

# The National University of Ireland's abolition?

Dr. Maurice Manning gives his view on why the NUI should not be dissolved

**On January 20 2010, the Minister for Education and Science Mr Batt O’Keeffe TD announced that the Government had approved his proposal to dissolve the National University of Ireland. I believe that this decision is ill-advised and shortsighted and that the abolition of the National University of Ireland would be damaging to Ireland, educationally, socially, culturally and economically.**

First of all what is the institution that the Minister proposes to dissolve? The National University of Ireland is a federal university established under the Irish Universities Act 1908. It is the largest single element in Irish higher education, encompassing four universities—University College Dublin, University College Cork, National University of Ireland Galway and National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Until 1997 these were colleges in a single university. Under the Universities Act 1997, each of the four institutions became autonomous self-governing universities. The federal structure remained intact, the four new universities becoming Constituent Universities within it. Under the Act, the degrees awarded by the constituent universities are degrees of the National University of Ireland.

The original university (which in the interests of clarity I will refer to here as NUI) remained at the centre of the federation, retaining a small number of functions, including the power to award degrees in recognised colleges (these are: the Institute of Public Administration, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, the National College of Art and Design, Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy and Shannon College of Hotel Management). NUI also provides services for the member institutions, for graduates, prospective students, schools and the general public. It maintains the archives and registers of the University (including the NUI Seanad Eireann register).

The Minister proposes to dismantle this federal structure; abolish NUI leading to the dispersal of its registers, archives and its executive; remove the historic connection between the four Constituent Universities; get each of them separately to perform

functions now performed centrally by NUI; and force the Recognised Colleges to look elsewhere for their degrees. In my view, no useful purpose would be served by such a move.

Let’s look at the economic case first. *The McCarthy Report* suggested that abolishing NUI would save €3million annually. That argument was blown out of the water when NUI pointed out that a significant part of the expenditure would simply be passed on to the member institutions. In 2009, the net cost of running NUI was €1.36 million. The State grant was €12,697. NUI remitted €530,000 to the Exchequer in income tax and levies. The Minister now accepts that dissolving NUI is not about saving money.

The second argument against the abolition of NUI relates to the recognition and high status enjoyed by NUI degrees nationally and internationally. This is important particularly in medicine and health sciences but also in other professional fields. NUI institutions are increasingly successful both in attracting international students to Ireland and in delivering programmes in campuses abroad. Approximately 7,000 international students studying in NUI member institutions make a significant contribution to the universities and the economy, in fees paid and money spent. On graduation they act as valuable ambassadors for Ireland overseas. Abolishing NUI would severely inhibit this growing internationalisation which the government seeks to promote.

No less important is the fact that having an NUI degree enhances the employment prospects of graduates abroad. This regrettably is once again a major consideration for Irish graduates.

The Minister acknowledges the value of the NUI brand. He has said that he will open up discussions with the Constituent Universities to ensure the protection of the integrity and international reputation of NUI degrees. In my view this would be akin to re-inventing the wheel. NUI is the connective tissue that joins the constituent universities together and gives meaning to the concept of the NUI degree. It is the central forum of the University where the member institutions come together to achieve various university objectives.

Through their collaborative activities NUI degrees are protected and promoted and the NUI brand is sustained. Without such a connective framework, the names of the individual institutions (each of which has National University of Ireland as part of its legal name) will in my view lose their meaning and damage will be done to the reputation of their degrees. For this reason, the NUI constituent universities all support the retention of NUI.

A further major reason why I am opposed to the dissolution of NUI is that it would dismantle a national institution older than the State, but strongly associated with the State since its foundation. Eamon de Valera, T K Whitaker and Garret FitzGerald have all served as Chancellors of NUI. It would be a poor boast for Minister Batt O’Keeffe to be able to say that he had terminated a national institution with such strong historical resonances.

NUI has a proud record of support for the Irish language, Irish history and Irish culture. It gives public recognition to academic excellence in its member institutions through its awards and provides significant support for academic publishing. This may not be headline-grabbing activity but it is highly important for research, learning and scholarship, the core purposes of universities.

The continuation of NUI is not in any way at odds with the establishment of the proposed new super agency for qualifications and quality assurance. NUI will co-operate fully in any new framework for external quality assurance in universities.

NUI has been in existence for over one hundred years. It has over 250,000 graduates in Ireland and throughout the world. Its name is well established. Its degrees enjoy a high level of recognition nationally and internationally. It provides useful services and support for academic activity. I fail to see what advantages would accrue to its member institutions, to higher education in Ireland or to Irish society through its dissolution. I call on the Minister and the Government to think again.

**Dr. Maurice Manning is Chancellor of the National University of Ireland**