent that very few people write regularly in Irish and feel at ease in the medium. Local people attest to a similar situation in Corca Dhuibhne, although I do not have any accurate statistics with which to support their claim, and it is notable that these same difficulties have often been cited in other Gaeltacht areas in which I have worked in recent years. The directors of Gaeltacht *naíonraí* (Irish-medium playgroups) and primary-school principals estimate that a large percentage of children are not now proficient in Irish when they come from their homes to begin their schooling (Hickey: 1999). If these people do not engage with the written word, and if they are not surrounded by spoken language of the highest standard, then one cannot expect them to attain the standard necessary to undertake a university course in the future. This aliteracy, that is, the ability to read while not exercising it, is discernible throughout the community. It was indicated in 1993, for example, that only 1% of the Irish public regularly read books in the Irish language (Ó Riagáin & Ó Gliasáin 1994:12).

Towards a solution

Solutions can indeed be found to help raise standards. The universities of Ireland and the Irish-language intellectual presence, if they, or rather, we, can be so called, have neglected the development of Irish as a language and its role among those who speak it, in the Gaeltacht and all over the country. If Irish-speakers are not interested specifically in the study of the language and its literature, then they will have little exposure to it once they leave school. This is not the case in regard to English. Universities must take a more active role in the life of the Irish-language community, in the same way that they are almost ubiquitous in intellectual life in the English domain. Of course, this is not only a matter of instruction being available through Irish. All other aspects of university education previously alluded to must also be provided in Irish. An Irish-language intellectual presence must be visible on

television; it must be heard on radio. The qualities of confidence and inquiry must be reintroduced into the sphere of the Irish language, and it must be demonstrated that Irish admits intellectual possibilities that are not available in English. The National University of Ireland, Galway, runs some programmes along these lines, and although not adequate, other Irish universities are making some effort in this regard. Lifelong learning is the new mantra in Europe, and the education of the Irish-language community in its entirety in order to sustain the language is our concern.

Among the questions that we were asked to discuss, was 'What are the structural models which would best suit the Irish-language community, a dispersed population? In my opinion, the State, and particularly higher-education institutions, which are a part of the State and which are therefore owned by the public, have a responsibility to service the language requirements of the Irish-language community, and to improve the standard of higher education among its speakers. The Irish-language community does not have a strong grasp on reading and writing. The standard of Irish required in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations needs to be revisited. They currently provide no intellectual challenge whatsoever to students who are not absolute beginners in Irish. The programmes are of little inspiration, and the language loses respect as a result. A development programme in literacy is urgently required in the Gaeltacht, and all over the country. The research and response required are tasks for a university.

In every faculty of the University of Limerick there are people who have excellent Irish, and I am certain that this is the case in other Irish universities, but ability to speak Irish is not the same as being able to teach a subject effectively and professionally through the medium of Irish. In-service courses are essential, as is professional support in the provision of terminology and texts.

One must acknowledge the dispersed nature of expertise in the Irish language. I do not envisage the establishment of a new institution which would bring all of these academics together, not at this stage at least, as such an exercise would prove too costly. Alternatively, I propose the establishment of a National Centre for Third-Level Education through Irish. The role of this centre would be to develop a plan that would attempt to address the issues and challenges mentioned above, which are:

- to secure the role of universities in the development of the speech community, and to include Irish-medium education in the National Development Plan
- to prepare a strategy to maximise resources already available and to see what might be provided in the near future. This would be a co-ordinated effort, to avoid conflict between the various institutions involved
- to develop new academic programmes which would be made available on a modular basis. Credits could be transferred between universities, with the possibility of combining standard modules with evening modules and modules in distance learning, until all criteria to obtain the qualification in question were satisfied. This model is already operational in some courses in Limerick, for example in "Applied Languages—Europe" on which students spend Years One and Four in Limerick, and Years Two and Three in universities abroad.

This proposal would not involve much cost initially, but it calls on university staff, universities themselves and the State, to take responsibility for the status of the Irish language and for education through the medium of the Irish language, as an integral part of its development.

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