

Symposium: ‘Societal Impact of our Universities’

Queen’s University Belfast at 175: A Reflection on its Foundation and Development, 1845-2020

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The genesis of the modern University is grounded in the Medieval period. From the 11th to 13th Centuries, Universities were being founded across Southern and Western Europe, with the most widely known being University of Bologna, University of Oxford and University of Cambridge. Although Universities establishment continued across Central and Northern Europe (14th to 15th Centuries) and the Americas (16th Century) it was not until 1592 that the first University, Trinity College Dublin, was founded in Ireland. These medieval roots are still evident as universities face the challenges of the 21st century.

However, Queen’s College Belfast had more ambiguous ecclesiastical origins than these earlier medieval universities. Over 200 years later, the Act of Union (1800) and subsequent nationalist movement to bring about its repeal, most notably through the Loyal National Repeal Association, drew attention to the need to provide education for Catholics on par with that available to Protestants through Trinity College Dublin. Responding to this, the Conservative Government led by Sir Robert Peel, sought to balance rising Irish Catholic demands with British politics and the non-denominational Queen’s Colleges were founded ‘in order to supply the want, which has been long felt in Ireland of an improved academic education equally accessible to all classes of the community without religious distinction’ (Queen’s Colleges (Ireland) Act 1845, Act 8 & 9 Vict. c.66).

It was within this context that Queen’s College Belfast, from its formation in 1845 sought to position itself outside the conflict surrounding it. In a society that was deeply sectarian, however, this non-sectarianism served only to make Queen’s highly political. Cardinal Newman discouraged Northern Catholics from attending Queen’s College Belfast, while the leader of the Irish home rulers, Charles Stewart Parnell, subsequently criticised the three Queen’s Colleges for their godlessness. In 1850 The Synod of Thurles decreed that all three Queen’s Colleges should be shunned by the laity ‘as dangerous to faith and morals’.

By default, not design therefore, Queen’s found itself with an overwhelmingly Northern Irish Protestant studentship and largely local staff. Across the first 50 years of its existence Catholics amounted to only 5 per cent of the student population.

The partition of Ireland in 1921 only reinforced Queen’s University as a Protestant, Ulster-minded and locally-embedded institution. It became part of the Protestant ascendancy in the newly constituted six counties of Ulster, teaching Northern Ireland’s professional classes, meeting local needs, and servicing the reproduction of the Protestant middle class. The paradox of partition, though, was that Queen’s University became the only opportunity Northern Catholics had of obtaining university education locally. The Catholic Church thus eventually softened its position and endorsed attendance by Catholic laity.

By the end of its first century in 1949, Queen’s University was a rather small and modest institution, with dedicated staff but rather insular and inward looking, mirroring Northern Ireland as a slow, sleepy backwater.

This changed significantly with the outbreak of the civil unrest colloquially known as ‘the Troubles’ in 1968-9. The reaction of senior managers was to try to minimise the effect of the conflagration on life-as-usual in the University. Lord Ashby, Vice-Chancellor said at a graduation in 1976 that ‘universities which have corporately dabbled in politics have lost their influence and their liberties’. Sir Peter Froggatt, who became the new VC, remarked that ‘Universities who play politics can have politics played on them’. Disengagement was less risky; and universities, he said, were custodians of values not agents of change.

However, this position was completely reversed in the early 1990s coinciding with the peace process. How and why? Queen’s University was a ‘zone of civility’ during the violence that assisted in promoting the idea of peace; incidentally, this is a contribution to the peace process that has been entirely ignored. There are three bases to this claim that Queen’s was foundational to the peace.

First, the University facilitated the birth of the civil rights movement. The origins of the civil rights movement may well have lain in international developments, particularly in the USA with Black civil rights and in 1968 Paris with Left Bank students; and its immediate progenitor in Northern Ireland was undoubtedly the various civil rights groups springing up within civil society in Catholic-Nationalist areas, but it was brought to life by Queen’s. Queen’s educated the middle class Catholic students who looked to Martin Luther King and the Paris communes for inspiration. Its leaders were largely Queen’s men and women, with the exception of the Maynooth-educated John Hume.

Secondly Sir Peter Froggatt’s policy in the mid-70s to mid-80s, of intellectual engagement but institutional disengagement, facilitated world-leading research by individual staff and departments on comparative ethno-national conflict and its effects, especially in the social sciences, humanities and medicine, that garnered knowledge information but which also cultivated students’ ‘soft skills’ for learning to live together.

Thirdly, during the vice-chancellorships of Sir Gordon Beveridge and Sir George Bain between 1986 and 2004, the University’s own structures and policies began to model the new inclusive society people aspired to in Northern Ireland, through a vigorous and encompassing equality agenda that promoted fair employment, gender equality and abolished discrimination against Catholics. Conspicuously Sir George Bain was the first non-British appointment to the vice-chancellorship, hailing from Canada. Especially under his leadership, Queen’s signalled both intellectual *and* institutional engagement with the conflict and its aftermath. Bain also appointed the first non-Anglo-Irish Chancellor, Senator George J Mitchell, symbolising this shift towards total engagement.

Queen’s University is now a pluralist institution that successfully models the kind of Northern Ireland that the peace process is designed to deliver. Queen’s very successfully transformed itself as an institution. Largely as a result of Vice-Chancellor Bain’s leadership, around 60 per cent of students and 50 per cent of staff are now female. It is also one of the most socially inclusive universities, with almost 40 per cent of students coming from families with incomes in the lowest socio-economic groups. The University is an exemplar of fair employment and is committed to social justice.

It also became an institution that is outward facing. The intellectual engagement, Vice-Chancellor, Sir Peter Froggatt encouraged, meant that he was unable to sustain institutional disengagement. By undertaking world-leading research, educating cohorts of students, and locating ‘the Troubles’ in a broader comparative framework staff and students became involved in the peace process. In the Students’ Union, and in seminars, lectures and debates, students’ learnt to live and work together and through intellectual challenge, began to engage with the socio-economic and political institutions in pursuit of peace, social justice and economic prosperity.

For many, Queen’s was the first integrated institution most students attended, and while many kept up their pre-university friendships and lived at home in segregated residential areas, while at Queen’s they were in mixed company, and provided with the opportunity to discuss, debate, engage and challenge ideas and identities. They could experiment with new identities, rethinking the taken-for-granted assumptions of their childhood and upbringing, and expand their horizons by seeing a vista outside the conflict and a life different from the conflict zones. Students could do this in a space that was relatively safe and secure – Queen’s was not immune to the conflict, but it was a zone of relative calm; it offered the opportunity to live and work, no matter how temporarily, in an integrated environment where people from different backgrounds could learn to live together. As a zone of civility Queen’s helped harness the power for change, enabling people to envision a better future.

The University significantly reshaped itself to promote post-conflict change. Professor Sir Peter Froggatt’s view that universities should conserve rather than advocate reform was replaced by the post-conflict perspective under

Vice-Chancellor, Professor Patrick Johnson that Queen's should champion social justice. The University confronts its social responsibilities toward global society as much as to the local and regional needs of the society in which it is located. The University is *in* but no longer *of* Northern Ireland.

In the newly developed Strategy 2030, under the Vice-Chancellorship of Professor Ian Greer, Social justice remains central to the University's mission, but rather than being merely custodians of values as advocated by VC Froggatt in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, the University also strives to be an agent of change. Fundamentally, this will be achieved through intellectual engagement on global issues, but this does not exclude institutional engagement as was the case, pre-1990s.

In many ways, as Northern Ireland society matures in a post-conflict era, the role of Queen's has also matured. Pluralism is no longer considered in terms of Catholic and Protestant, or female-male, but as an internationally diverse student and staff body. Institutional partnerships extend globally such as the China Medical University and Queen's University Joint College, established in 2014 in China to meet the educational needs of the pharmaceutical and medical healthcare sector in China. And the University campus has become again, a zone of civility but no longer in providing just a neutral shared space for Protestants and Catholics, but as a zone of civility and a model for an inclusive society that embraces all, irrespective of gender, religion, disability or race. Given the political context for Queen's, the pace and extent of internationalisation on the campus has been impressive, with the University ranked 17th in the world for international outlook, and in the top 25 global universities for publications with international co-authors (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2022).

Intellectual engagement remains paramount, but even this has changed away from discrete disciplinary boundaries, aimed towards reproducing the middle-classes, and instead, toward a pragmatic research philosophy, shaped by societal challenges demanding interdisciplinary perspectives in advancing research that informs and shapes society. One dimension of this is in the commercialisation of research. Here again, Queen's has excelled, being ranked first in the UK as the most entrepreneurial university (Octopus Ventures Impact Rankings), having created more than 100 technology spin-outs, generating £323m in revenue and creating over 3,100 jobs. The most notable of these spin-outs including LSE-listed Kainos Group Plc, valued at over £2bn, Andor Technology and Fusion Antibodies Plc. Through research and commercialisation efforts in cybersecurity, over 1,800 jobs have been created in the business cluster surrounding Queen's Institute of Electronics, Communications and Information Technology.

Today, it is estimated that Queen's contributes £1.9bn per annum to the Northern Ireland economy, equivalent to a cost to benefit ratio of more than 1:6. The pace of change in Queen's has been rapid over the past few decades with the Northern Ireland peace process, undoubtedly, being critical in this transformation. Queen's is fully engaged intellectually through research and education while also engaging institutionally with policy, particularly in addressing societal issues and prioritising social justice. Throughout its evolution and strategic orientation, the motto of the university when it was founded in 1845, remains as relevant today as it was then: *Pro tanto quid retribuamus*: 'what shall we give in return for so much'.

Reference:

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