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# An Examination of the Factors that Influence the Strategic Priorities of Ireland's Public and Private Higher Education Senior Managers

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# An Examination of the Factors that Influence the Strategic Priorities of Ireland's Public and Private Higher Education Senior Managers

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The author hereby declares that, except where duly acknowledged, this thesis is entirely her own work and has not been submitted for any degree in any University or Institute of Technology.

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**Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Kevin and
Bernadette O'Donnell.  Thank you
Mum and Dad for everything.

# Acknowledgements

The journey towards completion has been equally harrowing and rewarding. I would like to sincerely thank my two supervisors Dr Margaret Linehan and Rose Leahy for their unwavering encouragement, support, and belief in my ability. I am very grateful for your dedication to me and my research topic over the last few years; thank you for helping me to maintain my focus at all junctures. You are extraordinary supervisors, and I count myself very lucky to have learned so much from you both. I would like to thank Cork Institute of Technology's School of Business, in particular, Gerard O'Donovan and Brian McGrath for the opportunities and support. Thank you to the team in CIT Extended Campus, particularly Dr Irene Sheridan for her wise words and encouragement. Thank you to my colleagues and friends Mai O'Leary, Deirdre Goggin and Colm Barry-Murphy – you livened up my days.

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| Central Applications Office | CAO |
| Employment Control Framework | ECF |
| European Network for Quality Assurance | ENQA |
| Full-Time Student Equivalents | FTSE |
| Higher Education | HE |
| Higher Education Authority | HEA |
| Higher Education Colleges Association | HECA |
| Higher Education Institutions | HEIs |
| Higher Education and Training Awards Council | HETAC |
| International Monetary Fund | IMF |
| Information Communications Technology | ICT |
| Institute of Technology | IoT |
| Irish Universities Association | IUA |
| Irish Universities Quality Board | IUQB |
| Key Performance Indicators | KPIs |
| Massive Open Online Courses | MOOCs |
| Quality and Qualifications Ireland | QQI |
| Recurrent Grant Allocation Model | RGAM |
| Royal Irish Academy | RIA |
| Science Foundation Ireland | SFI |
| The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development | OECD |
| Teachers Union of Ireland | TUI |
| Technological University | TU |
| United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation | UNESCO |

**Abstract**

Globally, higher education is experiencing transformative changes, and higher education institutions now operate in highly competitive and dynamic environments. Funders of higher education, including governments, subsequently, require the strategic spending of funding, and expect higher education institutions to deliver a satisfactory return on investment. In this landscape, and in the context of Ireland's challenging economic environment in recent years, this research seeks to understand precisely what factors influence the strategic priorities of Ireland's higher education senior managers. Research on strategic planning in Irish HE is limited, particularly in the context of Ireland's volatile economic environment, in recent years, and global developments in higher education. The current research uses a qualitative approach and aims to bridge the gap in HE literature, particularly Irish HE literature. It derives key insights from managers in relation to selecting, implementing, and attaining their organisations' strategic priorities. The empirical research was conducted with 49 senior higher education managers in Ireland's universities, institutes of technology, and private HEIs to elicit and capture their unique perspectives and experiences.

This research demonstrates that developments in the domestic environment predominantly influence the priorities of Ireland's HE managers, particularly the role of the Irish government, and the economic and financial environment. This research builds upon existing higher education literature in relation to factors influencing higher education systems and institutions and, specifically, suggests that higher education trends and developments occurring outside of Ireland have less relevance for HE managers in this study. Based on the research conclusions a model was developed, which illustrates the primary findings to emerge from this study. Additionally, a framework for the pursuit and attainment of ambitious strategic priorities was created to, in particular, illustrate that HEIs and senior managers require five particular enablers in their immediate and wider environments, such as flexibility, autonomy, and trust from their key stakeholder. Through the creation and preservation of these enablers, managers are optimally positioned to pursue and attain ambitious strategic priorities, and to engage in impactful strategic planning. This research, therefore, synthesises strategic planning best practice and, additionally, highlights the critical role of relevant HE stakeholders in adhering to its implementation.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction and Background to the Research

Higher education institutions around the world have been operating in a highly volatile environment in recent years. The economic downturn has challenged many of the traditional higher education (HE) sources of finance and caused governments to reassess how they fund their higher education systems (Alstete, 2015). Coupled with this, the environment in which higher education institutions (HEIs) operate is, for example, characterised by increased competition and subject to the full effects of globalisation (Wood and Robertson, 2015; Turner, 2015). Higher education institutions are experiencing pressure to accomplish predetermined targets, control costs, develop alternate funding revenues and emphasise activities that improve their global ranking, all while contributing to their nation's economic goals (Enders *et al*., 2015). Moreover, the rise and prominence of marketisation or activities more closely associated with commercial enterprises, challenge the traditional values of HE, particularly the public and societal benefits of HE (Holmwood, 2011). Higher education institutions, therefore, are being significantly influenced by several factors; factors that are shaping and determining the strategic priorities of higher education senior managers. This study aims to understand what particular factors are influencing the strategic priorities of public and private sector senior managers in Ireland's higher education institutions.

The extant literature contends that developments in technology and internationalisation will continue to, for the foreseeable future, revolutionise higher education (Chen and Chen, 2014; Thompson, 2012). Students are taking advantage of technological developments to obtain a higher education qualification in an institution of their choice (Teichler, 2013). The establishment of a new genre of higher education, the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), for example, has created a more flexible and less expensive means by which to obtain a higher education qualification. Moreover, technological and internationalisation developments have created an entirely new dimension of competition within higher education (Bowen, 2015; Lumby and Foskett, 2015). These developments have helped to make students into powerful stakeholders. Students now typically evaluate their higher education options by comparing institutions across the world against a stringent set of criteria, thus fuelling and elevating the importance of league tables and ranking systems (Stromquist and Monkman, 2014).

The environment in which higher education managers in Ireland operate and manage their organisations has also significantly altered. Higher education funding for Irish higher education institutions has been reduced and the government has implemented numerous policies, all of which have implications for managers and their strategic planning processes. Moreover, it is clear that Ireland's higher education institutions are expected to substantially inform and contribute to Ireland's economic and social development. The role of Ireland's higher education institutions in economic revitalisation and stimulation, therefore, has heightened, and become more formalised and strategic (Griffin, 2015).

It is against this backdrop that Irish higher education institutions are now operating. This chapter presents the central research objectives, which are derived from the aforementioned developments, the methodological approach, and an outline of the thesis.

This study begins by outlining the expansion and development of higher education in Ireland. Massification is the term coined to describe the unprecedented growth and expansion of higher education (Gumport *et al*., 1997). Massification refers both to the volume of students participating in higher education and the number of institutions operating in a country's higher education system. The massification of Irish higher education can primarily be attributed to the abolition of undergraduate fees in 1996, which aimed to remove financial and psychological barriers to higher education participation (Swail and Heller, 2004; Clancy, 2001). In addition to the abolishment of undergraduate fees, developments such as the growth in female participation, higher post-primary retention rates, and a growing economy all contributed to higher education massification in Ireland (Griffin, 2015; Denny 2014). Since the 1950s third level participation rates in Ireland experienced a sixteen-fold increase in enrolments, and public expenditure on higher education also increased proportionately (Swail and Heller, 2004).

Ireland's higher education system developed from an elite system where generally the top socio-economic groups of society attended to a diversified, massified system (McCoy and Smyth, 2011). According to Drennan *et al*. (2014) approximately 65% of Ireland's second-level students now progress to third level. Ireland's higher education system includes seven universities and thirteen institutes of technology as well as a growing number of private institutions. The role of higher education managers, therefore, has changed significantly as managers have had to respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by the growing numbers of students now attending their respective institutions. Mass participation in higher

education has introduced new groups of students into the higher education system, many of which are unfamiliar with the higher education culture and environment (Hornsby and Osman, 2014; Sy *et al*., 2012; Clancy and Wall, 2000). Higher education institutions and managers, therefore, have been challenged to direct funds towards numerous support services to assist students in higher education. In recent years, however, the expansion and massification of Ireland's higher education system has significantly steadied (HEA, 2012). Enrolment of full-time and part-time students has levelled out, particularly between 2010 and 2012. Table 1.2 illustrates the total enrolment number from 2007 through to 2012.

**Table 1.1 Enrolment Trends 2007/08 – 2011/12 for all Higher Education Authority (HEA) Funded Institutions**

| Undergraduate | 2007/08 | 2008/09 | 2009/10 | 2010/11 | 2011/12 | % Change 2010/11 – 2011/12 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full-time | 119,512 | 124,990 | 133,849 | 139,092 | 141,226 | 1.5% |
| Part-time | 21,013 | 20,456 | 19,097 | 19,355 | 20,616 | 6.5% |
| **Total** | 140,525 | 145,446 | 152,946 | 158,447 | 161,842 | 2.1% |

Source: Higher Education Authority (2012)

The massification and expansion of Ireland's higher education system is, however, an important developmental factor to be considered in the context of this study. Ireland's public higher education institutions now consume a significant proportion of public funds; although funding has not increased in line with student numbers (Irish Universities Association, 2014). In return, public higher education institutions have an integral responsibility to produce highly qualified graduates, engage in innovative research, and ultimately, contribute to Ireland's economic and social development. The massification and expansion of Ireland's higher education system, therefore, has heightened the necessity for public sector managers to adopt and apply practices more traditionally associated with commercial enterprises such as strategic planning and key performance indicators. As a result of massification, both public and private sector managers have a greater volume of students in their institutions and, consequently, a substantially larger budget to manage. Massification, therefore, has undoubtedly fuelled the necessity for HE managers to adopt strategic plans and priorities to help ensure that they utilise their budgets in order to effectively accomplish their organisation's goals (Goedegebuure, 2012).

Since 2008, Ireland has been experiencing particularly difficult economic circumstances. In 2009, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated that Ireland was experiencing an "unprecedented economic correction…that exceeds that being faced currently by any other advanced economy" (IMF, 2009: 28). The Irish government had to respond to the economic crisis by, in part, significantly reducing public sector spending. In the higher education sector, the government's efforts to reduce public sector spending is evident through policies such as the Employment Control Framework, designed to reduce the numbers employed in higher education, and national agreements centring on public sector salaries, pensions and holidays. Hazelkorn (2014) notes the reduction in higher education funding in recent years:

> *As the economic crisis hit harder, higher education has experienced significant reductions; overall exchequer funding for recurrent purposes to publicly-funded HEIs, which is 95% of institutions which students attend, has been reduced by circa 25% between 2008 and 2012* (Hazelkorn, 2014: 4).

Despite these difficulties, demand for higher education in Ireland has remained buoyant, and moreover, the economic decline has introduced a new cohort of students into the higher education market. Individuals with skills and training in the construction sector, for example, who have become unemployed now require new skills and knowledge to re-enter the workforce. Ireland's higher education system, therefore, has an important role to play in supplying skilled and work-ready graduates. Ireland's public and private sector higher education managers, consequently, are challenged to respond to the substantial demand for higher education from new cohorts of students, yet, within a significantly more constrained financial environment.

The reduction in state funding for public higher education institutions has also coincided with an increase in the student contribution, formally referred to as the registration fee. Although the state has, over the last few years, started to direct a portion of the cost of education to students, in the form of the registration fee, it should be noted that approximately 50% of Ireland's HE students qualify for higher education grants (O'Sullivan, 2014). From this perspective, the Irish state still absorbs a large proportion of the costs associated with public sector higher education. It is also important to note that Ireland, at present, still has significantly high unemployment rates translating into substantial social welfare expenditure, and below optimal tax returns (Central Statistics Office, 2014). In addition, because of Ireland's banking crisis, Ireland's debts are significant and the government is under pressure

by the European Union, in particular, to reduce expenditure on pubic goods and services. Ireland's public higher education sector is, consequently, experiencing the full effects of Ireland's economic challenges as resources and budgets have been cut substantially.

Additionally, the Irish government is attempting to align higher education activities with economic objectives (Hazelkorn, 2014). For public and private sector higher education managers, however, contributing to the state's economic and social objectives is severely challenged by the scarcity of resources and finance within their respective institutions. The necessity for HE managers to identify strategic priorities that support their respective institution's goals as well as national economic goals, within their limited budgets, therefore, is very relevant. Lillis and Lynch (2013) observe:

> *If HEIs are to be the key enablers for their nation's policy objectives, to hold their own in a competitive funding landscape and to be the engines of growth in their regions their institutional management capability needs to be able to meet these challenges. Strategy development processes need to be effective, efficient and responsive to change, enabling HEIs to better serve the needs of all their stakeholders* (Lillis and Lynch, 2013: 2).

Currently, therefore, expert strategy development skills and the ability to build distinctive competencies through strategic planning, is of particular importance for higher education managers. In Ireland, the economic decline has triggered a change in the means by which the government manages the higher education institutions under its remit. In 2011, for example, the government published its first national higher education strategy entitled *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (also known as The Hunt Report). The publication of the strategy signalled a concerted effort to formalise the government's role in managing and, in part, reforming Ireland's higher education system (Walsh and Loxley, 2014). The publication of the government's first national HE strategy, moreover, had significant implications for private higher education institutions. In the strategy document, the private sector was acknowledged as an important contributor to Ireland's higher education system, particularly in meeting growing demand for higher education in the future.

This particular development in Ireland's higher education history is of relevance for this study and is, therefore, discussed in detail in the following chapter. Chapter Two includes a sub-section that outlines the changing role of the government in Ireland's higher education

system, and the subsequent influence of this new role on public higher education managers' activities and priorities.

Higher education literature suggests that Ireland is not alone in experiencing the effects of greater government involvement in higher education (Oireachtas Library and Research Service, 2014). Bleiklie and Michelson (2013) posit that across Europe, for more than ten years, governments have been attempting to introduce reform to higher education institutions to encourage a more market-led and efficient style of operating. Considering the link between economic prosperity and a highly educated nation in today's highly competitive global market, it is reasonable that governments would want to exercise greater control over publicly funded HE institutions (Stromquist and Monkman, 2014). In Ireland, however, considering that the government's escalated involvement in its higher education system coincides with Ireland's economic and financial crisis, one of the government's primary motives for becoming more involved in HE operations appears to be financially driven (Hazelkorn, 2014). Recent research carried out by Lillis and Lynch (2013) indicates that the economic downturn provided the Irish government with an ideal opportunity to introduce some much needed reform to Ireland's HE system.

Increased government involvement in higher education, despite its good intentions, is very often associated with a reduction in managers' autonomy (Dill, 2014; Enders *et al*., 2013). Managers, for example, have to engage more with government representatives and agencies in relation to their most recent activities and decisions, and have less freedom to make key decisions independently (Middlehurst, 2015). The Employment Control Framework and other national policy agreements such as the Croke Park Agreements illustrate examples of reduced management autonomy in Ireland, as managers have to seek permission to, for example, recruit new employees. These particular two policy agreements share the same primary objective: to reduce public sector spending. In implementing these policies, however, authors such as Robbins and Lapsley (2014), Hazelkorn (2014), and Harmon (2011) argue that the government has inadvertently encroached on the autonomy levels previously awarded to HE senior managers, for example:

> *The challenge, however, is balancing the over-arching requirements of the "system" with those of institutional autonomy, often portrayed as academic freedom. The universities, which have traditionally enjoyed greater autonomy*

*than Institutes of Technology, argue that the new policy environment and associated political scrutiny is intrusive* (Hazelkorn, 2013: 7).

From this perspective, the rules of engagement for public higher education managers, in particular, have significantly altered as managers increasingly have to report to the government in relation to key issues (Greenfell, 2014). Ireland's public higher education managers have to adapt to the markedly different operating environment, resulting from Ireland's challenging economic circumstance and the government's new role. It is in this environment that Ireland's higher education managers have to implement and attempt to accomplish their organisation's priorities. The private higher education sector is not directly impacted by the Irish government's current style of HE management and, as a consequence, private sector managers are unlikely to encounter the same internal challenges, such as changes to autonomy levels, as their public sector counterparts.

In addition to domestic developments, such as the changing role of government and the massification of the Irish HE system, there are other higher education trends and developments occurring that are of relevance for this study. Trends and developments such as globalisation, commercialisation, and technological advances are all shaping and influencing the activities of higher education institutions around the world. Many authors, for example, believe that technological advances have been revolutionising, and continue to revolutionise, higher education systems around the world (Bowen, 2015; Chen and Chen, 2014; Khan and Markauskaite, 2013; Larsen and Vincent-Lancrin, 2006). Developments in technology are changing the way students consume information and acquire knowledge (Thompson, 2012). Students, moreover, are entering higher education with a strong attachment to technological devices and applications, and have, as a result, become accustomed to learning through technology (Bowen, 2015; Thompson, 2012).

The internet has considerably broadened the level and number of information sources available to students and the rise of social media provides students with a live platform to share and discuss course work (Bryant *et al*., 2014). The role of higher education institutions and lecturers, therefore, has changed as students can access vast amounts of information readily and instantaneously (Yuan and Powell, 2013; Bennett *et. al*, 2008). Additionally, the student learning process is far more dynamic and students are no longer solely dependent on the lecturer and the recommended class text books to acquire knowledge on a particular topic (Beetham and Sharpe, 2013; Yuan and Powell, 2013). This trend, therefore, challenges

higher education institutions and their academic staff to adopt new technologies, and to embrace pedagogies that recognise the new learning patterns and behaviours of students (van Liempd, 2013).

Higher education internationalisation is a further trend present in the extant literature (van Liempd, 2013; Hennessy, 2013; Tadaki, 2013) among public and private institutions. Internationalisation, in the context of higher education, can be described as the process of integrating an international or multicultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of a higher education institution (Knight, 1993). Internationalisation of higher education also includes actively recruiting overseas students, internationalising the curriculum, and in some cases, building college campuses in select overseas locations (Fabricius *et al*., 2015). In recent years, de Wit and Beelen (2012) state that the process of internationalisation has moved from 'a reactive to a pro-active strategic issue' among HE institutions and governments in Europe. The aforementioned drivers suggest that intense competition for students, an increased emphasis on HE rankings, and pressure to create new revenue streams have all fuelled the development of HE internationalisation.

It is not just individual higher education institutions and their managers that are seeking to internationalise their activities, governments and economic policymakers also see the value in an internationalised HE system (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013a). The Irish government, for example, dedicate a significant proportion of *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) to proposing a potential internationalisation pathway for Ireland's higher education system. Internationalisation offers the opportunity to create valuable revenue streams, and considering Ireland's financial position coupled with the volume of funding that the Irish HE sector now requires, it is reasonable that the Irish government is encouraging institutions to become more pro-active in this field. A competitive and challenging financial environment also stimulates this trend in the private HE sector. Private colleges are, therefore, more comprehensively evaluating internationalisation for its revenue generating opportunities (Ng *et al*., 2013; Sanyal and Martin, 2008). There can be some criticisms associated with such an approach, however, as Egron-Polak (2012) and Valiulis and Valiulis (2006) believe that the holistic benefits that can arise from HE internationalisation such as a diverse, multi-cultured institute are underappreciated. These authors, therefore, warn against over-emphasising the monetary aspects of HE internationalisation.

In the context of all the factors occurring in both the domestic and global environment, the necessity for Ireland's HE managers to identify and focus on key strategic priorities becomes particularly acute. Answers are sought, thereby, to ascertain what priorities senior managers are pursuing and, importantly, what factors are influencing these priorities. The search for answers leads to the rationale for this study.

## 1.2 Rationale for the Study

Several authors believe that higher education is currently experiencing unprecedented change (Altbach, 2013; Yuan and Powell, 2013; Lillis and Lynch, 2013). Developments and advances in technology are challenging the existing structures and activities of higher education institutions and fuelling higher education competition across the globe (Johnson *et al*., 2013). Additionally, the global economic crisis has coincided with a steep demand for higher education and an expectation for higher education to assume a fundamental and permanent role in their country's economic and social development (Hazelkorn, 2014). As a result of the ever-changing environment in which higher education systems and the institutions within these systems operate, the traditional values of higher education are being questioned and re-evaluated by the public, the government, and those working in academia (Altbach, 2013). Moreover, as mentioned above, in addition to the global economic crisis Ireland is experiencing its own financial and economic challenges. Hazelkorn (2013: 3) states that the higher education system was not fortunate enough to escape the effects of Ireland's economic crisis, 'a beneficiary of the boom, it has become a victim of the crisis'.

The challenge, therefore, for Irish higher education senior managers is to maintain their institutions standards of quality, with an ever-decreasing budget, in a highly competitive global environment. These pertinent domestic and global factors provide a foundation for the purpose of this study and are outlined in detail in Chapter Two.

Developments such as increased competition and demand for higher education, reduced budgets, and government reform policies direct attention to the importance of adopting and realizing strategic priorities. Recent research conducted by Lillis and Lynch (2013) presents various strategic planning challenges facing Ireland's higher education institutions, paying particular attention to the evolution of strategic planning in Ireland's public HE institutions. Additionally, Hazelkorn (2014) examines the policy challenges facing the Irish government in relation to the public higher education sector, in an economically challenging environment.

Although these authors have provided substantial context in relation to the actions and decisions of the Irish government, and the implications of these decisions on Irish public and private higher education, a substantial gap in the literature still exists. The existing literature, for example, provides scarce information on Ireland's private higher education sector, particularly in relation to private sector managers' strategic priorities, and, the most pertinent factors influencing these priorities. It is from this gap that the research question and the key research objectives arose.

**Research Question**

There is insufficient literature available to comprehensively identify, and thoroughly understand what factors are influencing the strategic priorities of Ireland's public and private higher education institutions. There is also a gap in the literature in relation to how managers in Ireland's public and private higher education institutions are accomplishing their priorities. This research aims to understand what factors are exerting the greatest influence on managers' choice of strategic priorities. The research will investigate whether it is developments in the domestic environment or trends occurring globally that primarily determine what priorities managers emphasise as strategically important for their organisations' future. Additionally, the research aims to understand the level of influence that the individual factors have on managers' strategic priorities, and to what extent the influencing factors support or deter managers in accomplishing their priorities.

The research question, therefore, is as follows:

- **What factors influence the strategic priorities of Ireland's public and private sector senior managers?**

From these foundations a number of core research objectives were composed:

1) **What are the strategic priorities of public and private higher education senior managers?**

   This research specifically focuses on the strategic priorities of Ireland's public and private higher education senior managers. Considering the rate of change, and the competitive nature of the environment in which higher education institutions currently exist, this study aims to understand if higher education managers in Ireland are restricted from selecting multiple, broad, and highly ambitious objectives. Moreover,

this research aims to ascertain the extent to which the existing environment, characterised by reduced funding and limited resources, influences and determines managers' choice of strategic priorities for their respective organisations. This research, therefore, aims to understand what issues or themes Ireland's HE managers are choosing to intensely focus on and, ultimately, prioritise. Additionally, this study aims to identify any patterns or trends, relating to managers' strategic priorities, among Ireland's individual higher education institutions, both in the public and private HE sectors.

2) **What differences exist between public and private higher education managers in their strategic priorities?**

Through understanding what priorities Ireland's higher education managers are emphasising, and, what factors influence these priorities, the research also aims to discover if differences exist between the public and private sectors. The research will investigate whether public and private sector managers have selected similar strategic priorities and if the influencing factors manifest themselves in a similar style across both sectors. This particular research objective also aims to contribute to the scarce literature available on Ireland's private higher education sector, particularly in relation to strategic planning and priorities.

3) **How are higher education managers and their institutions managing in the current environment?**

A broad research objective of this study aims to discover how Ireland's public and private higher education managers are currently coping. In the context of the turbulent economic and financial environment, and the various trends and developments occurring in higher education, this study seeks to understand how Ireland's senior managers are responding to the arising challenges and opportunities. Additionally, this study seeks to establish managers' perspectives in relation to the success of the strategic priority process in their organisations, and what factors are required to help support the strategic priority process into the future.

In order to successfully explore the aforementioned research question and objectives, it is imperative that the research project is designed in the most appropriate format. Careful attention, therefore, was given to planning a methodological approach to the research.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach applied for the purpose of this study, in detail. In the interest of further contextualising the research, however, the methodological approach will be briefly outlined in the following section.

## 1.3 Methodological Approach

As noted previously, a full examination of the methodological considerations, inherent to an interpretive body of research, is provided in Chapter Three. To address the central objective of this study, it was imperative to select a methodological approach that provided the opportunity to gain the most accurate and unique insights into the perceptions of Ireland's public and private higher education sector senior managers.

For this reason, a qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate methodological choice for this study. Qualitative research emphasises the qualities of entities, processes and meanings. Unlike quantitative research, data collection and analysis tend to occur simultaneously and in an interactive manner (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010). Advocates of the qualitative approach are of the opinion that social science research cannot be measured in quantity and frequency; rather, because the focus of social research is on human beings in social situations, qualitative research provides an appropriate format (Robson, 1993). The aim of an interpretative approach can be considered as:

> *To understand how people make sense of their worlds, with human action being conceived as purposive and meaningful rather than externally determined by social structures, innate drives, the environment or economic stimuli* (Gill and Johnson, 2002:168).

This qualitative study was framed by a grounded theory methodological approach. The creators of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967), advocate that a grounded theory methodology is particularly useful when little is known about a particular issue, area of study, or development. Additionally, grounded theory was deemed an appropriate methodological approach as it provides a structured, methodical and robust framework for coding and analysing the data, while also supporting the researcher to identify and develop emerging theories.

For the purpose of this study, 49 senior managers participated in the in-depth interview process. Deciding upon a relatively substantial sample size provided the opportunity to obtain a diverse and broad range of perspectives and observations and, importantly, to

generate a rich collection of data. From the outset, this study aimed to target higher education managers in senior positions because of their important, embedded, and multi-faceted role in their organisations' strategic plans. In the public sector, senior managers interviewed typically held the title Head of Faculty in the institute of technology sector, and Dean of College in the university sector. The titles of managers in the private sector varied, however, it was ensured that private sector interview respondents had similar and relative levels of responsibilities, and involvement with their institutes' strategic plans, particularly in line with their public sector counterparts. Private sector managers that were identified as appropriate interview respondents, therefore, held titles ranging from Head of Academic Affairs, Institutional Director, Head of Law School etc. The 49 interview respondents were comprised of 14 university sector senior managers, 26 institutes of technology senior managers, and nine private sector senior managers.

Obtaining new and interesting observations and perspectives from Ireland's public and private sector senior managers will provide a unique insight into Ireland's higher education institutions. The final section of the current chapter further contextualises the thesis by providing an overview of each of the remaining chapters.

## 1.4 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis follows a logical pattern in its structure and presents the following chapters sequentially:

**Chapter Two – Literature Review**

Chapter Two builds upon the introductory chapter and provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on Irish higher education, and the factors influencing higher education systems and institutions. The chapter begins by outlining the history and development of the Irish higher education system, detailing, in particular, how the university, institute of technology (IoT) and private sectors developed in Ireland. The most recent developments to occur, primarily in relation to the Irish economy and the subsequent actions of the government, that are of relevance for Ireland's higher education institutions, are also outlined. Chapter Two continues by outlining the most influential higher education factors occurring around the world that are also of direct consequence to the Irish higher education system. Factors such as globalisation, massification and internationalisation are outlined, with particular emphasis on how these factors are shaping and moulding the activities of higher education institutions around the world. Chapter Two also presents the changes that

have taken place to higher education management structures and functions. In particular, the chapter demonstrates how higher education management has responded to the factors influencing their institutions and how their roles, as managers, have altered. Following this, the chapter explores the concept of academic quality in today's higher education institutions, and details how academic quality is valued, measured and upheld. Finally, the chapter concludes by examining the influence and impact of various factors such as internationalisation and massification on higher education academic quality.

**Chapter Three – Research Methodology**

Chapter Three presents the research philosophy and methodology and the tools adopted for this research. The chapter opens by presenting the philosophy of research design, including the various research paradigms and approaches to social science research. The reasons why a grounded theory method is most appropriate for this study are outlined, as well as the appropriateness of in-depth interviews as the primary data collection tool. The latter half of the chapter focuses on the selection of respondents, outlines the interview process and describes the data analysis techniques applied in the study.

**Chapter Four – Findings and Analysis**

Chapter Four presents the main findings and analysis arising from the 49 interviews in four key thematic areas. The first part of the chapter outlines how the role of the Irish government is affecting the activities and decisions of Ireland's higher education senior managers, particularly as they relate to their institutions' strategic priorities. The chapter then explores the strategic planning and priority process in effect in Ireland's higher education institutions, and outlines the most prominent strategic priorities among HE managers. The chapter continues by presenting the influential and impactful trends and developments occurring in higher education at present and their subsequent effect on respondents' strategic priorities. To conclude, the chapter outlines the unique outlooks and attitudes of Ireland's higher education managers, in relation to how they perceive their organisations to be coping, and their sentiments about the future.

**Chapter Five – Conclusion**

The final chapter summarises the key findings and indicates how the findings contribute to the existing literature. This chapter highlights the particular factors that are having the

strongest impact on respondents' priorities, and, illustrates how managers can respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by these influencing factors. The analysis and interpretation of the data acquired from this study resulted in the creation of a model which illustrates the key factors influencing managers' priorities, and, the resulting challenges which managers encounter in attempting to implementing and attain their priorities. Furthermore, a conceptual framework, presented in Chapter Five, explains how the strategic priority process can be improved and enhanced by the cultivation and preservation of key enablers. The framework proposes that conditions, such as committed and motivated employees, and strong governmental leadership and direction can fundamentally assist managers to implement and achieve ambitious strategic priorities. The chapter concludes by outlining some recommendations for practice and policy, the limitations of the study, and suggests areas for further research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Chapter One set the context for this study by briefly outlining some of the most significant changes occurring in higher education throughout the world, and specifically in Ireland. Chapter Two builds on this background, by outlining the history and development of Ireland's higher education system and, then, exploring some of the most recent occurrences. Furthermore, this chapter will outline the most influential factors occurring in higher education systems throughout the world, and assess how these factors affect the operations of individual higher education institutions. The next section of the chapter directs attention to the development of higher education management roles and functions, and to key themes associated with higher education academic quality. It explores the changes that have occurred to higher education management structures and functions, and consequently, the role of higher education managers in recent years. Following this, it examines the impact of the influencing factors on the role and function of higher education managers and on higher education academic quality, in particular.

## 2.2 History and Development of Public and Private Higher Education in Ireland

The following section comprehensively outlines key developments in Ireland's higher education history. The chapter begins by examining the formation and development of the university sector, then explores how the institutes of technology were formed before detailing the development of private colleges in Ireland's HE system. To conclude, the section presents a number of recent developments that are of direct concern for Ireland's higher education institutions and their managers.

### 2.2.1 The Irish Public Higher Education Sector

According to Coolahan (1981), Ireland did not benefit from the rise and prominence of universities in the middle ages that many other European countries experienced. Ireland, rather, was in direct contrast to the rest of Europe in its failure to establish a university prior to the 14th century (White, 2001). Several attempts were made to establish a university in Ireland, including attempts in Dublin in 1320 and in Drogheda in 1465 which both failed. It was Queen Elizabeth 1 who established Ireland's first university, Trinity College in 1592 (French, 2010). Queen Elizabeth 1 hoped that an Irish university would put an end to Irish Catholics sending their children to universities in countries such as France, Spain and Italy where she believed:

> *...they have been infected with Popery and other ill qualities and so become evil subjects* (O'Donnell 1987:80).

Trinity College remained Ireland's only university up until 1850. It was closely affiliated to the Church of Ireland and, therefore, the Catholic Church viewed it as inappropriate for Catholics to receive their higher education there (White, 2001). Pressure for a state-endowed and supported university for Catholics grew in the middle of the 19th century and according to Coolahan (1981) was one of the greatest political issues of the time. It was feared Irish Catholics abroad were forming revolutionary ideas and this, combined with political pressure in Ireland to improve the education rights of Catholics, led to the establishment of non-denominational universities (French, 2010). The government created three state controlled universities for mixed denominations: the Queen's Colleges at Cork, Galway and Belfast. Coolahan (1981), however, believes that the colleges did not achieve their aims; the system

served to further alienate Catholics and was condemned by the Catholic hierarchy in Rome. A solution was reached in the form of the Irish Universities Act of 1908. This act established an expanded University of Dublin, a new college called Maynooth College, and the non-domination of the Queen's colleges in Cork, Galway and Belfast (French, 2010). Religion, however, was not the only significant issue impeding Irish higher education in the 1900s, access and participation rates were also a problem. By the 1900s, there were only 3,200 students enrolled in third level education; the majority of the Irish population believed that third level education was for the elite and those with money and position in society (White, 2001).

Religion and politics largely defined Irish universities until the last three decades of the 20th century. One hundred years after the opening of the Queens College Belfast and the National University of Ireland, however, President McAleese (2008) spoke of how far the Irish people and these colleges have come:

> *One hundred years on from the days of that predictably political compromise with more than a hint of denominational overtones, both institutions flourish today...regardless of faith, ethnicity or identity* (McAleese, 2008).

Alongside religious affiliations in Irish higher education, a trend that was not unique to Ireland was that of female participation in higher education towards the end of the 19th century (White, 2001). Ireland, like other countries, suffered from a prejudice against women participating in higher education. Raftery *et al.* (2010), for example, state that gender equality in Irish higher education received marginal attention as it was over-shadowed by religious issues. The social attitude in Ireland also served to restrict female participation as the public was generally not in favour of women attaining higher education qualifications. With the establishment of the Royal University of Ireland (RUI) in 1879 women were granted permission to enter Irish higher education and this set a precedent for the remaining higher education institutions. The Queen's Colleges, Trinity College and the Catholic University all opened their doors to the female population of Ireland in 1904, following the developments in the Royal University of Ireland (Harford, 2008).

The aforementioned colleges dominated the Irish higher education system for most of the 20th century, with Ireland's university sector accounting for 78% of total full time enrolments in

1969.  The university sector provided education largely concerned with vocations such as teaching and medicine. There was very little technical education in the Irish higher education system up until the 1960s:

> *The universities catered for the liberal professions and for secondary teaching, but they were essentially concerned with purely academic study and with providing a liberal education. The country was not industrialized which had been the spur for technological education elsewhere. The universities did not aspire to provide education of such a utilitarian nature or see it as their function to help in the creation of wealth* (French, 2010: 8).

The Royal Dublin Society was a pioneer of technical education in Ireland prior to the 1960s. The Royal Dublin Society was eventually taken over by the state and in 1867 became known as the Royal College of Science for Ireland with departments of mining, agriculture, engineering, and manufacturing. It was eventually absorbed by the University College Dublin based on the realisation that the technical college had little impact on Ireland's educational structure (White, 2001).  According to Duff *et al*. (2000), those pursuing technical careers in 19th century Ireland largely learned their trade from the private sector through practical work and study. Technical training at higher level continued to evolve and develop in Ireland with the creation of the Royal Institute of Architects 1839, the Cork School of Music 1848, and the Royal Vetinary College of Ireland in 1900.  The College of Technology, which is now part of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) was formed in 1887 and is the oldest of the six colleges that came together to form DIT (Duff *et al*., 2000).

In conjunction with the development of technical higher level education, and independent from the universities, was the development of teacher training colleges.  The establishment and function of primary teacher training colleges was again marred with religious denomination issues in the 19th century.  Two Catholic denominational colleges were established; St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra 1875 and Our Lady of Mercy College, Blackrock 1877 as well as others in Limerick, Waterford, and Belfast.  A non-denominational college the Church of Ireland Teacher Trainer College was established in 1884 (White, 2001).  At the start of the 20th century, training for secondary school teachers was established in the form of the Higher Diploma.  The Higher Diploma, which is now known as the Postgraduate Diploma in Education, was administered through the universities in the form of

a one year course (now a two year course). The Department of Education and Science, as it was then known, also focused on training teachers in disciplines, such as domestic science, woodwork and metalwork to reflect the vocational and technical landscape at second level.

Third level education in Ireland continued to evolve at a significant pace in the 1900s, particularly in response to the changes occurring in Ireland's political structure. A significant change in Ireland's political structure occurred when Ireland gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1922. Ireland's new sovereign identity had a direct impact on the landscape of Ireland's higher education system. The new government had to adapt to governing and managing its higher education institutions, independent of the United Kingdom (Corcoran, 2009). Significant changes to Ireland's higher education sector were largely a result of changes to Ireland's political status and national sovereignty. According to McMahon (2008), on gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1922, one of the first significant pieces of legislation to come into effect under the newly independent Republic of Ireland was the creation of the Vocational Education Act 1930. To carry out legislation under the Vocational Education Act, a variety of regional Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were established. The VECs inherited control of the technical colleges already in existence including some of the aforementioned technical colleges.

Concurrent to Ireland gaining independence, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the Irish government embarked on developing Ireland economically, and subsequently, the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) were established (French, 2010). The establishment of the RTCs was a government reaction to a review of Irish education carried out in the 1960s. This review was in the form of a report entitled "Investment in Education". The report was commissioned in 1965 by the Department of Education and Science and the Organisation for Economic and Community Development (OECD). The report concluded that Ireland's higher education system required urgent attention in the area of advanced technical education to produce technically qualified people to effectively build capacity for a more industrialised economy (Hanafin, 2006). O'Malley (1986) further states that the RTCs were set up because of the changing labour force needs of Ireland's industrialising economy. The brief for these new institutions was to educate the trade and industry across a wide spectrum of occupations ranging from craft to professional level, most notably, in engineering and science, but also in commercial, linguistic and other specialities (O'Malley, 1986).

The first Regional Technical Colleges opened to students in 1970. Following the establishment of the RTCs, the VEC of Dublin city embarked on amalgamating the six specialist colleges under its remit, and in 1948, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) was formed. Outside of Dublin, following the establishment of DIT, the Irish government founded the National Institute of Higher Education in Limerick and a further twelve RTCs around the country. The RTCs comprised of schools of engineering, science, and business and humanities each of which offered a range of two to three year certificate and diploma programmes. In 1992, the Dublin Institute of Technology Act came into effect. With the introduction of the Dublin Institute of Technology Act 1992, the colleges under the DIT remit were now independent of Dublin city VEC and had the power to grant their own education and training awards (www.irishstatutebook.ie). A significant act which was introduced, in addition to the Dublin Institute of Technology Act 1992, was the Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992. According to McMahon (2008), the act provided RTCs with a new legislative basis and dictated that the RTCs were to receive their awards from the National Council for Educational Awards (now part of Quality and Qualifications Ireland).

Returning to the university sector, in examining Ireland's higher education system, it is clear that the university sector has expanded and advanced to become an integral and pivotal force in the system. Ireland's university sector is comprised of seven universities. Teacher training colleges such as St. Angela's College Sligo, St. Patrick's College, Mater Dei Institute of Education and Mary Immaculate College are sometimes categorised within the university sector as they have educational and research links with the respective universities. Recently, former Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, (2012) proposed that many of Ireland's existing teacher training colleges are to be merged with Ireland's universities, to reform and strengthen the training of teachers in Ireland. Other colleges, routinely classified by state agencies under the university remit, include the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) and the Royal College of Surgeons. The seven universities in Ireland's higher education sector are as follows:

- University College Cork (UCC)
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)
- National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)

- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- University of Limerick (UL)
- Dublin City University (DCU)

These seven universities account for a large share of Ireland's undergraduate and postgraduate base; 84,248 students were enrolled in these seven universities in 2009 (Delaney *et al,.* 2009). The universities are largely concerned with undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes together with basic and applied research. Alongside the university sector the institute of technology sector, formally known as the regional technical colleges, also developed steadily:

> *Our Institutes of Technology are a true success story. They have grown and matured over recent decades to become an essential and dynamic part of the education system. Notwithstanding their remarkable progress, it is worth remembering that they are a relatively recent feature of the educational landscape…*(Hanafin, 2006).

The Institute of Technology sector comprises of fourteen institutes of technology. These institutions provide programmes of education and training from craft to professional level. The programme disciplines within the institutes of technology span a wide spectrum covering areas such as business, science, information technology, engineering, linguistics and music (the Department of Education and Skills, 2011). The Department of Education and Skills has overall responsibility for the institute of technology sector and are, therefore, responsible for the formulation and review of policy, and for the budgetary and regulatory frameworks.

An examination of the formation and development of Ireland's higher education system provides evidence that the landscape of Ireland's higher education system has grown and evolved over the years. It has grown and evolved to reflect the increasing demand for higher education that has been experienced in Ireland and across the world. Third level organisations in Ireland have expanded to cater for increased demand and have diversified to reflect a more broad range of education preferences and market demands (Walsh and Loxley, 2014; O'Hara, 2010). In 2012, for example, the Higher Education Authority recorded over 140,000 full-time students in Ireland's publicly funded institutions. The rapidly-increasing numbers can be attributed to growing retention rates at second level, demographic trends and

increasing transfer rates into higher education (the Department of Education and Skills, 2011). *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* summarises the developmental path that Ireland's higher education system has undertaken, and importantly, how it has contributed to Irish society:

> *Irish higher education has seen exceptional development in the recent past – moving from a system that was confined to a social elite to one of widespread participation. Our graduates are highly regarded and are among the most employable in Europe. The scale of investment in research has expanded considerably and the quality and reputation of Irish research is now achieving impact internationally. These developments have all had an enormously positive impact across all social groups, to the benefit of individuals, society and the wider economy* (The National Strategy for Higher Education Strategy to 2030, 2011:9).

It is clear that the Irish higher education system has expanded and is no longer for those with money and position in society (Coolahan, 1981). As stated above, the Department of Education and Skills (2011) attribute growing retention rates at second level as one of the reasons for increased participation at third level. The subject of increased participation rates in Irish higher education is an important one, and has provoked much discussion. Approaching the 21st century, full-time enrolments in higher education grew almost fivefold in the space of 30 years (Hazelkorn, 2014). Foreign multinational companies were attracted to Ireland because of its highly educated and trained work force which in turn legitimised expenditure on Ireland's higher education system, ensuring that participation rates were maintained (Sweeney, 1998). The government abolished tuition fees in 1996 as part of their strategy to encourage students to participate and complete their higher education studies. The abolition of fees applied to undergraduate courses only and aimed to remove any financial or psychological barriers to participation at third level (Denny, 2014). This decision to abolish undergraduate fees was, according to Denny (2014), and Clancy and Kehoe (1999), a very significant development in Ireland's higher education history. The removal of higher education fees, these authors posit, had a profound impact on Ireland's social and economic development.

Clearly, Ireland's higher education system has developed and advanced significantly over the last 100 years. Moreover, in more recent years, private higher education institutions have also become an important part of Ireland's HE system. The following sub-section will outline the growth and development of private colleges in Ireland, and identify their particular characteristics.

## 2.2.2 The Irish Private Higher Education Sector

An important feature of higher education both globally and in Ireland is the establishment and prominence of private higher education institutions and their coexistence alongside public higher education institutions. *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) suggests that private higher education institutions are likely to play a role in Ireland's future higher education system, and the demand for public higher education is likely to decrease as private higher education institutions continue to grow and absorb more students. Walsh (2013) and Hennessy (2013) also believe that the contribution of private HEIs in Ireland will continue to grow, as they compete with public HEIs for public funding, to deliver specialist programmes.

To provide some context for the growth and development of Ireland's private higher education sector, it is worthwhile to first discuss private higher education in a global context. Higher education in many ancient societies was largely concerned with private individuals and organisations, because universities and colleges were set up by private individuals and trusts. Additionally, private higher education originated and grew in the past mainly for reasons of charity and philanthropy on the one hand, and to support governmental efforts in the spread of education, on the other (Tilak, 2008). More recently, according to Levy (2006), private higher education now takes many forms ranging from the small, highly specialised for-profit institutions to large, non-profit institutions offering a diverse array of programmes. While non-profit institutions continue to be the dominant provider in most parts of the world, Salerno (2004) believes that the growth of for-profits has been quite remarkable and points to an American example, the University of Phoenix, which is now the largest private university in America, to illustrate how successful private higher education organisations have become.

While private education is not a new phenomenon, the nature of current private education is very different from that of the past. Growth in private higher education has occurred primarily because of excess demand for higher education (James, 1993). Tilak (2008), in a

similar opinion to James (1993), stated that in many countries, particularly developing countries, there is excess demand for higher education, over and above the supply that the government provides. The excess demand is then met by the private sector. Furthermore, Steier (2003) claims that the growth of private institutions in response to rising demand, has been much more rapid in developing countries such as Kenya and Jordan, than in most OECD countries. Salerno (2004) maintains that in places such as the United States of America and France, private universities have not only always co-existed with the public sector, but have grown into some of the most prestigious higher education establishments in the world. In other regions, particularly parts of Southeast Asia, private higher education institutions are the dominant providers of tertiary education. In Portugal, for example, private universities have expanded in less than a decade to represent 30 percent of tertiary education institutions, and they enrol close to 40 percent of the total student population (Salerno, 2004). The expansion of private tertiary education is also regarded as a factor of diversification in higher education systems around the world (Bernasconi, 2006).

Ireland has experienced an increase in the establishment of private higher education institutions over the last century all of which contribute to Ireland's higher education system alongside public HE organisations (www.hea.ie). Walsh (2013) believes that the growth of private colleges in Ireland is particularly surprising considering the restrictive policies placed on private higher education institutions. Additionally, Walsh (2014) believes that the presence of private providers in Ireland's higher education system is a positive development as it stimulates competition between higher education institutions. Private institutions in Ireland, that operate side-by-side with the publicly funded higher education institutions, are primarily involved in the provision of business and professional educational training. Courses on offer include disciplines, such as Accountancy and Business Studies, Law, Humanities, Hotel and Catering, Tourism Studies and Art. Several of the programmes offered by these colleges are validated by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and some have links with universities and/or professional associations, through which the courses on offer are accredited (Education Ireland, 2011).

According to O'Donnell (2011), the two largest private HEIs in Ireland are Dublin Business School, with over 9,000 full and part-time students, and Griffith College Dublin, with campuses in Cork and Limerick, totaling over 8,000 full and part-time students. Dublin Business School offers a range of courses in accounting and a variety of other branches of

business and arts, law, psychology, and social science. The college is owned by an American company, Kaplan, the education division of the Washington Post company. Griffith College Dublin offers courses at honours degree, ordinary degree, and higher certificate level in, for example, business, accounting and finance, law, journalism and media communications, interior architecture, and fashion design. Another college, contributing to Ireland's private higher education spectrum is the Hibernia College, Ireland's only online college to be accredited by Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Hibernia College, based in Dublin, is a private online course provider operating in Ireland for over ten years. The college is best known for its School of Education and, according to Donnelly (2013), the college produces the largest amount of primary school teachers in Ireland. The capacity that Hibernia has for training teachers will assist in the future demand for teachers as the education systems adjusts to Ireland's population increase (Flynn, 2011). Furthermore, Hibernia College is a profitable private enterprise and it has generated profits close to €4 million in 2010 (Flynn, 2011). Programmes in the private colleges are not covered by the free tuition fees scheme or third-level maintenance schemes, although students can avail of tax relief on fees for many courses in these colleges (O'Donnell, 2011). Dublin Business School, Griffith College and Hibernia College are vocal about maintaining standards and representing students to their best ability, this is demonstrated through their membership of the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) (www.heca.ie).

The aforementioned colleges, together with five other privately owned colleges, came together to form HECA, in 1991. The Higher Education Colleges Association represents its members on boards such as Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Membership with HECA is restricted to private colleges that meet and maintain high standards of quality (www.heca.ie). The ability of HECA members to differentiate themselves from non-regulated private operators was one of the primary reasons for the formation of the association (www.heca.ie). According to Hegarty (2011):

> *Through its (HECAs) ethos of quality and by demanding high standards of education from its members, it is now viewed as the official voice of independent third and fourth level education* (www.heca.ie).

Some of Ireland's leading private colleges are represented by HECA, which perform a number of important functions on behalf of their members. Group representation for private higher education institutions will perhaps become more important as *The National Strategy*

*for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) predicts that over the next two decades the number of private providers operating in Ireland is likely to grow. Additionally, the strategy states that private colleges may deliver modules and programmes, in instances where public colleges are not performing effectively, and also when demand cannot be met by public colleges. Private higher education institutions, therefore, play an important contributory role in Irish third level education, and combined with universities and institutes of technology, serve the majority of higher education demands. The above mentioned private colleges operate in conjunction with several Irish higher education agencies. Higher education agencies in Ireland and their interaction with higher education institutions will be discussed in the next section.

### 2.2.3 Higher Education Agencies in Ireland

Further to the history and development of public and private higher education institutions in Ireland, it is also important to understand the role of government agencies operating in the Irish higher education spectrum. As the landscape of Ireland's higher education system changed and evolved over the years, so too did the governing departments and agencies operating in the education spectrum. The public and private higher education organisations operating in Ireland are facilitated and governed, at varying degrees, by government educational agencies. There are numerous government agencies involved in Ireland's higher education system which contribute to the provision and maintenance of Ireland's higher education model. The agencies that have the most impact on higher education in Ireland will now be discussed.

An important element of Ireland's higher education system is the Higher Education Authority which is the statutory planning and policy development body for higher education and research in Ireland. The HEA has wide advisory powers throughout the whole of the higher level education sector. Additionally, it is the funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology and a variety of designated higher education institutions (www.hea.ie).

The mission statement of the HEA is:

> *To foster the development of a higher education sector which is accessible to all potential students and which is recognised internationally for the high quality of teaching, learning and research and which has the capacity to address the changing needs and challenges in our society* (www.hea.ie).

The HEA aims to develop higher education and to ensure all higher education institutions meet the standards they set, thus, ensuring that students receive a quality education. The functionality and development of individual HE organisations are heavily reliant on the decisions and rulings of the HEA, as the HEA assists in coordinating state investment into Irish higher education. The HEA, on behalf of the state, plays a principle role in recognising the demand for higher education and meeting that demand, thereby, stimulating the development of Irish higher education (www.hea.ie). Additionally, the accessibility of higher education in Ireland has been a prominent function of the HEA, which has also contributed to the advancement of Irish higher education over the last 20 years (www.hea.ie).

Ireland's higher education model also relies on a framework that sets and establishes standards and qualifications for programmes within higher education institutions. The body responsible for this is the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), established in 2001. The primary function of the NQAI is to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition, and award of qualifications and some of their functions overlap with the HEA. Students participating in the Irish higher education sector have been able to progress and develop their education, due in part, to the clear, unambiguous and accessible framework established by the NQAI (www.nqai.ie). Since its inception, the NQAI has positively contributed to the current state of higher education in Ireland.

A further body central to Ireland's higher education system is the Central Applications Office. In 1976, the Central Applications Office (CAO) was created to control the applications made to higher education institutions for undergraduate courses. The CAO's purpose is to process applications centrally and to deal with them in a fair and efficient manner (www.cao.ie).

Another body that has relevance in the history and development of public and private higher education in Ireland is HETAC (the Higher Education and Training Awards Council). HETAC was established in 2001, under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. It succeeded the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) and is the qualifications awarding body for third-level education and training institutions outside the university sector. HETAC has responsibility for establishing standards, accrediting programmes and awarding qualifications across all levels of higher education and training. HETAC, additionally, provides a quality improvement service to registered educational institutions to ensure Ireland's higher education sector continues to meet and raise standards

(www.hetac.ie). In November 2012, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was created. Quality and Qualifications Ireland replaced HETAC and has also incorporated responsibility for the maintenance, development and review of NQAI.

A number of the relevant government bodies that play a part in Ireland's higher education system have been briefly detailed above. While there are also other government departments and agencies, such as the Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), for example, which HE institutions and their managers correspond with, a review of the literature suggests that the aforementioned agencies are the most prominent. Understanding the role and function of these agencies serves to further establish and enhance the understanding of how Ireland's higher education system has evolved, and currently functions today. Before concluding this section on the history and development of Irish public and private higher education, however, it is necessary to present an overview of the most recent developments in Ireland's higher education system.

## 2.2.4 An Overview of the Most Recent Developments in Ireland's Higher Education System

In the last five to eight years several developments have occurred, such as Ireland's economic decline, which have had implications for Ireland's higher education institutions, such as reduced budgets, resource constraints, and increased competition. *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) summarises some of the most significant developments in Ireland's higher education system, particularly pertaining to student participation, undergraduate fees, and funding challenges within Ireland, stating:

> *Irish higher education is now at a point of transition: the number of people entering the system is growing and the profile of students is changing. Unemployment and changing patterns of work bring new urgency and a much greater emphasis on lifelong learning and upskilling. A high proportion of the skills that we need now in the workforce are high-order knowledge-based skills, many of which can be acquired only in higher education institutions. The development of the higher education system in the years to 2030 will take place initially in an environment of severe constraints on public finances* (The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, 2011:4).

According to *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) in 2009, the number of new entrants into Irish higher education stood at 42,500. More recently, the HEA (2012) estimate that the total number of students enrolled in publically funded institutions is over 196,000. In addition to the increased student retention rates at second level, the national strategy also acknowledges that high unemployment rates in Ireland have been a contributing factor to increased participation rates at third level. Furthermore, participation rates at third level are set to rise because there is also demand from those currently in employment, who are interested in upskilling and retraining opportunities. Table 2.1 illustrates the past, current and future predictions of learners entering the Irish higher education system.

**Table 2.1 New Entrants to Higher Education, Current and Projected Demand**

| | 2009 | | 2015 | | 2025 | | 2030 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | % of Total | Number | % of Total | Number | % of Total | Number | % of Total |
| Direct | 29,982 | 70 | 30,621 | 61.8 | 34,227 | 52.8 | 33,558 | 52.3 |
| Late | 3,855 | 9 | 4,459 | 9 | 5,843 | 9 | 5,775 | 9 |
| Mature | 5,568 | 13 | 8,919 | 18 | 16,229 | 25 | 16,041 | 25 |
| International | 3,426 | 8 | 5,500 | 14.2 | 8,569 | 13.2 | 8,790 | 13.7 |
| **Total** | **42,831** | **100** | **49,549** | **100** | **64,918** | **100** | **64,164** | **100** |

Source: The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (2011:44).

The estimated and projected growth for the Irish higher education system will be a significant challenge for the publicly-funded system to respond to and serve effectively, particularly with the existing funding model:

> *Recurrent annual funding is currently at €1.3 billion, and in today's values this would need to rise to €1.8 billion by 2020, and to €2.25 billion by 2030 just to maintain current levels of resource per-student* (The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, 2011:111).

Over 85 per cent of Ireland's higher education funding is derived from public sources compared to an EU average of 81.1% (OECD, 2009). *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011), therefore, suggests that because of Ireland's low levels of private investment, high levels of anticipated demand, and constraints on public finances, Ireland urgently needs to look elsewhere to source funding. One such source *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) mention is 'increased individual contributions'. The government's 2013 and 2014 budgets stated that the student contribution will rise to a maximum of €3000 for the 2015/2016 academic year (the Department of Education and Skills, 2014). *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) suggests that the proposed increase in student registration fees is perhaps unavoidable as a more substantial student contribution is required to maintain standards and enrich the students' higher education experience. The issue of student fees is gaining a substantial amount of political and public attention:

> *The big political hot-potato is tuition fees, otherwise referred to as the student contribution. Politically, the re-introduction of tuition fees was always going to be highly contentious because the main beneficiaries were the vocal middle class. While their abolition did not bring electoral benefit, any suggestion of their reintroduction is likely to provoke a backlash which neither government party can afford. Nonetheless, the large public deficit dictates that position is no longer tenable* (Hazelkorn, 2013: 8).

The Irish government is currently assessing a range of options to address the HE funding gap, such as the introduction of a tuition fee, a means-tested contribution, and a restriction of student numbers nationally (Hazelkorn, 2014). As outlined by Denny (2014), and Clancy and Kehoe (1999), third level education fees were abolished in the 1990s and the abolition of fees, subsequently, made higher education more accessible to the general population. For this reason, therefore, there are some concerns in relation to the reintroduction of fees, directly or indirectly. Denny (2010) believes it could be potentially damaging for Ireland's societal development and progress, if fees were to be re-introduced as the re-establishment of fees would, by default, exclude particular groups of Ireland's population from gaining a third level qualification.

A further recent development to occur is the public sector recruitment moratorium or freeze on recruitment, and most notably for the public education and health sectors, the Employment Control Framework (ECF). When the ECF was first announced in 2009, there was a requirement for public higher education institutions to reduce their teaching and support staff by 6%; the government outlined and agreed the specific details with the individual public higher education institutions. The Department of Finance, through the ECF, required higher education institutions to stay within an agreed number of authorised posts and higher education institutions were only permitted to fill essential academic and support posts (www.finance.gov.ie). Following the first ECF, a second ECF was announced for the period of 2011 – 2013. The second ECF displays some distinctive differences to the initial ECF, which only included core staff. The second ECF, however, includes all staff employed in the higher education sector, for example:

- Core-funded staff, i.e. mainstream posts funded from the Core Grant, undergraduate tuition fees (including grant in lieu of fees), Student Services Charge and the new Student Contribution being introduced in 2011
- Non core-funded Research and related project posts, including commercialisation posts, funded from Exchequer resources external to the institution
- Other Research and/or Specialist project-based posts funded from non-exchequer sources: EU research and other grants, private sector income, international student income, postgraduate and part-time fees - but not including full-time EU undergraduate tuition fees/student contributions as non-Exchequer, non-core income (NUIM, 2011:1).

The Irish government is not unique in introducing measures, designed to cut costs and become more efficient, to its higher education sector. According to Douglass (2010), during periods of economic difficulty, governments typically employ measures, similar to the ECF, to bring about reform and to promote efficiencies within higher education institutions. Despite the intentions of the government, since its introduction, the ECF has attracted a significant amount of attention particularly from Irish academics. In particular, the second employment control framework has stimulated much discussion, including some criticism. One such criticism put forward by Boland (2011), relates to the perceived reduction in autonomy that ECF measures impose:

*Employment control frameworks, ordinarily, should have no place in a higher education system. They inevitably impact on institutional autonomy* (www.independent.ie).

The second employment control framework shifts the power of appointing and approving new positions from the higher education institutions to the Higher Education Authority. According to Garvin (2011), the presence of this framework impinges upon the levels of autonomy previously bestowed upon higher education institutions and their employees. More recently, Salmi (2013), proposed that higher education managers and senior academics need sufficient levels of autonomy. He suggests that world-class institutions are characterised by favourable governance conditions, which include high levels of autonomy and academic freedom (Salmi, 2013). Salmi also advocates that developing world-class higher education institutions is dependent on the cultivation and prioritisation of a higher education eco-system with several intrinsic characteristics, such as abundant resources and favourable governance. The argument made by many higher education authors in Ireland (Robbins and Lapsley, 2014; Harmon, 2011; Von Prondzynski, 2011; Garvin, 2010), in relation to the employment control framework, however, is that it is too restrictive and it prohibits individual higher education institutions from investing in key areas which will, ultimately, impact upon their global competitiveness:

*The ECF means we are stalled in getting projects off the blocks that have been secured, and with great embarrassment find ourselves having to return to funders to explain this. I can think of no other example globally where this sort of centralized approval process has been enforced on externally funded appointments, so explaining this is a tough call* (www.universitydiary.wordpress.com)

The introduction of the ECF is a relatively recent development to occur in the Irish higher education sector. With the exception of Robbins and Lapsley (2014), who criticise the government, and subsequently the ECF, for their lack of creative solutions in relation to higher education cost savings, there are few publications available on the impact of the ECF on Ireland's HE system. Commentary and discussion on the ECF, rather, is most commonly

put forward by academics and those involved in higher education policy, in the form of Irish higher education websites, blogs, or in the media.

Further recent developments to occur in the Irish public higher education sector include the proposal by the government to create university clusters and a new technological university (TU) sector. The proposal for institutional mergers, in Ireland's public HE sector, first started to emerge in the 1960s when it was proposed that Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin merge. This proposal never came to fruition. The most recent proposals, however, are being pursued by the government and the process has evolved substantially since the publication of the government's national HE strategy. Walsh (2014: 1), however, believes that the most recent proposals are far more persistent, and essentially viewed by the government as a "convenient solution for Ireland's economic and societal problems".

The recent developments and proposals for higher education consolidations and mergers are part of the government's plan to create a higher education sector that is more efficient and effective. Authors such as Ylijoki (2014), Aula and Tienari (2011), and Altbach and Salmi (2011) note that higher education reform usually involves the merging and consolidation of existing higher education institutions, with the specific aim of developing a HE system that avoids duplications among higher education institutions. According to the HEA (2012), a significant amount of reform is required for the Irish higher education system because of the unplanned development of Irish higher education over the years:

> *There has been a growing concern that while the laissez-faire development of the Irish higher education system has achieved successes in some areas – higher participation and research activity - it has also led to mission drift, confusion over the role and mission of institutions, growing institutional homogeneity, unnecessary duplication and fears about the quality and sustainability of the system* (Higher Education Authority, 2012: 5).

Hazelkorn (2014) credits the global financial crisis for the policy changes that the Irish government have had to face in relation to the higher education system. The reform, most prominently referred to in *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011), and in subsequent HEA documents, presents itself in the form of structural solutions, such as:

- The consolidation of small institutions through mergers

- The formation of regional clusters of collaborating institutions

- The formation of mission-based clusters in areas of national importance straddling regions (Higher Education Authority, 2012: 8).

Although the Irish government's most recent reports outline the necessity to reform the entire higher education system, Hazelkorn (2014) believes that *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) primarily focuses on the reformation of the IoT sector. In reforming the higher education system, the Irish government aims to reduce the number of higher education institutions but increase the system's critical mass and scale in order that the system can satisfactorily serve the needs of its student population (HEA, 2013). In relation to the Technological University process, *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011: 90) states that only amalgamated IoTs may apply to become a Technological University. Following this, the amalgamated entities that 'demonstrate significant progress against stated performance criteria' may be re-designated as Technological Universities (*The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, 2011: 103). The implementation phase is now in progress and amalgamated IOTs which have applied for TU re-designation expect the process to continue into 2015 and perhaps beyond (Murphy and Murphy, 2013). With regard to the proposal to merge existing higher education institutions in Ireland, Cartwright and Cooper (2007) posit that the period before a merger can be a stressful and uncertain time for HE managers and employees, as there tends to be a vacuum of information available about the future. In addition, authors such as Maguire and Phillips (2008), and Van Dick *et al*. (2006) state that merging higher education institutions can raise challenges for organisational identity, and furthermore, the ability of employees to be able to identify with the new merged entity.

Several developments such as the economic financial crisis have also contributed to a complex and volatile environment in which Ireland's higher education system operates. The economic crisis has deeply impacted higher education systems across the world, most notably, across aspects such as policy, management and planning (Tsiligiris, 2012). Considering that demand for higher education typically increases during economic downturns, higher education systems globally are facing unprecedented challenges with many governments and individual higher education institutions reconsidering their priorities

and traditional income revenues (Mishima *et al.*, 2012; Douglass, 2010).    These issues are perhaps heightened further by global competition which now dictates that a highly qualified population is required to attract foreign direct investment and accomplish economic objectives (Ravi, 2014; de Weert, 2011). The transformation of higher education in recent years involved the re-evaluation of traditional cost structures and a greater emphasis on return on investment (Mina, 2014).    To illustrate the impact of the financial crisis on higher education systems, Hazelkorn (2014) states that only seven out of twenty European higher education systems believe that their higher education funding situation in 2012 was better than it was in 2008.   Thirteen higher education systems including Ireland, therefore, observed that their funding situation in 2012 had disimproved when compared to 2008.   Costello (2014) and Garvin (2010) vehemently disagree with the cost cutting actions of the Irish government.   These authors believe that the actions of the Irish government, relating to the higher education system, negatively restrict academic employees from effectively carrying out their responsibilities, and the government's short-term cost saving tactics are highly damaging for Ireland's HE system.   Although the government's funding of public HE institutions has diminished, the role that Ireland's HE system is expected to play in Ireland's future economic and social development has not (Hennessy, 2013).

In 2006, the higher education authority introduced a new funding mechanism for its public higher education institutions.  Before 2006, public higher education institutions applied a unit cost allocation model to distribute the core recurrent grant from the State.  This was replaced by the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) that allocates funding based on the type and resource intensity of higher education programmes (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2010).  The RGAM model takes into account the number of Full-Time Student Equivalents (FTSE) to most accurately calculate grant allocation for each respective HEI under their remit (www.tcd.ie, 2013).  The Economic Policy Committee (2011) posit that the RGAM model will help to establish a grant system that is more cohesive, accountable, and transparent. Despite this, Nolan (2012) strongly criticises the Irish government for failing to address the real flaws in Ireland's funding model.  He believes that, even with the new RGAM model, the existing funding model still falls short of adequately financing Ireland's third level students, and that the standard of education delivered to student will suffer as a consequence. Additionally, the national HE strategy indicates that publically funded institutions will move towards a performance-based framework, where a percentage of the core grant will be allocated to institutions based on individual performance metrics.  In relation to Ireland's

private HE sector, in the existing literature, there is no evidence of significant changes to private sector funding structures.

The global economic crisis has, however, also prompted some positive developments within global higher education systems. Douglass (2010) contends that one of the main positive developments to occur is that governments and individual higher education institutions are availing of the opportunity, presented by the economic crisis, to amend and restructure the quality, innovation and efficiency of their operations. In relation to Ireland, however, Lillis and Lynch (2013) believe that, even if Ireland did not experience an economic crash, the existing higher education system was, for many years, in need of some reformation. Finally, it is also important to highlight that the first national strategy for higher education in Ireland was published in 2011, *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. The publication of this strategy was a significant turning point for the Irish higher education system because, as Lillis and Lynch (2013) state, it formalised the process of strategic planning for higher education institutions across Ireland. It also highlighted the role of the Irish higher education sector in the future delivery and performance of Ireland's HE sector. Before its publication, many higher education institutions applied a more *laissez-faire* approach to strategic planning rather than a plan intrinsically linked to prescribed national objectives (Harkin and Hazelkorn, 2014; Lillis and Lynch, 2013). Included in *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, are four pillars that are intended to illustrate the core roles and objectives of the Irish higher education system and its institutions. These four pillars are:

- Teaching and Learning
- Research
- Engagement with wider society
- Internationalising higher education

The strategy also examines the existing governance, structures, and funding of Irish higher education, and outlines general recommendations for improvement and reform. In 2012, a subsequent report was published entitled, *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape*, which further elaborated on the recommendations outlined in the national strategy report. The *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape* (2012) report provided more detail on the government's vision and plans to reform higher education governance, structures, and

funding. In particular, this report included more clarification on the topic of academic contracts:

> *The leadership management and governance arrangement in place will be fully reflective of and in line with the stated mission of the institution. In practice this will mean: workplace practices and employment contracts that are reflective of modern university including, inter alia, such matters as the flexible delivery of programmes for diverse learner groups, the length and structure of the academic year, the efficient utilisation of the institution's physical resources and other infrastructure* (Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape, 2012: 17 – 18).

Hazelkorn (2014), on the subject of employment contracts in Irish public higher education institutions, suggests that there have been some positive developments with unions, but, that it is difficult to see how this will evolve in the future.

In summary, the Irish higher education system has continued to develop at a steady pace since the inception of Trinity College Dublin in 1592. The creation of the Regional Technical Colleges (now Institutes of Technology) and the introduction of multiple private higher education providers have individually and collectively contributed towards a more diverse and open higher education system. In addition, higher education institutions in Ireland are supported and intrinsically linked with the various higher education agencies in operation, all of which play a substantial role in contributing to Ireland's higher education system. At present, partly as a result of the challenges presented by the current economic environment, Ireland's higher education system is going through a period of radical reform with the proposal, and preparations, to introduce a new Technological University sector and several university clusters. In addition to the changes occurring in the national context, there are currently several global factors that are having a significant influence on higher education, and which have implications for the Irish higher education system. The global factors that feature most prominently in the literature review, will be outlined in the following section.

## 2.3 Factors Influencing Higher Education Institutions

### 2.3.1 Introduction

While there are an infinite number of factors influencing higher education systems and institutions around the world, for the purpose of this research, the most salient factors in the existing literature will be outlined. The first part of this section will briefly outline a broad number of factors, which feature in the existing literature, which are impacting higher education systems and public and private HE institutions, such as technology, and competition. Following this, four particular factors, which feature prominently in existing higher education discourses, will be explored in greater detail. These factors are massification, globalisation, internationalisation, and commercialisation. Later in this section, a further justification for focusing, in particular, on these four influencing factors is put forward.

Higher education has rapidly evolved and changed over the last fifty years (Siemens and Matheos, 2010). The global economic crisis is affecting higher education systems in many countries and causing governments to rethink their higher education policy and governance structures (Hazelkorn, 2014). Additionally, there is now a much more varied student population in global higher education systems which can present challenges for individual higher education institutions (Eggins, 2011). In a report carried out for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, Altbach *et al*. (2009) outlined massification, globalisation, competition, and information communications technology as being significant occurrences in higher education over the last half century. The increasing presence of market forces (or commercialisation) within higher education has also been identified as a formidable force and one that has impacted the nature of higher education (Brown and Carasso, 2013; Hazelkorn, 2009). Moreover, most recently, authors such as Hesselbarth and Schaltegger (2014), and van Liempd (2013) suggest an increasing emphasis is being placed on higher education institutions to practice and teach corporate social responsibility. Riccaboni and Trovarelli (2015), in a similar opinion, believe that public and private higher education institutions perform an integral role in influencing society and policy-makers towards a more sustainably oriented way of life.

A highly influential report by UNESCO (2009) chartered the main factors impacting higher education, and stated that information communications technology (ICT) was one of the key factors influencing global higher education. Information communications technology in

education refers to all the present-day digital tools, such as computers, accessories and the internet that can be incorporated into higher education to assist and support education at all levels (Tsolakidis, 2004). Information communications technology's impact on, and interaction with, public and private higher education has been widely publicised (Bowen, 2015; Chen and Chen, 2014; Khan and Markauskaite, 2013; Larsen and Vincent-Lancrin, 2006; Kirkup and Kirkwood, 2005). The advancements of the internet forced higher education institutions to assess new ways of teaching, learning and carrying out research. Thompson (2012) and Bennett *et al.* (2008) discuss the rise of the 'digital native' (a term coined to describe those born after the 1980s), which they posit has occurred because young learners are highly exposed to digital media activities during their developmental years. These students, therefore, think and learn differently than previous generations, and as a consequence, HE systems around the world have had to reassess their provision of education (Stromquist and Monkman, 2014; Rideout *et al.*, 2010). Technological advances, for example, have created a shift within higher education institutions, and higher education institutions that previously were more reliant on the traditional "chalk and talk" approach are now utilising new methods supported by technology that promote a more collaborative and reflective learning environment (Hainey *et al.*, 2014). In addition, ICT has assisted higher education institutions in exploring new and more efficient ways to deliver programmes, as well as enhancing pedagogy techniques and methods (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2014). Information communications technology has, therefore, impacted higher education across a variety of dimensions, such as:

- Advances in ICT, have a direct correlation to the increase in distance and life-long learners entering the higher education system.
- Higher education research is supported through information communications technology both within and across the institution. Information communications technology also assists higher education institutions around the world to collaborate and share research projects and findings.
- Information communications technology has affected other aspects of higher education operations such as administration, finance and management operations (Altbach *et al.*, 2009: 124)

Information communication technology is not only revolutionising the provision of education, but is also changing the way in which higher education institutions brand and

market themselves (Daj and Chirca, 2009). Information communication technology introduces new avenues for higher education institutions to market themselves to a global audience via communication platforms such as YouTube, iTunes U and Facebook (Wilen-Dougenti and McKee, 2008). The advances in ICT have also contributed to the rise and prominence of the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) in recent years. van Liempd (2013), in particular, believes that 2013 was an important year for the MOOCs because it prompted higher education institutions around the world to examine how they can take advantage of technology to deliver a more tailored educational experience to their students. Ultimately, the MOOCs have encouraged HE organisations to embrace more styles of embedded education. Additionally, ICT is vastly accelerating the provision of higher education from in-class instruction toward online instruction, and, importantly, the MOOCs offer a valuable opportunity to make higher education more accessible to students around the world (Nafukho, 2015; Eisenberg and Fischer, 2014).

Although Larsen and Vicent-Lancrin (2006) posit that ICT within higher education has not reached its full potential, the possibilities of ICT within higher education are endless and will continue to provide innovative teaching opportunities beyond the classroom. Another factor that has had a significant impact on public and private higher education is the existence of increased competition within the sector (Blanco-Ramirez and Berger, 2014; Malsen, 2012; Lopez and Pereya, 2007; Armstrong, 2000).

The increase in competition has occurred, in part, because of the influence of globalisation (Wood and Robertson, 2015). Globalisation has made it easier for students to travel abroad for their third level education, therefore, higher education institutions now find themselves competing for a portion of the international student market (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Within this competitive environment, therefore, the marketing efforts of higher education institutions have seen a marked change over the years with institutes aiming to attract a high standard of researchers, lecturers, and students in an effort to stand out from their competitors (Alstete, 2015; Armstrong, 2000). Competition within higher education institutions can arise from two distinct but overlapping sources: national and global competition (De Haan, 2015). With national competition, prospective students compare and contrast the educational offerings of higher education institutions within their home nation. Global competition, on the other hand, stretches beyond national borders and involves the evaluation and comparison of higher education institutions around the world (Alstete, 2015; Marginson, 2006). In this competitive environment, national governments and their higher

education institutions have become more focused on accountability and quality assurance (Fumasoli *et al*., 2015). Previously, Hazelkorn (2007) expressed a similar sentiment in relation to the expectations now placed upon HEIs:

> *Achieving greater accountability, improving the quality and relevance of programmes and research, and enforcing sharper differentiation between institutions* (Hazelkorn, 2007: 80).

League tables and ranking systems are further examples of the existence of competition within higher education (De Haan, 2015; Taylor, 2012; Altbach, 2010; Hazelkorn, 2007). Increased competition has emphasised the use and popularity of league tables and ranking systems which were previously relatively confined to American universities (Hazelkorn, 2007). In the highly competitive higher education sector, league tables can be of assistance to governments, students, and indeed the higher education institutions themselves. Through the use of league tables, students can evaluate and compare the offerings of individual institutions, governments can inform their decisions as they relate to the allocation of funding, and HE institutes can benchmark themselves against leading institutions (Altbach, 2010). Altbach (2010) states that a competitive environment can generally be healthy for higher education institutions because it can contribute to and attract attention to educational quality.

Moreover, as competition for students is intense higher education institutions are examining how they can attract and retain students by focusing on, and improving, the academic and social experiences of individual students (Drumbridge *et al*., 2013). In the United Kingdom, for example, research conducted by Brown and Carasso (2013) demonstrates that increased competition has been very beneficial for higher education institutions. Brown and Carsso (2013) found that increased competition has, for example, encouraged individual public and private HE institutions to increase efficiencies and develop stronger management structures. On the other hand, Taylor (2012) believes that intense competition can cause an institute to direct attention and resources towards the institute's image and, thereby, promote inefficient spending on, for example, reactive marketing tactics. Furthermore, Taylor (2012) believes that higher education institutions which are overly focussed on competing can be more risk adverse, often make short-term decisions, and tend to be concerned with the physical attributes of their institute. Responding to competitive pressures in this style, therefore, can create a cycle of competition that is often very costly (Taylor, 2012).

Ultimately, Salmi (2013) believes that competing with higher education rivals and closest competitors can be very costly for individual institutions, and their nations. Competing to become a world-class higher education institution requires strong government leadership and non-government revenue streams, as well as the strategic recruitment and retention of high calibre academics (Salmi, 2013). A shortage or insufficient level of government and non-government funds will limit an institution's ability to compete with the world's best institutions and, ultimately, to become a *world-class* institution (Wang and Cai Lui, 2014).

In addition to emerging global developments such as ICT and competition, authors such as Stromquist and Monkman (2014), and Adombent *et al*. (2014) believe that developments which occur in geopolitical areas such as the European Union impact on the operations and priorities of individual higher education institutions. The European Union, for example, have orchestrated three key developments, in particular, which have had an impact on the higher education frameworks throughout Europe. These are the Sorbonne Joint Declaration (1998) the Bologna Declaration (1999), and the Lisbon Strategy (2000). The Sorbonne and Bologna Declaration set about creating and supporting a compatible and cohesive higher education system across Europe. The Lisbon Strategy sought to make the European Union the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. Higher Education, therefore, was considered a significant and important contributor to this particular objective (Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, 2006). These three declarations (or strategies) have, subsequently, had an influence on higher education systems throughout Europe. Individual nations and their higher education institutions have had to adapt their operations and activities to align with the objectives and measures outlined in the respective declarations:

> *When the European Ministers of Education signed the Bologna Declaration in June 1999 they committed themselves, and engaged their countries, to fundamental changes within their higher education system* (Hedberg, 2003:1).

According to Aldeman (2009), forty-six countries in Europe have been engaged in reconstructing their higher education systems to bring about a greater degree of convergence, as per the Bologna Declaration (also known as the Bologna Process). This impacts 4,000 institutions and 16 million students. Through their participation in the Bologna process, these 4,000 institutions have committed to harmonising academic degree standards and quality assurance frameworks in order to establish a common European higher education region

(Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2012). The harmonising of academic degrees, most notably through the introduction of a system of Bachelor and Master Degrees, significantly impacted countries such as Finland, Germany and Italy who had distinctly different processes in place. Ireland was less impacted by these changes because it already had a similar system established. Another dimension to the Bologna Agreement involved the establishment of a system of learning outcomes. Higher education institutions, therefore, had to adapt existing programmes to ensure that their programmes successfully accounted for these learning outcomes (McMahon, 2010). In addition to influencing factors such as ICT and competition, it is evident that the Irish higher education system has been and continues to be directly impacted by decisions made by the European Union.

Particular attention will now be directed towards four of the most prominent influencing factors: massification, globalisation, internationalisation, and commercialisation because they feature heavily in the current higher education literature. First, the effects of higher education massification and expansion on the operations and functions of public and private higher education institutions will be outlined.

## 2.3.2 Higher Education Massification and Expansion

Earlier in this chapter and in Chapter One, massification was referred to in the context of the growth and expansion of Ireland's higher education system and institutions. Massification is credited as one of the most significant factors that has, and continues, to influence higher education systems around the world (Shin, 2014; Palfreyman and Tapper, 2008). The rapid and expansive growth taking place within higher education has also stimulated numerous implications, which the following section will outline in detail. First, in relation to higher education massification, Guri-Rosenblit *et al*. (2007) stated that:

> *The massive expansion of higher education across all continents has been one of*
> *the defining features of the late 20th and early 21st centuries* (Guri-Rosenblit *et al.*
> 2007:1).

Gumport *et al.* (1997) define massification as the unprecedented growth and expansion of higher education. Massification can refer to the number of students participating, and/or the number of higher education institutions operating, in the higher education sector. Sociologist Martin Trow (1970) was responsible for coining the terms that characterise the expansion of higher education, such as 'mass', 'elite' and 'universal' higher education. Trow (1970) states

that massification occurs when up to 50% of a country's total population enrols in higher education. More recently, however, Altbach *et al.* (2009) posit that mass higher education is achieved when more than 40% of a country's population enrol in higher education. In relation to higher education enrolment numbers, Varghese (2013) states that gross enrolment percentages throughout the world have risen from 13.8% in 1990 to 29% in 2010, firmly cementing massification's presence within higher education.

The United States of America was the first to reach mass enrolment (Altbach *et al.*, 2009). Ireland, however, also falls into the massification bracket as more than half of annual secondary school graduates now progress onto higher education (Irish Higher Education Authority, 2011). Additionally, figures released by Eurostat (2013) revealed that Ireland had the highest attainment of higher education qualifications, 51%, among the age category 30 – 34. The massification and expansion of higher education has occurred for a variety of reasons and at different paces throughout the world. It is useful, therefore, to chart the development of higher education massification and to explore the reasons for its occurrence.

There are many causes for the expansion of higher education. One of the principal reasons put forward for the growth in higher education by many authors is the rapid and deep changes that have taken place in society (Hornsby and Osman, 2014; Walsh 2009; Schofer and Meyer 2005). These changes have made HE more accessible and attainable. There has been a change in societal behaviours and attitudes that have made higher education more favourable and desirable among the broader public (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). Achieving a higher education qualification, for example, has become more acceptable and the norm in many societies, just like secondary education previously did (Marquina and Ferreiro, 2015; Walsh, 2009). Schofer and Meyer (2005), furthermore, believe that higher education expansion is more likely to occur when certain conditions are in place. They state that enrolment in higher education tends to increase when a country: is strategically placed in the world economy/society; has high secondary enrolments; and has weak government control over higher education (Schofer and Meyer, 2005: 2).

Many countries consider the massification of their HE systems as desirable because a more educated and knowledgeable work force is beneficial for economic and social development (Hornsby and Osman, 2014). In relation to Ireland, there are particular social developments, largely linked to political or governmental actions, which have taken place and have influenced the expansion and growth of higher education. The expansion of Irish higher

education was, in part due to government efforts to facilitate greater equality of opportunity, across all groups of society. A financial aid system, for example, was introduced by the government in 1992/1993 to promote greater access and HE attendance (Clancy, 1997). The actions taken by the Irish government at that time to increase higher education access to all groups in society, contributed to the expansion of higher education, although some groups did not enrol at the same levels as others (O'Reilly, 2008). An additional government action that created changes to Irish society, and, ultimately, contributed to mass higher education in Ireland, was the decision to abolish all undergraduate fees in 1996 (Clancy, 2007). Furthermore, from the 1970s onward, a wider variety of programmes and disciplines offered by HE institutions attracted and encouraged more people to enrol in higher education (Coate and MacLabhrainn, 2008). The combination of these factors contributed to a larger and more varied higher education system in Ireland was previously available.

From a global perspective, Schofer and Meyer (2005:3) believe that not only has higher education expanded in terms of the volume of students, it has also expanded in terms of 'scope and centrality', as higher education now encompasses a diverse range of disciplines and missions. The higher education sector has, in particular, experienced the rise and prominence of business departments and schools. These business schools are in part, a response to, and because of, the changes to the structure and requirements of the global labour market (Schofer and Meyer, 2008). The labour market has changed significantly and now many positions are allocated based on a person's higher education qualification. In addition, several industries that previously did not require their employees to have qualifications are now using higher education qualifications as part of their screening process for hiring new employees (Ischinger, 2007). The expectations and demands of the labour market have also contributed to the increase in those choosing to obtain a higher education qualification, and indeed, for the increase in the number of private providers entering the HE sector to meet this extra demand (Teixeira *et al*., 2013).

An additional cause for the expansion of higher education was cited by several authors who posit that higher education massification was triggered when the structure of national and global economies changed (Altbach *et al.*, 2009; Coate and MacLabhrainn, 2008; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). The mass demand for public and private sector higher education, in particular, was driven by the global transition to a post-industrial economy, the progression of the service industry and the evolvement of the knowledge economy (Altbach *et al.,* 2009). These economic changes affect national higher education systems in many countries around

the world equally and simultaneously. Similarly, Teichler (2004) believes that massification of higher education can largely be attributed to, a rather specific higher education policy, adopted by economically advanced countries around the world. This viewpoint maintained that future economic progression and advancement was dependent on the development of an educational policy that prioritised the expansion of higher education.

The massification and expansion of higher education has also caused governments to reassess the funding of their publicly funded institutions. Some countries such as Denmark and Finland, for example, in response to HE expansion, have invested heavily in their higher education systems and structures (Ischinger, 2007). Although Denmark and Finland are purposely targeting HE expansion and massification there is evidence to suggest that most OECD countries are also adapting their systems and structures to cope more effectively with massification developments and predictions (Ischinger, 2007).

The mass expansion of higher education, however, has not escaped criticism. As a result of the increased number of individuals attending higher education and obtaining a HE qualification, Schofer and Meyer (2005) posit that higher education is less appreciated and more taken for granted among society. They believe that substantial attention is directed to removing inequalities and improving access within higher education institutions, without assessing the arising or potential implications of HE massification. Schofer and Meyer (2005), moreover, believe that a massified higher education system has the potential to produce a high percentage of graduates for which there may not be a corresponding number of jobs. Ischinger (2007) also questions whether the increase in a well-educated labour force is matched by an equal amount of high paying positions. As a result of HE massification, she contends, the number of graduates entering the labour market are not always matched by jobs that equal their particular qualification. University graduates, therefore, can end up in jobs that do not use their qualification and acquired skills, and that pay poorly (Ischinger, 2007). The long term effects of the changes, stimulated by higher education massification and expansion, are as yet not fully understood, but they have undoubtedly challenged the traditional practices and programme offerings of most public and private higher education institutions and placed additional pressures on quality assurance systems (Nielsen and Birch Andreasen, 2015; Ogata, 2015; Connell, 2015). In addition:

> *Expansion of higher education in most European countries has brought about the*
> *availability of new qualifications (e.g. the creation of multidisciplinary courses*

*and the relative demise of single honour degrees), the setting-up of new degree programmes, the formal definition of new levels of study (e.g. qualifications at sub-degree level, the development of taught masters degrees) and/or the reorganisation of syllabuses and examination practice (e.g. the development of credit accumulation and transfer* (Macerinkiene and Vaiksnoraite, 2006:87).

A further criticism of the massification and expansion of higher education is the pressure it applies to existing national HE frameworks and individual HEI structures. Within the higher education system, the academic profession is under more stress than ever before (Guri-Rosenblit, 2007) because higher education institutions around the world are forced to respond to increasing demands for higher education. Additionally, the average qualification for academics in many countries has declined, as individual higher education institutions struggle to recruit suitably qualified academic staff to cater for the demand applied by a massified student population (Monan and Altbach, 2013). Previously, Altbach *et al.* (2009), for example, estimated that almost 50% of the world's higher education teaching staff only hold a Bachelor degree. The expansion of higher education has put significant pressures on national governments and higher education managers, therefore, as they now have to adjust their higher education systems and institutions to more comprehensively mirror the trends in the market (Guri-Rosenblit *et al.*, 2007). An example of this is put forward by Quinn (2011), who believes that the Irish higher education system faces substantial challenges in meeting predicted future demand for higher education which is projected to grow to 72% over the next 20 years.

There are also concerns that increased massification will continue to further alienate specific groups in society. In particular, O'Reilly (2008) believes that although higher education enrolment has grown significantly, there are still some socio-economic groups in Ireland that have a poor history of participation. In recognition of this issue, and in an attempt to overcome access and participation challenges, O'Reilly (2008) states that the Irish government has invested heavily in promoting higher education access to Ireland's lower socio-economic groups.

The criticisms associated with HE massification and expansion have been outlined by authors such as Monan and Altbach (2013), O'Reilly (2008), and Ischinger (2007). There are also, however, some positive effects associated with higher education massification and expansion. The most widely acknowledged benefit of HE massification is that a knowledgeable and

skilled workforce helps to develop and stimulate national and global economies (Anyon, 2014; Beerkens-Soo and Vossensteyn, 2009; Gumport *et al.,* 1997). In a study conducted by Macerinkiene and Vaiksnoraite (2006) to explore the benefits of higher education massification and expansion, they found that the positives of increased higher education enrolments manifest themselves in society and the economy in three different ways. First, the expenditure of the higher education institution, its employees and its students benefit the local economy. Second, the individual who attains a higher education contributes to an enriched society. Third, the research and development focus and investment made by higher education institutions helps stimulate the economy and benefit society (Macerinkiene and Vaiksnoraite, 2006: 87).

As well as contributing to an enriched global society authors, such as Hornsby and Ossman (2014) believe that an increase in the number of higher education graduates results in a higher tax revenue for governments because higher education graduates generally earn more than those without HE qualifications. Additionally, those who engage in higher education tend to be more entrepreneurial and adaptable, therefore, society and the economy benefit when more people obtain a HE qualification (Baum *et al*., 2013). The subject of higher education massification and expansion has caused widespread discussion and in some cases criticisms. Although the positives and negatives of these developments can be argued, the development of massification has had a significant impact on existing higher education systems and structures. In short, Jose-Lemaitre (2009) summarises this major higher education development:

> *Higher education has experienced significant changes...From a relatively encapsulated situation, centered in universities, focused on theoretical and conceptual teaching and learning in the arts, sciences and humanities and in advanced research and scholarship, it has moved to center stage in most countries. It is offered by different providers, to a large and diversified student population, in a wide range of teaching, research, consultancy and service functions* (Jose-Lemaitre, 2009: 1).

While it is apparent that massification is a factor influencing higher education, it is necessary to examine the effect massification is having within the higher education environment. The impact that massification and other factors, have on the internal operations of higher education institutions will be examined in a further section of this chapter. Massification's

influence, in particular, on the role and function of management, and academic quality within public and private higher education institutions, will be outlined.

Globalisation is a further factor occurring alongside massification which has shaped higher education systems and institutions around the world in recent decades (Hazelkorn, 2014). Higher education institutions no longer operate in a regional or national context but within a much wider environment in which knowledge and information moves much more freely (Marginson, 2006). The following subsection explores the development, and impact of, globalisation and internationalisation within higher education systems.

### 2.3.3 The Globalisation of Higher Education

Globalisation is a prominent, multi-dimensional feature of the 21$^{st}$ century, present throughout the world. There are virtually no industries or sectors that have not been affected by globalisation in some shape or form, over the last few decades (Spence, 2011). For the purpose of this research, the existence of globalisation in higher education and its influence on individual public and private institutions will be examined. Globalisation within higher education can be defined as:

>    *The widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness by*
>    *which higher education institutions are being increasingly transformed* (Held *et*
>    *al.*, 1999:2).

Although the influence and impact of globalisation is evident across many industries, Marginson and van der Wende (2006) believe that the higher education sector, in particular, is more susceptible to globalisation than other sectors. They believe that globalisation has particularly affected higher education because knowledge does not pay attention to boundaries. Furthermore, in global knowledge economies, higher education institutions act as the lynchpins for cross-border relationships and the continuous movement of people, information and technology etc. Globalisation is multi-dimensional, and within public and private higher education institutions the existence and effects of globalisation are complex and varied (Stromquist *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, globalisation's effect within higher education is not a standardised process, instead, its effect is unique to each higher education organisation, region, or country in question (Rye, 2014). A similar viewpoint was previously put forward by Marginson and van der Wende (2006), who suggest:

*Globalisation is not a single or universal phenomenon. It is nuanced according to locality (local area, nation, world region), language(s) of use, and academic cultures; and it plays out very differently according to the type of institution* (Marginson and van der Wende, 2006:4*).*

There are several views and opinions on the occurrence and development of globalisation within higher education systems (Wood and Robertson, 2015; Rye, 2014; Alberts, 2010; Vaira, 2004; Forest, 2002). In some cases, higher education institutions have been proactive when it comes to globalisation. Many institutions, on the other hand, have been reactive, and have chosen to co-exist alongside and within the realms of globalisation, altering and adapting existing practices to meet the requirements of the globalised world (Forest, 2002). Wood and Robertson (2015), moreover, posit that the movement of highly educated and ambitions graduates around the world, both in developed and developing nations, in search of a high living standard, further accelerate the development of globalisation within the HE sector. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that the activities of departments, internal functions, and individuals within public and private higher education institutions have also instigated the development of higher education globalisation, for example:

*Faculty research collaboration, curricular reform, research cooperation, discipline-based networks and associations, open and distance learning across frontiers, regional and cross-border institutional partnerships, international student and faculty exchange (and the related rise of international credit recognition and transfer), professional disciplinary conferences held throughout the world, and governmental policy all contribute to the relationship between globalisation and higher education* (Forest, 2002:436).

Similarly, Alberts (2010) believes that governments and many individual higher education institutions throughout the world have purposely set in motion processes and systems to become more globalised. In other words, rather than become a bystander to globalisation developments, several higher education institutions and nations have made strategic decisions to most effectively position their institutions to take advantage of the opportunities presented by globalisation. The globalisation of higher education has evolved, therefore, in part, as a result of the purposeful actions of many higher education institutions to, for example, recruit

the best students from around the world (van Rooijen, 2013). In doing so, these organisations are simultaneously attempting to improve their global higher education ranking. Moreover, colleges such as New York University are actively engaged in globalising their institutions by creating multiple campuses around the world (van Rooijen, 2013). Alberts (2010) maintains that the world's leading HE institutions recognise that they have to actively globalise in order to capture a wider international student base. Strategic and purposeful actions such as these, therefore, help to further reinforce globalisation's existence and grasp in higher education systems throughout the world.

A further viewpoint on the prevalence of globalisation within higher education is offered by Chinnammai (2005) who states that developments and occurrences in the political, economic, social, and technological environment have stimulated the globalisation of higher education. In particular, higher education systems and institutions now play an integral role in producing graduates and knowledge which meet the requirements of the global labour market. Governments and individual higher education institutions realise that their organisations must monitor global economic developments and be responsive to potential skills gaps in the global labour market (Kaiser *et al*., 2014). Globalisation has, consequently, encouraged higher education institutions to become more productivity driven, market centred and accountable (Khoo and Lehane, 2008). In Ireland, for example, Gaynor (2010) believes that higher education institutions were influenced by globalisation particularly because of the influx and establishment of multinational companies over the last number of decades. Establishing and attracting foreign owned companies and foreign direct investment to Ireland is part of the government's growth strategy. The Irish higher education system, therefore, is expected to contribute to that strategy by producing a high number of qualified graduates to meet the needs of these global companies (Gaynor, 2010).

Globalisation is also impacting the design and coordination of programmes and course offerings within public and private higher education organisations (Gough, 2014). Peace Lenn (2000), for example, states that we now live in an era of globalised professions, which has implications for public and private higher education institutions. The global economy is driving the movement of professionals across borders and regions, thereby, challenging higher education institutions to supply graduates with the skills and knowledge required by global companies and industries (Wood and Robertson, 2015). Two professional areas that follow this phenomenon most closely are engineering and accounting. Higher education

institutions, therefore, are challenged to tailor and develop their programmes to meet the demands of the global economies. To remain competitively relevant, therefore, public and private higher education institutions must prepare students by creating and developing programmes that meet the needs of the global marketplace (Gough, 2014; Peace Lenn, 2000). Similarly:

> *Recognising that a modern workforce needs a wide range of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills necessary to live in a diversified, integrated and highly competitive world, there is a new commitment among institutions of higher education to provide international education. Universities must be increasingly responsive and effective in meeting the educational and training needs of their nation, in order to enhance their nation's ability to compete successfully in the global economy* (Forest, 2002: 438).

It is clear that the global economy is making particular demands of higher education systems and individual higher education institutions. Wu and Chung (2014), for example, also believe that higher education institutions face a challenge to ensure a global approach is adopted by staff both in their curriculum design and their teaching efforts. Furthermore, it is important for public and private higher education institutions to assess their position in relation to globalisation because advances in travel and communication, that make the cost of studying abroad more affordable, will accelerate the presence of globalisation in higher education (Alberts, 2010).

Globalisation challenges the traditional values and features of higher education, and is also redefining the traditional existence of higher education institutions (Power, 2015). According to Neubauer (2010), the traditional functions of higher education are: knowledge creation, knowledge transmission, and knowledge conservation. The redefinition of traditional values and functions is having an impact across many aspects of higher education practice. Additionally, there can be a tendency for departments and faculty to resist or clash with the redefined values stimulated by globalisation, particularly if these redefined values directly oppose the traditional embedded values of higher education institutions (Vaira, 2004). As a consequence of the effects of globalisation, therefore, many higher education institutions struggle to remain loyal to their traditional and deeply-rooted values (Neubauer, 2010). Despite this, however, Wood and Robertson (2015) state that the globalisation of higher

education has improved access for learners and expanded the variety and number of higher education providers. Globalisation has also advanced communication and technological capabilities to, ultimately, increase the demand for higher education (Khoo, 2014).

A globalised higher education market, moreover, has accelerated the use and presence of league tables and higher education rankings. Students around the world typically assess higher education institutions based on their ranking position (Khoo and Lehane, 2008). League tables and global HE ranking criteria have, therefore, become important to individual higher education institutions as they attempt to attract their share of international students, and advance their individual economies (Hazelkorn, 2014). Kenny *et al*. (2009), however, believe that European higher education institutions, including Irish higher education institutions, have been slow to respond and aggressively compete for global rankings. This may suggest that European higher education has not adjusted to the various faces and effects of globalisation, as their counterparts have in America. As a result, this makes European higher education institutions less equipped to deal with the ever-present threat of competition posed by the global market (Kenny *et al*., 2009). In examining Ireland's higher education system, Hazelkorn (2014) believes that the growing importance of global rankings is alarming for Irish higher education institutions because the Irish government's capacity to continue funding its public higher education institutions, at the rate required to feature in the global higher education rankings, is increasingly challenged.

Globalisation, as detailed in this section, is a prominent factor influencing public and private higher education. Additionally, internationalisation is a factor closely related to globalisation, and it is influencing higher education in a similar manner. The development of internationalisation within higher education, however, is often discussed in the same context as globalisation, and there can be a failure to distinguish between the two (Yang, 2003). The following section, however, outlines how internationalisation is distinct from globalisation and, moreover, how internationalisation is currently influencing public and private higher education institutions around the world.

## 2.3.4 Internationalisation of Higher Education

In predicting the top higher education trends for 2014, van Liempd (2013) indicates that higher education institutions will increasingly focus on building an intercultural and

international environment for their students. Internationalisation within higher education systems is, however, not a new occurrence as Bennell and Pearce (2003) state that higher education internationalisation, particularly among universities in developed nations, has been steadily identified as a major trend since the late 1980s. Internationalisation, in the context of higher education, can be explained simply as the expansion of institutional borders, courses and programmes (Tadaki, 2013; Nicolescu *et al.*, 2009). More specifically, it can be described as:

> *The process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution* (Knight, 1993:21).

As mentioned previously, the terms internationalisation and globalisation are often used interchangeably. Several authors, however, believe that an overlap occurs between globalisation and internationalisation because the two concepts are intrinsically linked and are inter-dependent (Blanco-Ramirez and Berger, 2014; Yonezawa, 2013; Cantwell and Maldonaldo-Maldonaldo, 2009). Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009), in particular, state that globalisation is something that happens to universities, and internationalisation is how universities respond. Overall, these authors agree that the emergence of internationalisation activities within higher education occurs, in part, as a result of an institution's response to the influence of globalisation:

> *Internationalization of higher education is frequently conceptualized as the responses of colleges and universities in face of globalization* (Blanco-Ramirez and Berger, 2014: 89).

On the contrary, the OECD (2004) state that internationalisation of higher education is occurring due to higher education massification, the knowledge economy, and cheaper communication and transportation costs. More recently, Alon *et al.* (2013) posit that a dominant driving force behind the rapid and expansive growth of HE internationalisation is that developing economies are experiencing a demand for higher education that their higher education systems cannot meet. Students of these developing nations are, therefore, travelling abroad for part, or all of their higher education and, thereby, fuelling the internationalisation of public and private higher education (Martiniello and Rath, 2015). Additionally, the global economic recession, has contributed to the increased emphasis on

higher education internationalisation, particularly because individual higher education institutions are searching for alternative sources of funding (Egron-Polak, 2012). Similarly, Brennan (2013) believes that declining public subsidies and the deregulation of international student tuition fees, in countries such as the United Kingdom, has led higher education institutions to consider the overseas market as a solution to the reduction in traditional sources of higher education funding.

Internationalisation of higher education has come to be an established and dependable source of revenue for institutions and their national economies (Hadley, 2015). According to the United Kingdom's Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2013b), the United Kingdom's educational exports industry is worth £17.5 billion to the economy. Additionally, international students can significantly contribute to a country's economy as international students in the United Kingdom spent approximately £4.4 billion in 2011 – 2012 on fees and living costs (Hurley, 2014). The influx of fee-paying, international students, which results as part of the HE internationalisation process, therefore, is certainly a motivating factor for pursuing internationalisation. In Ireland, Harkin and Hazelkorn (2014) believe that the internationalisation of higher education is viewed as desirable because of its potential to stimulate Ireland's economy, both in the short and long term. Ireland's higher education internationalisation efforts are, however, according to Hennessy (2013) insufficient, and need to be reassessed. Ireland, for example, could accelerate their internationalisation process through creating a more flexible system for international students to study, thereby, making it easier for international students to apply for and study in Ireland (Hennessy, 2013).

The International Association of Universities (IAU) (2010) state that countries and higher education institutes all over the world, interact and participate in the internationalisation process at varying levels, and at different stages. Moreover, there are virtually no higher education institutions in the world that are not concerned with developing international connections (Egron-Polak, 2012). Among different nations and within individual higher education institutions, there are several approaches to higher education internationalisation, these are:

1) Mutual Understanding: allows and encourages international mobility of domestic as well as foreign students and staff through scholarship and academic exchange programs

2) Skilled Migration: shares goals of mutual understanding but with stronger emphasis on attracting talented students to work in the host country

3) Revenue-Generating: shares the rationales of mutual understanding and skilled migration, but offers higher education services on a full-fee basis, without public subsidies

4) Capacity Building: using foreign postsecondary education as a quick way to build an emerging country's capacity; twinning arrangements and partnerships with local providers are encouraged and sometimes compulsory in order to facilitate knowledge transfer (OECD, 2004:317).

Deardorff *et al.* (2014) share a similar viewpoint, and believe it is imperative for public and private higher education institutions to approach internationalisation carefully and strategically, in order to build mutually beneficial and sustainable relationships. In examining the development of internationalisation in higher education, Healey (2008) states that higher education institutions and individual nations are inclined to take a step-by-step approach to internationalisation. This approach is called the Uppsala internationalisation model. The Uppsala internationalisation model is based on the idea that internationalisation occurs in a sequential, stage-by-stage fashion.

As stated by the IAU (2010), many countries around the world are at varying stages of development in the higher education internationalisation process. Bennell and Pearce (2003), for example, state that the United Kingdom and Australia have been particularly successful in recruiting international students and developing programmes specifically designed for the international student market. In Ireland, according to Education in Ireland there were approximately 32,000 international students in Irish third level institutions for the 2011 – 2012 academic year. It is clear why internationalisation is being pursued by individual nations and their higher education institutions as it helps to: build an international reputation and brand, enhance student and staff inter-cultural experiences and understanding, generate alternative income, create mutually beneficial international strategic collaborations, and increase research output (De Haan, 2014).

For the above reasons, internationalisation has been one of the most significant factors influencing higher education systems throughout the world (Lumby and Foskett, 2015; de Wit, 2014; Bonaccorsi, 2014). It has, consequently, attracted a significant amount of

attention, particularly in relation to how it impacts various aspects of the HEI. Egron-Polak (2012), for example, posits that there is divided opinion in relation to how internationalisation contributes to individual higher education institutions and their host countries. A popular viewpoint is that, through embracing internationalisation, benefits such as improved educational standards and cross-cultural learning accumulate (Egron-Polak, 2012). Valiulis and Valiulis (2006), on the other hand, however, contend that if there is an over-focus on the intake of overseas students, it can negatively impact on host countries, at both a cultural and an academic level. Further criticisms of internationalisation are that it can lead to a country's strongest students leaving their home country to study overseas, and, to increased commodification, thus limiting the variety and range of programmes available (Egron-Polak, 2012). Despite these criticisms, however, for many higher education institutions internationalisation activities have become a normalised part of their operations:

> *Internationalisation of higher education matters. No longer is it an ad hoc or marginalised part of the higher education landscape. University strategic plans, national policy statements, international declarations and academic articles all indicate the centrality of internationalisation in the world of higher education* (Knight, 2014: 75).

In conclusion, globalisation and internationalisation are significant, influential developments in higher education and, in the context of increased global competition, higher education institutions need to strategically position themselves to best respond to these developments. A further factor that is influencing higher education systems throughout the world is commercialisation. The development and presence of commercialisation within higher education systems and institutions will be explored in the following sub-section.

## 2.3.5 The Commercialisation of Higher Education, and the Changing Role of Government in Higher Education

The development and growth of commercialisation occurring in higher education is having a significant effect in all aspects of the higher education institution (Major, 2015). Its presence within higher education has also split academic and public opinion into two groups – those who are pro-commercialisation, and those who are alarmed about its potential impact on HE (Bok, 2003). This section will detail many dimensions of commercialised higher education,

including the reasons for its occurrence, and the different ways it is interpreted by individual nations and higher education institutions.

Commercialisation within higher education was defined by Bok (2003), in simple terms, as the pursuit of profits by higher education institutions. Similarly, Wedlin (2008) believes that higher education is commercialised when higher education institutions pursue educational and research activities that produce profits. In relation to commercialisation in higher education systems, there are many terms that can be substituted for the word "commercialisation". Terms such as, for example, marketisation and liberalisation are used interchangeably to refer to commercialisation in higher education (Lock and Lorenz, 2008). More recently, Perkmann *et al.* (2013), explore the relationship between higher education and industry engagement, and, commercialisation. Perkmann *et al.* (2013) posit that higher education-industry engagement can often be instigated with the objective to produce commercial outcomes.

Marginson (2007) previously posited that commercialisation in higher education has several dimensions. These are: the increase in the incidence and volume of tuition charges, the restructure of national systems as competitive quasi-markets, an increase in competition from private institutions, a slight shift from basic to commercial research, and the sale of other university services as private goods. Despite the varying terms and labels used to describe commercialisation activities in higher education systems, Marginson (2006) and Steier (2003) believe that commercialisation in the higher education sector is now normalized, and its operational values and purposes are encoded in the systems of all types of higher education institutions. Moreover, the rise of commercialisation over the last decade has meant that higher education organisations are increasingly moving from entities that research and disseminate knowledge for public good, to entities that are more market oriented and concerned with productivity (Drucker, 2015; Butler *et al.*, 2015).

Authors such as Vincent- Lancrin and Karkkainen (2009), and Kritz (2006) believe that internationalisation has played a strong role in the rise and prominence of commercialisation in higher education. Higher education institutions are increasingly recognising the importance of implementing an internationalisation strategy that aims to attract international students and enhances the international reputation of the institution – as internationalisation has lucrative commercial potential (Brown and Carasso, 2013). Furthermore, the existence of private education in the HE market has served as a powerful incentive for public higher

education institutions to introduce practices and functions which improve and enhance their operations. To respond to more aggressive and prevalent competition in their respective environments, institutions, therefore, have had to implement tools and practices more closely associated with commercial enterprises (Steier, 2003).

A further reason why commercialisation has developed within HE is because higher education institutions are increasingly expected to significantly contribute to the economy by the transfer of their respective organisation's knowledge, innovations and research (Power, 2015; Sanberg *et al.,* 2014). This expectation is fuelling the presence of commercial activities and practices within higher education institutions. Functions and activities more traditionally associated with for-profit institutions are also more prevalent in public institutions because of many governments' aspirations to reduce public spending and introduce cost-savings measures (Sanberg *et al*., 2014; Dill and Teixeira, 2011). Many governments around the world have moved towards the market steering of higher education institutions with the aim of enhancing efficiencies and accountability, while simultaneously reducing the financial burden of higher education on public expenditure (Meek *et al*., 2009). In addition, Meek *et al*. (2009) believe that many governments have been purposely pursuing commercialisation within HE as it can help to reduce their public expenditure.

Government's escalated role in the management and operations of publically funded institutions has, consequently, resulted in public institutions no longer having as much autonomy, freedom and independence over their organisation's activities and plans. Narayan (2012) suggests that aspects of commercialisation are now visible within public higher education institutions, particularly, as a result of many governments reducing funding, and simultaneously expecting higher education institutions to develop new revenue streams. The purposeful actions of governments throughout the world, therefore, have stimulated a more commercial environment within higher education institutions, for example:

> *Having triggered an entrepreneurial university environment, government has simultaneously retained a high degree of indirect control via oftentimes proliferating performance reporting and accountability systems* (Parker, 2011: 437).

The increased presence of governments in the operations of individual higher education institutions is, consequently, creating a more commercialised culture within higher education institutions (Blessinger and Anchan, 2015). This development has attracted some criticism. Salter and Tapper (2013) believe that a government's economic objectives can be multi-faceted and oftentimes quite transient. It is, therefore, they maintain, hazardous to impose the government's economic and social objectives upon the operations of higher education institutions. This particular issue is poignant for many higher education institutions in developed nations because they are experiencing a significant transition, from a situation where they were largely funded by the state, to a situation where they have to manage their own revenue and resources (Parker, 2011). Ireland is one such developed country where this trend is occurring. With decreasing financial resources, the government is paying closer attention to the management and individual operations of public higher education institutions (Hazelkorn, 2014). The Irish government has increased their control over the regulation and management of Irish higher education institutions and, consequently, stimulated a more commercialised environment (Hahessy, 2009). A more commercialised environment within Irish public higher education institutions has, in particular, been encouraged by the Irish government to assist higher education institutions in the reduction of costs and the increase of efficiencies (Hahessy, 2009).

In the context of many governments promoting a more commercialised climate within the higher education institutions under their remit, Kohler and Huber (2006), state that governments can take two approaches to the governance of higher education in their country. The first approach is to step back from the direct control of the organisation and thereby, strengthen the institutions independence. According to Bok (2003) the American government have favoured this approach in recent decades. The second approach, favoured in Europe, is to increase quality control and accountability measures so that the state can better control the output of the higher education organisation (Kohler and Huber, 2006). Governments are primarily motivated to become more involved in the operations of publically funded institutions to increase the quality and efficiency of public HE institutions (Musselin, 2012; Perkmann *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, Bleiklie *et al.* (2013) contend that governments in Europe are increasingly recognising the social and economic importance and contribution of their nation's higher education institutions and are, therefore, encouraging their higher education institutions to become more business-like. Hazelkorn (2011), however, argues that governments must develop the proper HE infrastructure and capacity to build and develop a

knowledge economy, and consequently, meet economic goals. Without adequate HE capacity, individual nations will find it challenging to compete on the global economic stage (Hazelkorn, 2011).

By modifying traditional higher education institutions to become more business-like, governments, in turn, are aiming to achieve a more scalable higher education system that can produce more graduates, more efficiently (Lane, 2015). Additionally, Bleiklie *et al.* (2013) argue that governments' increased involvement in the management of public higher education institutions is an evolutionary consequence because so many individuals are now opting to obtain a higher education qualification. A substantial proportion of public funds are, therefore, directed towards higher education. Governments around the world, as a result, are becoming more concerned in relation to how public funds are spent and invested by higher education institutions and their managers (Lane, 2015).

With regard to Kohler and Huber's (2006) governance theory above, the Irish government is beginning to engage in the second approach to commercialisation, that is, the Irish government is becoming more actively involved in the governance and management of public HE institutions (Hazelkorn, 2013; Lillis and Lynch, 2013; Hedley, 2009). Hedley (2009), in particular, believes that in the past, Irish universities, when compared to other European universities, appeared similar to private universities because of their respective levels of freedom and autonomy from the government. In recent years, however, this has not been the case as Ireland's challenging economic circumstance has encouraged the government to introduce more accountability and efficiency measures designed to monitor and track the performance of public HE institutions (Hedley, 2009). Moreover, the introduction of such measures has resulted in the reduction of autonomy and freedom previously experienced by public higher education institutions (Hazelkorn, 2014). The changes to Ireland's economic environment have instigated a purposeful and determined response by the government to reduce costs, which have had implications for Ireland's higher education system:

> *In response to the deteriorating economic situation, the Irish government adopted*
> *a deflationary strategy aimed at increasing Ireland's competitiveness. Higher*
> *education has not been immune from these developments* (Hazelkorn, 2013: 3).

The government's changing role is also noticeable in the proliferation of reports and recommendations published by the government such as, *Building Ireland's Smart Economy*, *Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes*, *The National*

*Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, and *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape*. These publications, Hazelkorn (2014) contends, represent a substantial move towards increased government involvement in Ireland's higher education system. Additionally, through creating a more coordinated HE system, the government's ambition is to have a HE system that is more in line with Ireland's economic needs (Hazelkorn, 2013; O'Riain, 2007). There is a similar situation in the United Kingdom, as the United Kingdom government is assuming a more active role in the operations of their public HE institutions, and therefore, also increasing the existence of commercialisation in higher education (Moodie, 2015).

As evidenced in *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011), the Irish government has recommended that Irish higher education institutions deepen their engagement with wider society and industry. This recommendation, thereby, further illustrates how Irish HE organisations are being encouraged to integrate commercial thinking and practices into their day-to-day operations. The benefits of greater higher education-industry interactions are merited according to Nielsen and White (2013). They posit that higher education institutions that have strong relationships with industry, enhance the qualifications and experiences of their students, ultimately making their graduates more employable.

Similar to the other influencing factors outlined so far, the existence and acceleration of commercialisation has attracted a significant amount of attention. Angus (2010), for instance, believes that the implications of market-oriented forces in higher education are not fully understood and for that reason it is important to continue to question the presence of commercialisation in higher education. Wedlin (2008), however, believes that a positive feature of commercialisation is the transformation that a higher education institution makes into an organised, productive, effectively structured entity. In particular, Wedlin (2008) believes that, as a consequence of commercialisation, the role and function of management within higher education institutions plays a greater part in the organisation and direction of higher education entities than previously. Although McKenzie (2010) agrees with Wedlin (2008), suggesting that commercialisation has assisted higher education institutions to become more accountable and organised, McKenzie (2010) also puts forward a selection of arguments for and against the commercialisation of higher education. She believes that HE commercialisation can be beneficial for today's learners because higher education institutions compete on the basis of providing the best educational experience to students. On the other hand, McKenzie (2010) states that there are also some disadvantages of HE

commercialisation. First, the traditional role of HE is changing as higher education institutions alter their modules and courses to align with the market. Second, traditional subjects that were synonymous with HE, such as the liberal arts and sciences, are being replaced with courses that are directly linked with job opportunities. Finally, the effects of commercialisation are relatively unknown, therefore, it is difficult to predict the future direction of higher education (McKenzie, 2010).

Recently, Higgins (2012) also discussed the negative impact of a commercialised higher education, from the point of view of society as a whole. Higgins (2012) openly criticises the commercialisation of higher education and warns against the privatisation of Ireland's public higher education sector. He argues that by continuing to allow market forces to enter Ireland's higher education system it will undermine the social benefits of higher education and, ultimately, be detrimental to the marginal members of society. Moreover, in a similar opinion to Higgins (2012), Perkman *et al*. (2013) state that higher education commercialisation, or engagement with industry, can be disadvantageous for society because the influence of commercial forces can invariably result in sub-standard academic research.

The factors which are exerting the greatest influence on higher education systems and institutions around the world have been outlined above. Before concluding this section, however, it is also worthwhile to explore the implications of these particular factors on the internal operations and functions of higher education institutions. The following sub-section details some of the key changes or developments, prominent in the existing literature, which have occurred within higher education, as a consequence of the aforementioned factors.

A range of arguments and opinions in relation to how HE management structures and functions, and academic quality have been affected by the aforementioned factors, is presented below. This sub-section provides an important context for this study, as it outlines how the role of HE academic managers has evolved to include a strategic planning function, in response to the influence of developments in higher education, and the wider environment.

## 2.4. Higher Education Management Structures and Functions

In the context of the many challenges facing higher education systems around the world, Wu (2012) believes that today's higher education institutions need to demonstrate managerial efficiency, international competitiveness, and cost effectiveness in order to justify and attract

funding. Moreover, because of these factors, the importance of effective managerial structures is particularly poignant for public and private higher education institutions:

> *In the extremely competitive context of higher education, identifying and implementing an effective management framework and approach have emerged as significant issues for leaders and senior managers at universities and colleges* (Wu, 2012:153).

Gee (2011: 218) states that, although during economically challenging periods it might be tempting to 'hunker down and wait for the storm to pass', it is imperative for institutional leaders to promote fundamental reform and, in the process, become more flexible and responsive. Considering that more financial cuts are signalled, which are predicted to have deep and systematic-wide effects on Ireland's higher education system, it is perhaps ill-advised to wait for the storm to pass (Lillis and Morgan, 2012). Lillis and Lynch (2013), rather, believe that because of the pressures exerted by the external environment, Irish higher education organisations must either establish internal mechanisms to respond to the changes or else they risk having to continuously react to the external changes as they occur. For HE managers, therefore, the importance of developing a strategic plan and setting and implementing strategic priorities has come into sharp focus, in recent years:

> *If higher education institutions are to be the key enablers for their nation's policy objectives, to hold their own in a competitive funding landscape and to be the engines of growth in their regions their institutional management capability needs to be able to meet these challenges. Strategy development processes need to be effective, efficient and responsive to change, enabling higher education institutions to better serve the needs of all their stakeholders* (Lillis and Lynch, 2013: 2).

Managing resources and implementing strategic plans during economically challenging periods is challenging, and, according to Epstein and Buhovac (2006) effective strategic planning requires managers to be informed of all the potential factors that may affect their decisions, as they relate to the strategic priorities. Making informed decisions, essentially, is dependent on a manager's ability to identify potential risks, and to have a comprehensive understanding of their organisation's financial situation, in the short and long term (Epstein and Buhovac, 2006).

Higher education management has had to respond to the new environment in which it now exists due to pressures to globalise, the expansion and growth of higher education, and the commercialisation of various third level practices (Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007; Rip and Eijkel, 2004; Scott, 2003). Robbins and Coulter (1998) believe that increased global competition, the influx of private providers, and accelerating technology also contribute to the complex environment in which higher education institutions and HE managers now operate. Additionally, over a period of two decades, successive governments around the world have been promoting a consistent message to their higher education institutions, that is:

> *Increase efficiency, find new sources of income and improve performance across*
> *an ever widening range of activities and services* (Middlehurst, 2004: 258).

The responsibility to achieve these new efficiencies is primarily the responsibility of HE managers. Furthermore, the consistency and prolificacy of this message from governments, over recent years, has caused universities to question whether their respective organisation's internal management structures are fit for purpose (Middlehurst, 2004). Similarly, Barry (2009) believes that in order for a higher education institution to effectively achieve its strategic priorities, it must ensure that it has the appropriate mix of leadership and governance, while also prioritising academic freedom, in other words:

> *A new structure and management philosophy is needed to modernise the business*
> *organisation that is called a university. The modern university must empower all*
> *staff to be innovative, ensure the best management of limited resources and drive*
> *meaningful internal and external partnerships. The goal requires a rethink of the*
> *development and training of university leaders and a redefinition of these roles to*
> *broaden the pool of high calibre candidates* (Barry, 2009: 10).

Tabatoni *et al*. (2006) believe that the traditional system of managing public and private higher education institutions has been replaced by a new model which favours a business or entrepreneurial approach. This approach is more concerned with self-financing, productivity and the higher education institution's ability to compete. This new model evolved, in part, because of the aforementioned forces at play in the higher education sector (Tabatoni *et al*., 2006). The table below illustrates the different approach adopted by old and new management systems:

**Table 2.2 Traditional and Business-Like Higher Education Management Approaches**

| Traditional<br><br>Higher Education management | Business-Like<br><br>Higher Education Management |
| --- | --- |
| Supply-led | Market-driven |
| Reactive – resist change | Proactive – strategic |
| Dependent on state funding | Portfolio Financing |
| Consuming Assets | Investing for the future |
| Administered | Managed |
| Risk adverse | Manages a variety of risks |

(OECD, 2004: 34)

Not all higher education institutions migrate towards the business-like style of management but, the OECD (2004) believe that there is evidence to suggest that higher education institutions are moving in that direction. Similarly, for higher education institutions to effectively avail of the variety of opportunities that exist, and to overcome the challenges associated with those opportunities, the higher education sector simply need to adopt a new management approach (Farrington, 2014). The functions of management in higher education, moreover, have been gradually evolving and changing over the last number of decades and many authors note the existence of the concept of 'managerialism' within public and private higher education (Macfarlane, 2015; Stokes *et al*., 2002; Schofield, 2001; Exworthy and Halford, 1999; Pollitt, 1990). Managerialism is defined as:

> *The condition in which management becomes an end in itself and displaces the values and primary objectives* (Kogan, 2004:2).

The shift towards a managerialism model has been strongly influenced by market forces and higher education institution's engagement with these forces (Pausits and Pellert, 2009). Similarly, and more recently, Craig *et al*. (2014), suggests that new managerialist ideologies and practices illustrate the evolvement of public sector organisations that are competitive, emphasise value for money, and use techniques and structures of management that are more typical of private organisations. Within this new environment, the individual skillsets and responsibilities of higher education managers have also had to change significantly (Macfarlane, 2015; Barry, 2009).

External drivers, such as the economic and global factors are pressing for a more privatised approach to higher education and the more efficient use of resources and this, therefore, impacts the approach taken by senior managers (Locke *et al*., 2011). Furthermore, in response to the global financial crisis, university managers have had to demonstrate an unwavering determination to pursue cost effective strategies (Parker, 2013). Becoming more closely concerned with the internal operations of their organisation is only one aspect of how the role of public and private higher education managers has evolved. The activities of higher education managers are now more closely aligned to the goals and objectives of their nation (Craig *et al*., 2014; Donnelly, 2004). Senior managers within higher education, essentially, in part due to the many factors influencing the higher education sector, have now become more concerned with the national and global economy in which they operate (Eurydice, 2008).

The skills required of academic managers in today's higher education institutions, therefore, are markedly different to those who held senior roles in traditional higher education institutions. The existing environment requires an increased emphasis on setting and implementing strategic plans that serve the needs of their institution's key stakeholders (Lillis and Lynch, 2013). Gilbert (2013) suggests that the traditional senior academic is perhaps not suited to the demands expected of contemporary higher education institutions because they affiliate more with the original or traditional values of higher education. Additionally, many higher education academics become managers and leaders without having the adequate experience and training necessary to foresee and address the priorities for their organisations. As a result, in many cases, an academic managers' inexperience in leadership and strategic management has led to a risk adverse culture and one that promotes *status quo* (Beattie *et al*., 2013).

Currently, one of the most important functions of managers in public and private higher education institutions is to develop strategic plans which include a set of strategic priorities (Stevens *et al*., 2013). The existing highly competitive environment heightens the importance for managers to aim high, and set ambitious strategic goals for their organisations (Kaplan and Norton, 2013). Moreover, in a particularly challenging economic environment, the function of strategic planning can assist HE organisations and managers to more effectively manage their finances and resources and strategically direct their organisations to optimally perform in the future (Alstete, 2015). Management within higher education, therefore, no longer just involves simple administration and human resource functions to

support the internal functions of the HEI (Bolden *et al*., 2012). Higher education management, rather, is now more concerned with creating and implementing effective strategic plans and achieving operational efficiencies (Reed, 2002). The importance or value of strategic planning in higher education institutions becomes acute for HE managers, particularly, during economically challenging periods (Kotler and Murphy, 1981). In addition to outlining a range of strategic objectives or priorities, effective strategic plans include the use of key performance indicators (KPIs), and critical success factors. Through KPIs and similar tools HE managers can assess the development and progress of their priorities (Waal and Kerklaan, 2013). *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) outlines the requirement for public higher education institutions to select KPIs, by engaging in an open dialogue process with the Higher Education Authority.

The existence of KPIs in higher education is, however, a practice most traditionally associated with commercial businesses. Key performance indicators within the education domain have, therefore, attracted some criticism. The European Academy for Taxes, Economics and Law (2014), and Broadbent (2007), for example, question the practice and implementation of KPIs in higher education. They believe that while KPIs can help track the performance and progress of particular strategic priorities, such as student retention and enrolment, they warn that KPIs fall short of adequately measuring the more intangible priorities, such as student satisfaction levels. As the adoption and prevalence of KPIs illustrates, many public and private HE institutions that previously approached their strategic planning in a more informal manner, now place more importance upon the strategic planning process because of the notable operational improvements it can generate (Stevens *et al*., 2013).

The research findings of Lillis and Lynch (2013), who chartered the progress and adoption of strategic planning in Irish public higher education institutions, concur with Stevens *et al*. (2013). They found that strategic planning, and the setting of strategic objectives, has now become an integral function of Irish academic managers. When they began their research in 2000, only two Irish higher education institutions were engaged in strategic planning. Ten years later, however, the finding was markedly different, with all 21 sampled higher education institutions found to be engaged in some form of strategic planning. As well as an increasing number of higher education institutions embracing the strategic planning process, Parker (2013) observes a rise in higher education strategic plans that are highly competitive. These competitive strategic plans include financial and performance based accountability

systems. Similarly, Mina (2014) believes that as a consequence of increased student enrolments and pressure for higher education institutions to become more efficient and to reduce costs, the strategic plans designed and executed by HE managers need to be exceptionally creative. This is because contemporary HE senior managers continuously aim to sustain or improve their HE organisation's level of government funding. In order to achieve this, their strategic plans need to include particular performance criteria (Melo and Sarrico, 2015).

Similarly, Parker (2013) notes a trend amongst public and private higher education managers to develop and implement strategic plans that are somewhat generic, conservative, and homogenous, particularly because of the heightened emphasis on efficiencies and costs. The necessity to create competitive strategic plans that have a financial focus is a contentious issue for higher education managers:

> *These trends contribute to complex performance management and accountability challenges as universities' senior managers balance their internal financial ambitions with the expectations of external stakeholders, while simultaneously projecting sanitised imagery through corporate public relations strategies* (Parker, 2013:1).

Homogeneity across individual higher education institutions, therefore, can occur because higher education institutions are all working towards the same metrics to ultimately enhance their global ranking or public image (Martinez and Wolverton, 2009). The struggle experienced by senior managers in balancing their respective organisations' values and objectives is made even more complex by the response of academic staff to the increased commercialised and competitive environment in which they now work. Authors such as Peterson (2014), and Marginson and Considine (2000) believe that academic managers are now required to implement strategies that have the effect of, intentionally or unintentionally, altering the roles of their fellow academic colleagues and team members. In response to this, academics have tended to, either gravitate towards and embrace the more commercialised model of HE, or withdraw to varying levels by limiting their participation in what they deem to be non-core activities (Peterson, 2014).

Many authors such as Luke (2014), Sevier (2003) and Birnbaum (2000) believe that strategic planning in public and private higher education is largely ineffective, and senior managers often fail to successfully achieve the strategic objectives, as set out in their respective

organisations' strategic plans. Additionally, strategic plans in higher education are often labelled as a management exercise and criticised for being ineffective (Shah and Nair, 2014; Lillis, 2006). Higher education strategies can often fail to achieve their intentions as a result of variable factors, such as an organisational culture which resists change (Lacerda *et al*., 2014; Nair, 2014). Successful strategic plans, therefore, often depend on the alignment of a manager's goals and ambitions with the organisational culture and management structure (Stevens *et al*., 2013). Additionally, Schram (2014) states that because most higher education institutions have a dual mission to promote research and teaching, striking a balance in the strategic plan across these two objectives, is often challenging for HE managers.

It is not only in the higher education sector that the process and exercise of strategic planning is criticised, Rumelt (2014) and Martin (2013) believe that many sectors and industries engage in poor strategic planning. Rumelt (2014) believes that the characteristics of bad strategy include the belief that an organisation's strategy must account for multiple and conflicting demands. Instead, Rumelt (2014) posits that HE managers should avoid setting overly ambiguous goals, and instead focus on facing and overcoming the most acute challenges that their organisations face. In addition, to assist in the process of developing and implementing an effective strategic plan, Stevens *et al*. (2013) believe that it can be beneficial to engage with a strategy consultant, or enrol in some off-site training. Considering this, however, Rampersad (2001) warns against excluding employees from the strategy development and implementation stages, which could occur if the strategy is outsourced to a consultant. He suggests, rather, that it is advisable to involve employees in the strategic planning process because it helps to cement their commitment to their organisations, especially during uncertain periods. Furthermore, it has been argued that strategic plans which fail to involve or engage employees have less of a chance of succeeding rather than plans which actively leverage the skills and expertise of the organisation's employees (Tabatoni *et al*., 2006; Allen, 2003).

Despite the criticisms and warnings in relation to strategic planning in higher education, strategic planning in higher education has moved from a process of outlining intentions, to actively implementing strategically important decisions (Leisyte, 2015; Dooris *et al.*, 2004). Essentially, Dooris *et al*. (2004) believe that there is now less talk and more action amongst higher education institutions in relation to strategic planning. Moreover, Webber and Calderon (2015) contend that it has become imperative for higher education organisations to focus on strategic planning and priorities because of the highly competitive environment in

which they operate. Despite this, however, Barry (2009) states that today's universities are experiencing a struggle in balancing what was expected of them previously and what is currently demanded:

> *Universities have nevertheless been slow to review the appropriateness of their governance and leadership roles and structures and realign the symbols of power and management to reflect the new paradigm. Without doing so, universities will struggle to effectively manage and develop the organisation as demanded by the drivers of accountability, privatisation, internationalisation and massification* (Barry, 2009: 5 – 6).

Clearly, the traditional model of public and private higher education management has changed substantially to include new functions such as strategic planning. Moreover, the roles and functions of higher education managers have also significantly altered as HE managers are now required to develop strategic plans that dually meet their organisation's objectives and deliver value for money (Webber, 2015). Previously mentioned factors, such as massification and internationalisation have contributed to these changes in HE management (Macfarlane, 2015). Additionally, several influencing factors are continuing to shape the role and function of higher education managers. The following sub-section will outline how factors such as massification, globalisation, internationalisation, and commercialisation have directly affected higher education management structures, and the role and function of HE managers.

## 2.4.2 The Impact of Some of the Prevalent Influencing Factors on Higher Education Management Structures and Functions

One of the dominant reasons for the changes to higher education management is put forward and explored by authors such as Macfarlane (2015), Hedley (2010), Von Prodzynski (2010), and Johnson and Deem (2003). They believe that changes to HE management have occurred predominantly because of the rise in student numbers and the expansion of higher education. Massification of higher education is sighted as a significant cause for the rise in higher education managerialism. This is because the increase in student numbers causes higher education institutions to reassess their management structures and the manner in which they manage resources and funding (Hegarty and McGuinness, 2007). The impact of increased student numbers on the structures and functions of higher education management, is illustrated in a study of United Kingdom higher education institutions by Johnson and Deem

(2003). They believe that the changing and increasing student population is responsible for the centrality and strengthening of management systems and functions within United Kingdom higher education institutions. They present the experience of one manager-academic who stated:

> *In the few years I have been here the university has expanded, it has doubled, or more than doubled, the student numbers. If you have that rate of growth and you have enormous complexity of types of degrees, a lot of mature students, part-time students, students coming in for day release, afternoon release, evenings, weekends... the institution is running an inherently far more complex set of processes than ever before. Sorry, but you cannot do that without management* (Johnson and Deem, 2003: 298).

The rise in student numbers has significantly impacted the traditional role of higher education management, in particular, it has highlighted the need for stronger management structures within the current higher education environment (Johnson and Deem, 2003). In examining the impact of massification on higher education in Ireland, Von Prondzynski's (2010) findings concurred with Johnson and Deem (2003). Von Prondzynski (2010) suggests that Irish HE management structures and functions were forced to become more robust and responsive to the pressures applied by massification and expansion. In addition to creating coping mechanisms for massification developments, public and private higher education institutions also have to apply management techniques that maintain and strengthen the outputs of their organisation. In other words, while strong managerial frameworks are considered essential to cope with the growing number of students entering higher education, they are also considered essential to help maintain the standards and quality of education provided (Loxley *et al.*, 2014). Developments in globalisation and internationalisation also feature prominently in the literature regarding the changing structure and function of HE management.

Globalisation and the means by which public and private higher education institutions respond to globalisation opportunities is considered to be one of the biggest challenges higher education has ever faced (Pavel *et al.*, 2013; Neubauer, 2010; Scott, 1998). Confronted with this challenge, globalisation has triggered the rise of managerialism within higher education and, in particular, has had an impact on the management structures of higher education

institutions (Vaira, 2004). Higher education institutions have responded to globalisation by adopting and implementing a different form of management called new public management. New public management adopts market-mechanisms in an effort to more effectively manage HE activities in the context of a more globalised environment (Marginson and van der Wende, 2007).

Much has been written on the subject of how individual higher education institutions have responded and reacted to globalisation trends (Singh and Papa, 2010; Maassen and Cloete, 2006; Porter and Vidovich, 2000). One such view is that within higher education a more professionalised management interface is now being adopted as a means to deal with the pressures of globalisation (Maassen and Cloete, 2006). This professionalised approach aims to:

> *Enable institutions to become more strategic and more responsive in order to compete nationally and internationally to introduce efficiency measures and to help drive the implementation of national policy agendas* (Maassen and Cloete, 2006: 16).

In a similar opinion to Maassen and Cloete (2006), Dill (2014) believes that because of globalisation factors, government reforms, and changing market forces the organisational management of higher education institutions has changed substantially. Changes and reductions to the level of managerial autonomy previously awarded to managers is one such change that Dill (2014) emphasises. Moreover, in light of the globalised environment, higher education management must remain flexible and intuitive to their students' needs. It becomes the responsibility of management to make their institutes more accountable, efficient, and transparent for the globalised environment in which they operate (Altbach, 2009). This responsibility, Altbach (2009) states, requires an extra layer of management within the institute, thereby, further altering the state and existence of traditional higher education management. The influence of globalisation, however, has created some challenges for higher education management. A conflict of interest, for example, can occur for managers with regard to protecting and maintaining a strong cultural identity for their respective organisations, while also responding to pressures to manage the organisation in a business-like manner (Power, 2015; de Wit, 2014; Altbach, 2009; Jaiharn, 2003).

Internationalisation has also had an impact on higher education management. Teichler (2004) believes that the presence of internationalisation in higher education caused some substantial changes to national higher education systems in Europe, and indeed, the operations of their respective higher education institutions. These changes include a process whereby governments set targets for their higher education systems and reward funding based on its performance. This has relevance for higher education management because:

*Individual higher education institutions become more powerful strategic actors and they establish a managerial system characterised by stronger executive powers of the institutional leadership and by increased evaluation activities, which serve both reflection and improvement on the part of the academics as well as accountability to government and the public at large* (Teichler, 2004:20).

Research conducted by Middlehurst (2007), similar to research by Teichler (2004), also observes the trend of stronger managerial systems in higher education. Public and private higher education managers are not just reacting to internationalisation, rather, Middlehurst (2007) believes, they are proactive in relation to creating and implementing policies to better position their institutions in the competitive internationalised environment. In becoming more internationalised, the management function of higher education faces challenges, particularly in relation to developing effective and functional metrics for internationalisation (Middlehurst, 2007: 31).

In addition, changes to the structure of HE management are occurring as a result of internationalisation (Blanco-Ramirez and Berger, 2014). In recognition of the need to establish an internationalisation strategy, a reorganisation of higher education management is occurring. This reorganisation involves the assignment and creation of new positions and units within the higher education organisation specifically dedicated to the organisation's internationalisation strategy, thereby, ensuring that internationalisation forms part of the organisation's central direction (Taylor, 2004).

It is clear that internationalisation has created changes to the traditional structures of higher education management, and to the individual roles that managers perform. The literature, however, also suggests that commercialisation developments within higher education have implications for HE management. The following section examines how the presence of

commercialisation within higher education, encouraged, in part, as a result of increased government involvement, is impacting HE management structures and functions.

Earlier in this Chapter, several authors (Craig *et al.*, 2014; Parker, 2011; Barry, 2009) put forward their position on the changes that have occurred to the role and function of HE management. The findings of these authors highlight that, in many countries, the role of the government has been a prominent cause for the rise in commercialised HE activities, and consequently, partially responsible for the changes that have taken place to HE management in recent years. The managerial structures of higher education institutions around the world have been impacted by the stronger presence of commercialisation in higher education (Foskett, 2011). In some countries such as the United Kingdom, and Australia, commercialisation has been introduced through the actions of governments as they attempt to reform and more effectively manage their higher education systems (Webber and Calderon, 2015; Donnelly, 2004). Similarly, the internal structures and functions of higher education management have, and are, undergoing significant change, as governments reassess how they can manage and reform their higher education institutions in an environment characterised by an increasing demand for high quality educational services (Elvira, 2014; Sidorkin, 2012).

Additionally, the economic and financial pressures that apply to individual higher education institutions are also experienced by governments as they attempt to manage and fund their respective higher education systems in an increasingly complex environment (Foskett, 2011). Governments, therefore, have a greater interest than ever in ensuring that educational institutions help meet economic and social needs, given their importance in knowledge-oriented societies (Ball, 2013). As a result of their actions, therefore, governments can stimulate a more commercialised environment or culture within public higher education institutions (Narayan, 2012). Similarly, Parker (2013) believes that, in response to global competition, governments are increasingly expecting their HE system to build a knowledge economy and contribute to stimulating the various sectors of their economy. Governments, therefore, are increasingly introducing market-mechanisms to their higher education systems in an effort to manage them more efficiently and make them more competitive (Kehm, 2014). A change to the level and experience of institutional and managerial autonomy is, as a consequence, occurring within public higher education institutions around the world:

> *In the emerging narrative of political change, autonomy becomes redefined as the*
> *new organisational autonomy of universities as both strategic actors and as an*

*addressee of governmental control. Regulatory autonomy thus aims at aligning universities more closely with governmental goals* (Enders *et al.*, 2013: 1).

Essentially, the structure and function of higher education management is experiencing profound change, in part, due to the government's growing involvement in the short and long term operations of higher education institutions (OECD, 2003). Additionally, in trying to shape their higher education systems to become more efficient and economically driven, governments are using instruments to manage and control "organisational and academic behaviours within higher education institutions" (Ferlie *et al.*, 2007: 326).

New, or changed governance structures and controls must, however, help to ensure that HEI leaders and managers are adequately supported, and unobstructed, in making key strategic decisions (Dobbins and Knill, 2014). Matzler and Abfalter (2013) believe that it is inevitable that there has been a shift towards the strategic management of universities by governments, because of the increased competition and decline of available state funding. Managers are now focusing more on key performance indicators (KPIs) that satisfy government expectations, as part of their strategic plans (Parker, 2013). This is occurring in Ireland as *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) now requires public higher education institutions to outline, and regularly update the HEA on, their key performance indicators:

> *The HEA will use this (performance based) framework as the context for conducting a process of strategic dialogue with individual institutions where institutions will agree performance compacts with the HEA with institutional KPIs reflecting their contribution to overall system objectives* (HEA, 2013: 2)

The actions of the government are of particular concern for most Irish higher education institutions because the largest amount of their funding derives from the government, therefore, higher education institutions are subject to controls and management mechanisms put in place by the government (Dowling-Hetherington, 2012). The Irish higher education system faces substantial challenges and has, therefore, set out and implemented a range of reforms to ensure the financial sustainability and success of Irish higher education (HEA, 2012). All of these reforms have implications for HE managers in Ireland (O'Mahony and Garavan, 2012).

In the context of the changing role of the government in higher education, and its implications for higher education managers, the most significant development came in the form of *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Hazelkorn, 2014). The government's national higher education strategy outlines the objectives necessary to improve performance, accountability, and system coherence within Ireland's higher education system. The Irish Higher Education Authority has since published a number of documents outlining how the Irish higher education system and the higher education institutions under its remit are to respond to, and work towards, this national strategy. Corresponding with the recommendations of the national strategy, individual higher education institutions were invited to outline their institutional strategic direction in relation to Ireland's future higher education landscape (HEA, 2012). Hence, as a result of the publication of the government's higher education strategy and the subsequent related reports, a tailored and structured management response has been triggered in the Irish public higher education sector (Lillis and Lynch, 2013).

It is clear that the aforementioned influencing factors are impacting and shaping the existing structures and functions of higher education management. The changes that have taken place to higher education management structures and functions, however, have not escaped criticism. There are many authors, detailed in the following sub-section, who argue that the changes which have occurred to HE management have been regressive for the overall development and integrity of higher education.

## 2.4.3 Criticisms of New Higher Education Management Structures and Functions

One particular criticism on new styles of higher education management, put forward by Deering and Creso (2014), and Garvin (2012) is that new management styles are narrow and commercial in scope because they are predominantly concerned with efficiencies and productivity within their institutions. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of higher education managers' activities and decisions are concerned with exploring how their organisations are contributing to their nation's economic and social objectives (Ravi, 2014; Kelly *et al.*, 2009). Garvin (2012), in relation to the management and direction of Irish higher education institutions, notes that it is incorrect to assume that higher education has

nothing and everything to do with the growth of the economy. He argues that Ireland's higher education managers should be more concerned with creating a collegial environment that encourages the discovery and dissemination of knowledge, rather than managing people and resources primarily to generate economic results.

Managing and steering higher education in a direction which aims to fill or contribute to the skills gaps in national and global economies is another means in which higher education management has attracted criticism. An expectation has developed for public and private higher education institutions to fill the immediate or anticipated skills gaps in the economy (Bowen, 2015). Some authors, such as Garvin (2012), and Prendergast (2012) believe that this is not the responsibility of higher education institutions and that management should not be expected to direct their attention towards this issue. Rather than focus on the skills gap, whether present or future, they believe that higher education senior managers should prioritise and serve the interests of students rather than the economy. Prendergast (2012) also suggests that it is counterproductive for higher education decision makers or strategists to focus on creating programmes that bridge the economy's existing skills gaps because as soon as those gaps have been identified it is already too late. The focus, rather, should be on offering students a third level education that is sufficiently flexible and adaptable to meet the demands of the future global economy.

In order for public and private higher education institutions to operate in the current higher education environment, therefore, flexible, effective, and solid management structures must be formed (Howells *et al*., 2014). Introducing a new style of management or reinforcing a higher education institutions existing management style, however, has the potential to have a knock-on effect in other areas of higher education, such as academic quality. Several authors (Hase, 2014; Lynch, 2009; Jamieson and Naidoo, 2004) are of the opinion that new management structures and frameworks can have a lasting, negative impact on the performance of a HEI, and, their academic standards because they underemphasise the importance of producing knowledge for societal good, in favour of meeting particular targets. A commercial or over-zealous management focus can stifle the natural communication flows of a higher education organisation. Furthermore, commercialised management can also push intellectual scholarship and creative thinking to the side in favour of cost cutting and box-ticking (Garvin, 2012). Power (2015), however, suggests that regardless of the many, recent organisational, and somewhat commercial, changes which higher education institutions have

undertaken, universities still consider it of fundamental importance to serve their community, and to contribute to the development of society.

In Ireland, Lynch (2009) observes that the development of new HE managerial frameworks and functions is producing a profound alienation among academic employees. Academic employees believe that their managers increasingly view their role from the perspective of how they can meet and exceed performance targets. As a result, academic employees believe that their contribution to their respective organisation's academic quality and performance is undervalued. For example:

> *Working under constant surveillance also breeds a culture of compliance: there is little incentive to innovate or to challenge prevailing orthodoxies, necessary though it may be* (Lynch, 2009: 53).

Von Prondzynski (2010) sums up this viewpoint by stating that Irish higher education institutions have yet to find the right balance between managing their organisations effectively and maintaining academic quality. In other words, Irish higher education institutions have not properly established how they should be run within a management structure which ensures the integrity of scholarship and learning (Lynch, 2006). Despite the variety of criticisms that exist for the new techniques and functions of higher education management, managerialism, and the organisational forces associated with it, have become an important part of higher education today. In this respect, managerialism holds a firm position within national higher education policy and with individual higher education institutions themselves. The existence of managerialism within public institutions, thus, has become widely accepted by policy-makers and society as a primary means for driving efficiencies and meeting economic goals (Macfarlane, 2013).

The means by which the prevalent influencing factors impact higher education management have been explored and outlined. In examining the literature on factors influencing higher education systems and institutions, it is also evident that HE academic quality is also significantly impacted by several prevalent influencing factors. Factors such as massification, internationalisation, and commercialisation have indeed created changes to the means by which academic quality in higher education is measured and upheld by HE organisations and their respective managers. The following section will outline some of the prominent discourses, and changes to take place, in higher education academic quality, paying particular attention to the role of the most prevalent influencing factors.

## 2.5 Higher Education Academic Quality

This section will assess the impact of massification, globalisation and internationalisation, and commercialisation on academic quality within public and private higher education. First, the concepts of HE academic quality will be outlined, and then a selection of the means by which academic quality is measured will be presented.

The process of analysing and measuring academic quality is complex and the theme of academic quality itself, in higher education, has attracted much attention (Kleene *et al*., 2014; Heard, 2010). Authors such as Nigvekar (1996), Sallis (1996) and Warren *et al*., (1994) have drawn attention to the difficulty in defining academic quality due to what they deem as its elusive nature. Pfeffer and Coote (1991: 31), in particular, referred to it as a 'slippery concept' but they state that quality is led by the objectives and strategies of the invested party/parties and, therefore, the outcome or the purpose of quality is very much a result of this. Despite the questions surrounding a definitive definition of academic quality, there are typically five distinct approaches to defining quality:

- Exceptional – exceeding high standards, unattainable by most.
- Perfection – maintaining consistency to ensure quality is obtainable by all.
- Fit for purpose – fulfilling the needs of the student/consumer.
- Value for money – a satisfactory return on investment, for the student and or the government.
- Transformative – the degree to which the student has changed as a result of their experience.

(Harvey and Green, 1993: 10).

Much like Pfeffer and Coote (1991), Mishra (2007) states that the term 'quality' is made up of many different concepts and is quite difficult to define because it can be interpreted differently by individuals, regions, and nations within higher education. Despite this, Harvey (1999) believes that once it is established that a form of academic quality monitoring is going to take place, a selection of quality monitoring procedures are evaluated. In addition, quality monitoring procedures typically serve a variety of purposes for institutions, such as to become more accountable, to improve operations, and to generate and share information more effectively (Harvey, 1999).

The outcomes which quality monitoring procedures set out to achieve may be clear and distinct but the means by which quality monitoring procedures are put into practice vary widely from nation to nation (Klejnen *et al*., 2014). Additionally, around the world there are multiple academic quality monitoring procedures in practice that have been adopted by nations and individual higher education institutions. One such view which Dill (2007) advocates for measuring academic quality is to assess a student's level of knowledge, skill, and ability pertaining to their area of study upon completion. It can also be "the level of academic achievement attained by higher education graduate" (Dill, 2007:1). More recently, however, Pettersen (2015) believes that a particular level of standardisation is occurring within institutions across the world. This standardisation is evident as institutions on a global scale are increasingly directing attention towards students' learning outcomes, as an attainable measurement of academic quality (Pettersen, 2015).

A commonality between countries, in relation to measuring academic quality, is the use of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. The process of measuring academic quality is often split into these two distinct forms. Internal academic quality assurance maintains all internal activity and functionality pertaining to upholding academic quality, the latter encompasses the efforts of the higher education sector, as a whole, to monitor and uphold academic quality across the spectrum of global higher education (Trow, 1996). With regard to internal academic quality assurance, the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) (2009) believe that higher education institutions should implement their own methods of maintaining and assuring the academic quality of their programmes and rewards. In addition, a strategy which continuously enhances quality should be pursued as well as absorbed into the institution's culture. There are a variety of internal quality assurance measures that can be implemented within higher education institutions, and institutions can pursue one, a few, or all of these mechanisms depending on their size and characteristics (ENQA, 2009). For example:

- Policy and procedures for quality assurance
- Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and rewards
- Assessment of students
- Quality assurance of teaching staff

- Learning resources and student support

- Information systems

- Public information

(ENQA, 2009: 7)

When the Irish higher education system began to expand and massify in the late 20th century, the existing internal quality assurance mechanisms assisted higher education institutions to cope and maintain the existing levels of quality (Coolahan, 2004). Essentially, through implementing internal quality assurance mechanisms the Irish higher education system was sufficiently equipped to maintain quality while serving more students and delivering more programmes. Alongside internal quality assurance measures, external quality assurance mechanisms became popular as they provided a more meaningful way for Irish HE organisations to measure and compare academic quality. Previously, the traditional method relied on the state and the individual higher education institutions to set and measure quality (Martin and Stella, 2007). External quality assurance encompasses the establishment of autonomous independent entities to monitor, enforce, and compare standards between higher education institutions and across nations (Green, 2014). Governments tend to favour external quality assurance as it delegates the responsibility of measuring academic quality to a professional and expert group that provides them with accurate and timely reporting on the academic quality status of higher education institutions within their system (Martin and Stella, 2007).

Although external quality assurance measures are distinct from internal quality assurance measures, higher education institutions do not tend to just use one or the other. A combination of internal and external quality assurance measures, rather, are generally favoured over simply using one measure in isolation (Vettori *et al.*, 2007). This occurs because each quality assurance measure has its flaws; internal quality assurance can sometimes result in the manipulation of data to the HEI's advantage, and external quality assurance promotes a culture of compliance rather than improvement. Harvey (2006) previously stated that when external and internal quality assurance mechanisms are used together they establish a robust framework for quality assurance.

In Ireland, procedures and frameworks are in place to assist in maintaining higher education academic quality. The Irish government, in the form of Quality and Qualifications Ireland

(QQI), formerly Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), provides a framework to maintain and uphold academic standards. The functions of HETAC are now absorbed by the public agency QQI (2012) although the awards and qualifications made by HETAC continue to be recognised as they are on the national framework of qualifications. This framework develops standards and performance guidelines to be adhered to by institutions under its remit. Institutes of technology and private colleges, when developing HE programmes are required to apply for quality assurance validation by QQI. Once approved, the private higher education providers are then subject to quality assurance reviews and controls from QQI and are subsequently accredited and awarded by QQI. The Qualifications Act of 1999 delegated QQI (HETAC at that time) the responsibility of protecting learners attending private higher education institutions. Senior management in private colleges must provide HETAC with two alternative higher education organisations that are operating similar programmes to protect students if the private college collapses or fails to run a programme as intended (www.hetac.ie). Evidently, therefore, the Irish government, through QQI, take steps to protect the quality of education offered by private providers. Universities in Ireland accredit and grant their own awards. Academic performance and standards in Irish universities are upheld through the universities own internal quality department or through organisations such as the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) which is now also part of QQI.

In summary, a review of the literature also revealed that factors such as internationalisation, and the role of the government are impacting higher education academic quality. The following sub-section explores the different means by which higher education academic quality is impacted and affected by factors such as these.

## 2.5.2 The Impact of Some of the Prevalent Influencing Factors on Higher Education Academic Quality

Higher education systems throughout the world are experiencing a dramatic change in the form of increasing demand for education from a broadening and diverse range of students (Ravi, 2014; Martin and Stella, 2007). As result of the increase and expansion of higher education, both individual higher education institutions and national higher education systems were prompted to assess the academic quality of their programmes and the means by which they measure academic quality (Kis, 2005). Similarly, Eaton (2006) claims that the expansion and increase in higher education student enrolment, has created some challenges

for higher education managers in relation to monitoring and measuring academic quality. In particular, Eaton (2006) points to the increase in new higher education providers, which have emerged to meet the demand for higher education. Eaton (2006) states that these institutions' academic quality is not prioritised or assessed to the same rigorous standards as other higher education institutions. More recently this argument has come to the fore in the writings of the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) (2009), who also posit that an increase in providers can be damaging for academic quality, but, from a different perspective. Their view is that as Irish higher education enrolment numbers increased, so did the number of providers supplying particularly popular programmes, bringing the average entry requirements down for each programme. This means that students who previously would not have qualified for a particular programme now find themselves undertaking a programme which is too challenging for their level of ability. The presence of weaker students has the effect of lowering the average results for this programme and in some cases causing the HEI in question to adapt or entirely change the structure and delivery of modules (Dill and Beerkens, 2012).

Similarly, Altbach *et al*. (2009), in their analysis of higher education massification, believe that a general decrease in academic quality is inevitable with the widening and expansion of higher education systems around the world. When there are more students interested in obtaining a higher education qualification, academic quality can suffer because higher education institutions become more concerned with attracting and maintaining a proportion of these students, rather than on other aspects, such as the academic quality of programmes (Fritschler, 2010). The RIA (2009) posit that although the increase of higher education enrolments was experienced in Ireland, it had less of a dramatic impact because the increase in students attending higher education occurred more gradually and was, therefore, met with little opposition. As Ireland's HE system grew, however, the implications of HE massification on higher education academic quality were starting to manifest. A natural result of this expansion was bigger class sizes, with widely mixed student abilities while the academic environment remained the same. A conflict did, therefore, eventually emerge:

> *A resulting erosion of educational standards was partly concealed by 'grade inflation' and, in the United Kingdom and Ireland, by loss of the distinction between honours and general degrees, which made good degrees easier to*

*achieve. Governments, preoccupied with increasing access to higher education as a social goal, were less focused on quality* (RIA, 2009:3).

Ireland is not unique in experiencing the effects of massification on higher education academic quality. Other countries have also noted the impact of massification on their higher education organisations' academic quality (Shin *et al*., 2015). Oppedisano (2010), for example, when examining the expansion of Italy's higher education system, found that expanding student numbers put pressure on resources, and as a result, the average academic performance declined overtime. The workload of academic staff, the physical environment, and the administrative functions were all put under pressure due to the expanding student numbers, therefore, academic quality was also challenged. In the United Kingdom, Deer (2004) argues that HE massification increased the individual workloads of academic staff, as well as the student to teacher ratio. As a result of lecturers teaching more students, the opportunity to give particular students individual time and attention substantially decreased. Deer (2004) contends, that this had negative implications for HE academic quality in the United Kingdom. Similarly, and more recently, Hemer (2014) believes that the modern higher education institution, because of its size and diverse requirements, places strong demands on academic employees. Academic employees have less time, therefore, to research, and explore new teaching styles, all of which complement and enhance their quality of teaching (Hemer, 2014).

McCowan and Unterhalter (2015), Kis (2005), and El-Khawas (1998), however, believe that the expansion and massification of higher education forced HE policy-makers and those concerned with HE academic quality to reassess the existing methods of measuring and assessing academic quality. Increased higher education student enrolment, effectively, made the previous forms of academic quality assurance unsuccessful and not fit-for-purpose. Quality assurance mechanisms, therefore, shifted towards more formal methods of quality assurance such as employing the services of an independent quality assurance agency (El-Khawas, 1998). Similarly, Kis (2005) believes that massification, ultimately, helped to establish more formal, transparent, and effective quality assurance mechanisms.

The above authors illustrate the impact of massification on higher education academic quality. While considering these points, Deer (2004) contends that the concerns over the expansion of higher education, and its potential impact on academic quality, are not unique to third level education. Authors in the past raised similar concerns for educational quality

when primary and secondary education systems grew and expanded substantially (Schumpeter, 1943; Mandeville, 1732). Deer (2004), therefore, cautions against becoming overly concerned about the influence of massification on HE academic quality, and, believes that HE massification brings with it a responsibility for public and private higher education managers and policy-makers to monitor and prioritise academic quality.

In addition to massification, over the last few decades, authors such as Nayyar (2011), Marginson and van der Wende, (2007), Scott, (2000), Bourner and Flower (1997) have alluded to the manifestation of globalisation and internationalisation within higher education, and its implications for academic quality. According to Neubauer (2010), higher education policy-makers and institutions are often not always aware of the arising implications for academic quality that globalisation and internationalisation can offset. He suggests that often in a HE institution's haste to engage and become part of the globalisation and internationalisation process, they are unaware of the associated implications on academic quality that they have instigated:

> *In instance after instance the very linkages and aggregations that allow for the dramatic positive advances of globalization can also be equally responsible for simultaneous and often stunningly rapid onsets of negative outcomes that seemingly can catapult out of control* (Neubauer 2010: 2).

The speed and aggression at which internationalisation is pursued was also previously highlighted by Campbell and van der Wende (2000). They argue that an unresolved pursuit of internationalisation can result in relaxed quality assurance systems being applied. In Europe and the United States of America, in particular, a lack of information sharing exists between quality assurance bodies and those tasked with driving the internationalisation of higher education. This, Campbell and van der Wende (2000) posit, can contribute to a situation where higher education academic quality is compromised through the pursuit of internationalisation activities. Additionally, poor coordination can exist between quality assurance measures and the primary agents for internationalisation (Nicoll, 2012). As a result, higher education policy-makers are recognising the need to invest in effective quality assurance mechanisms as they strive to obtain some of the international student market, essentially:

*Nations and higher education institutions are seeking to assert the superiority of their own systems and market their own educational offerings on the basis of quality. But everyone seeks and needs a currency to make such comparisons of quality* (Nicoll, 2012: 4).

Campbell and van der Wende (2004) also argued against pursuing internationalisation processes that have the potential to have deleterious implications on higher education academic quality. Their argument can be illustrated by the means in which renowned and established higher education providers expand outside their national borders in to countries with developed, and developing, higher education systems (Nayyar 2011; Neubauer, 2010; Altbach, 2004). Although such expansion very often assists in increasing the profile of an institution internationally, and raises revenues among other things, it can also cause problems for academic quality (McGaw, 2005). While the quality and standard of programmes in such higher education institutions may be high in the domestic country, it does not necessarily mean that the same programmes in foreign campuses are subject to the same rigorous quality controls (Nayyar, 2011). A similar concern was previously raised by Altbach (2004), who stated that academic quality can suffer through a higher education institution's urgency to extend their globally recognised name beyond their national border. Instead of establishing a physical campus in a foreign country, some higher education institutions are engaging in a form of franchising. This form of franchising takes place when an internationally recognised institution lends its name to an independently run institution overseas. The academic quality of the foreign HEI is rarely scrutinised to the same effect as the domestic institution, which can lead to the reputation of the HEI in its home country being damaged by extension (Altbach, 2004).

The development of globalisation has also contributed to the influx of private higher education providers in higher education system. This can result in adverse effects for higher education quality in higher education (Harkin, 2012; Kak Odin and Manicas, 2004). Kak Odin and Manicas (2004) posit that, although the growth in higher education private providers expanded as a result of globalisation, it is unlikely that academic quality has improved at the same speed. Nayyar (2011), and Kak Odin and Manicas (2004) believe that, in countries with developing higher education systems, the volume of private providers entering, to avail of the growing market, is affecting the academic quality of higher education

programmes. Latin America is one such region in which this is occurring largely due to globalisation:

> *There has been a pathological explosion of private institutions that call themselves universities – charging very high fees and offering very low quality in their education programs* (Kak Odin and Manicas, 2004: 190).

Although cognisant of the negative outcomes of globalisation on higher education, Nayyar (2011) claims that the progressive momentum of globalisation continues to reshape the higher education sector and create opportunities for individuals and countries in which higher education was previously inaccessible. This concept parallels that of Campbell and van der Wende (2000), who previously alluded to the interdependence and correlation that exists between globalisation and academic quality. In addressing this theory, they found that academic quality is continuously strengthened and improved due to the process and development of globalisation and internationalisation. An illustration of how this strengthening of academic quality can occur, because of internationalisation, is put forward by Nicoll (2012) and Baburajan (2011). These authors state that the movement and mobility of academic staff and students internationally enhances academic quality because it creates more opportunities to study, research, and lecture in foreign higher education institutions. This, ultimately, enriches the academic quality of the educational programmes provided by higher education institutions and hence the academic experience of the students (Baburajan, 2011). Similarly, de Wit (2014), and Lauder *et al*. (2006) state that globalisation has provided a platform for national higher education systems, and public and private higher education institutions themselves, to establish global academic quality standards for maintaining educational quality.

An additional force that has instigated a series of changes to academic quality is the introduction and presence of market-like, or commercial forces, within higher education. While the reasons for the development of commercialisation in higher education were previously discussed, it is useful to keep them in mind while outlining commercialisation's impact on academic quality. According to Clay (2008: 50), the development of commercialisation has been driven by a combination of factors, such as "the rise of consumerism, a growing push for accountability, and declining public funding".

In Ireland, commercialisation has entered the higher education sector through the government's growing push for accountability and declining public funding (Donnelly,

2011). Severe budget cuts from the Irish government are impacting higher education institutions' operations and are, subsequently, playing a role in the declining standards of public higher education (Donnelly, 2011). In *The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2011-2012*, for example, former top 100 ranking universities Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD), slipped significantly in their ranking. Although in 2014, the 2013 figures revealed that UCD had marginally improved in their ranking in comparison to 2012, while TCD slipped further again. In examining Ireland's HE academic quality, Cahill (2014) and Donnelly (2011) believe that declining academic quality is symptomatic of the impact that funding cuts are having on Irish higher education institutions. In addition, he believes that these results may hint at the necessity to bring back higher education fees in Ireland to help maintain higher education academic quality. In a similar opinion to Donnelly (2011), the National Competitiveness Council (2011) state that in order for Ireland's higher education quality to be upheld, the sector needs to be adequately resourced, which they state will require a greater contribution from participants in higher education so that public higher education institutions are no longer solely reliant on public funding.

Additionally, the National Competitiveness Council (2011) state that, in comparison to other international higher education institutions, Irish institutions are underfunded - a factor they state is damaging the reputation of the Irish higher education system and indeed the quality of education provided. A poorly funded higher education system is unlikely to find the capacity to continuously innovate and invest; factors which Altbach and Salmi (2011) believe, underpin academic excellence in higher education. Academically excellent higher education institutions, furthermore, are those which have the flexibility and autonomy to make strategic decisions in an appropriate, non-bureaucratic timeframe (Salmi, 2009).

A different viewpoint on how commercialisation is impacting higher education academic quality is put forward by Lynch (2006). Lynch believes that the wave of commercialisation which has taken hold of the higher education sector has been quite a sensitive issue for those working in higher education. It is sensitive, she believes, because there is a widespread public trust and belief that the university employs scholars whose task it is to undertake research and teach for the public good. There is an expectation that those who are given the freedom to think, research and write will work for the good of humanity in its entirety and not be driven by business metrics or objectives. This can have an indirect effect on higher

education academic quality, if those working in higher education believe that the traditional principles are being threatened or undervalued (Fumasoli *et al.*, 2015; Lynch, 2006).

Within higher education there has been a lot of activity and discussion relating to higher education activities designed for economic stimuli. This argument has come to the fore in the writings of Buenstorf (2009) who believes there can be an expectation for higher education activities, such as research, to generate results which will be of benefit to the private sector. This expectation is somewhat resisted, he believes, by higher education employees and organisations alike because a disconnect can exist between the pursuit of these activities and the potential impact on academic quality and values. In addressing this theme, Garvin (2010) found that an over-dependence on higher education to stimulate national and global economies can be short-sighted and have negative implications for academic quality. His view, rather, is that higher education institutions should act as research and knowledge entities relatively disconnected from, and independent of, economic activities. This particular viewpoint, however, is not reflected in several of the higher education activities currently being explored and pursued (Garvin, 2010).

The Science Foundation Ireland, for example, is primarily funding research projects which are directly linked to Ireland's economic recovery (Geoghegan-Quinn, 2012). Geoghegan-Quinn (2012), moreover, states that science forms and informs Ireland's road to economic recovery. The Irish government, subsequently, through the Science Foundation Ireland, announced that funding will be issued and channelled into projects that are most strongly linked to job creation and profitability (Bruton, 2013). The Network for Irish Educational Standards (2012) analysis of this development, concluded that the potential exists for negative outcomes to arise from the commercialisation of higher education. The Network for Irish Educational Standards (2012) interpreted the SFI's announcement as regressive for research within higher education because, rather than pursue basic and exploratory research to lay foundations for further research, only research which is directly linked to job creation and profit is being funded by the Irish government. The problem with this, they state, is that it prioritises research that is profitable rather than research which can serve the public good; contribute to the higher education curriculum; and enhance the teaching of higher education students. Prior to the concerns expressed by the Network for Irish Education Standards (2012), Knapp and Siegel (2009) also stated that there was an over-emphasis on commercialised research in higher education. Their view is that if higher education is to

continue to pursue excessive commercialisation, it will have infinite and irreversible implications for all concerned.

Finally, according to Knapp and Siegel (2009) there are clearly two opposing views on commercialisation developments within higher education. One perspective is that higher education commercialisation threatens the traditional existence and functionality of higher education institutions, an existence which has proven resilient and effective for many years. Another perspective is that those involved in higher education must be responsive to stakeholders which increasingly demand excellence and accountability in fiscal management, marketing, employment practices, customer service, and other matters. Although these two viewpoints exist, Knapp and Siegel (2009) also argue that third level institutions understand the competitive environment in which they operate. While institutional quality and preservation are of the utmost importance, HEIs and their leaders recognise that the sector in which they operate demands sound business practices, including the adoption of commercialisation practices.

In summary, academic quality is a contentious and often volatile dimension of higher education. It is evident that some of the key factors influencing public and private higher education at present such as, massification, globaliation, internationalisation, and commercialisation, have the ability to affect academic quality in many ways. Kis (2005), for instance, posits that massification has altered the means by which academic quality is monitored and viewed within higher education systems and individual higher education institutions. The pressures applied by these forces have given higher education systems and higher education institutions the impetus to put improved processes in place to assist in upholding and protecting academic quality. While the forces are responsible for some negative implications on academic quality, they are also the cause of particularly positive outcomes. One such positive outcome was put forward by Nicoll (2012), and Barburajan (2012), who credit the internationalisation of higher education for activating improvements in academic quality such as faculty development, diversity of the student population, and the enhancement of both the programmes and curricula. Although Mishra (2007), and Sallis (1996), believe that the term or meaning of academic quality is deemed as complex and largely interpretive, it does not subtract from the reality that the measurement and monitoring of academic quality forms an integral part of a higher education institution's operations. Within this context, the viewpoints on the impact that these particular forces are having on

academic quality are particularly poignant for higher education managers and policy-makers, today.

## 2.6 Summary

In summary, Chapter Two demonstrates that higher education systems and public and private institutions around the world have undergone significant changes in recent years, and continue to be impacted by rapid and deep developments, such as globalisation and massification (Rye, 2014; Shin, 2014; Altbach *et al*., 2009). The development and stronghold of globalisation has, in part, stimulated many changes for higher education systems and institutions, such as the increased movement of students internationally, and more competition among institutions (Wood and Robertson, 2015; Blanco-Ramirez and Berger, 2014).

In addition, increasingly, governments around the world have become more involved in the operations of their higher education institutions, and the literature suggests that Ireland is no exception (Hazelkorn, 2014). Governments are heightening their involvement in third level education in an effort to more effectively manage public sector spending and resources, and maximise HE performance to, ultimately, advance and develop their respective economies (Sanberg *et al*., 2014). Irish higher education institutions, therefore, are experiencing a substantial shift in the way that their organisations are managed and governed. These changes, subsequently, have several implications for higher education managers and employees. One such implication is the development of processes and systems aimed at increasing efficiency and accountability within higher education institutions (Fumasoli, 2015; Hazelkorn, 2014).

Chapter Two, moreover, demonstrates that factors such as internationalisation, massification, and commercialisation are significantly affecting internal aspects and functions of public and private higher education institutions. As a result of the influence of these factors, HE management structures, and HE academic quality have been significantly affected and have had to adjust accordingly (Neilsen and Birch Andreasen, 2015; Ogata, 2015). The role of higher education managers, in particular, has altered significantly because of the commercial environment in which they now operate. This business-like environment requires higher education managers to manage their budgets effectively, and to develop strategic plans which establish a long-term, attainable direction for their respective institutions (Goedegebuure, 2012).

Chapter Two, therefore, illustrates that there are many factors that influence and, subsequently, characterise the environment in which Ireland's public and private higher education senior managers must select, implement, and accomplish their strategic priorities. Despite this, however, there is insufficient information available on the Irish higher education system, particularly in relation to the particular factors which are exerting the strongest influence on higher education managers' strategic priorities. More specifically, there is insufficient literature available to comprehensively understand the strength and level of influence that these factors are having on HE managers' strategic priorities, in Ireland. Additionally, the existing literature is incomprehensive in relation to ascertaining whether the aforementioned factors are manifesting themselves in Ireland, in a similar fashion to HE systems and institutions around the world, particularly considering the significant economic and financial challenges which Ireland has experienced in recent years. The existing literature, moreover, does not sufficiently address whether there are other, or more specific, factors which are absorbing managers' attention in relation to their institution's strategic priorities. A gap in the literature, therefore, exists in relation to identifying what particular factors are influencing the strategic priorities of higher education senior managers throughout Ireland. It is from these gaps in the literature, hence, that the research question and the research objectives arose.

## Chapter Three: Research Methodology – A Qualitative Approach

### 3.1 Introduction

The chapter outlines the most suitable approach to address the research objectives as presented in Chapter One. To start with, this chapter will present an overview of two of the most predominant research paradigms in social research. Following this, it will justify why a qualitative approach was taken, and explain the research strategy and methods applied to address the key research objectives. The approach to the interview process and data analysis will be outlined to complete the chapter.

### 3.2 The Philosophy of Research Design

Considering and understanding the philosophy of research is important in that it provides the researcher with a context in which to place their research objectives. Philosophy is concerned with the basic principles of knowledge, reality and existence. Dimensions of philosophy include ethics, metaphysics or ontology, and most notably for this particular area

of research, epistemology (Thomas, 2004). Ontology is concerned with what exists and what can, therefore, be known. Some ontologists argue, however, that we can never know exactly what reality is because of our perceptual limitations. Epistemology, on the other hand, questions how we can know anything with certainty, in other words, how is it possible to differentiate knowledge from opinion or beliefs (Thomas, 2004). Ontology, essentially is reality, and epistemology the technique used by the researcher to discover that reality (Perry *et al.*, 1999). Grasping these concepts is important as it affects all areas of the research process; from the research topic to the research methods adopted. Within management research there are several research philosophies such as positivism, realism, contructivism (interpretivism) and pragmatism. For the justification of this research, the positivism and interpretivism philosophies will be explored in more detail.

## 3.3 Paradigms and Research Approaches in Social Research

### 3.3.1 Positivist Paradigm

The quantitative research paradigm has been closely linked to positivism over the years. Lamputtong and Ezzy (2005) believe that positivism has influenced quantitative research because it is, in several aspects, the opposite of qualitative research; several positivism theories actually reject traditional qualitative research methods. The word positivism is derived from the term 'positive' which, in English, is understood as something positive or affirmative. In French, however, positive means 'real' or 'actual'. Positivism, hence, relates to the collection of knowledge that restricts itself to observable facts and their relationships. It is not concerned with phenomena that are not observable, rather, it rejects entities that are theoretical or invisible (Thomas, 2004; Robson, 1993). Positivism is based on the following premise:

> *The positivist notion is that science becomes credible and possible because every scientist looking at the same bit of reality sees the same thing* (Robson, 2002: 21).

Advocates of positivism prefer structuralist explanations and avoid interpretivist explanations that refer to human intentions and emotions (Maseide, 1990; Williams, 1976; Giddens, 1974; Mills, 1959). Positivists employ tactics to ensure objectivity and attempt to ensure that no occurrences of interpretation influence the research process. To achieve this, positivists require the interviewer, for example, to always ask the same questions in the exact same

manner, never to express any emotion when asking the questions and to distance themselves from the interviewee (Prus, 1996).

This premise that knowledge is objective and has only one single reality has left positivism open to criticism because it can be argued that the perspective of the viewer or observer will have an impact on the reality. It is difficult to separate the experiences and influences of the observer from what is actually the reality, therefore, each observer will observe something different (Robson, 1993). By its very nature, human behaviour is interpretive; therefore, critiques of positivistic methods believe you cannot measure human behaviour using methods derived from the investigation of non-sentient physical phenomena (Gill and Johnson, 2010). Noting the limitations of positivism, some researchers looked to interpretivism as a means of addressing the shortfalls of positivism. Interpretivism is distinct from positivism as it accepts the notion that the theories, hypothesis, background knowledge and values of the researcher can influence what is observed (Reichardt and Rallis, 1994). Interpretivism takes the view that there is an external reality separate from what we describe it to be but they do not accept, as positivism does, that we can know things for certain without factoring in non-observable cues (Robson, 2011).

### 3.3.2  Interpretivist Paradigm

Interpretivism is quite different from positivism in that it holds the view that social properties are constructed through interactions between people, rather than having a separate existence (Robson, 2011). Furthermore, interpretivism acknowledges the point that peoples' experiences of the social world are dependent and illustrated through their own interpretation of it. Although positivism has historically dominated the domain of knowledge construction because of its "objective reliance on the 'scientific method" (Hesse-Bieber and Leavy, 2006:12), interpretivism:

> *avoids the rigidities of positivism in relation to certain types of problems in the social field* (Carson *et al.*, 2001: 5).

Interpretivist approaches, therefore, focus more on a personal process to understand reality rather than attempting to explain causal relationships through examining objective facts, as is the case with positivism. Interpretivism does not separate the researcher from the subject of observation. On the contrary, the interpretivism premise is reliant on the interactive and cooperative relationship between the researcher and the subject of investigation (Decrop,

2006). Unlike positivism, interpretivism prioritises interaction over meaning and prefers to observe what people are doing. Advocates of interpretivism believe it is the researcher's task to understand the multiple, social constructions of meaning and knowledge (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010).

The interpretivist paradigm comes from the intellectual traditions of phenomenology and social interactionism. Phenomenology concentrates on how humans make sense of the world in which they live. Symbolic interactionism, on the other hand, is based on the premise that humans are engaged in a continuous process of interpreting the world around them. Derived from these philosophies is interpretivism where the focus is on entering the social world of the research subjects and to understand their world from their own perspective. In order to effectively achieve this, the researcher has to take an emphatic stance (Saunders *et al.*, 2009:116; O'Donoghue, 2007:16).

Over the last number of decades, generally two research approaches, known as quantitative and qualitative, have been followed when carrying out social research. Quantitative research focuses on measures such as quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Furthermore, the quantitative route tends to closely follow a similar research path as science researchers (Robson, 1993). By virtue of the emphasis on numbers, data analysis tends to be more straight forward and simplistic to process (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010). These qualities make quantitative research methods appropriate in situations where measurement and quantification is important, and accuracy and precision of measurement is sought (Robson, 1993). Qualitative research, on the other hand, emphasises the qualities of entities, processes and meanings. Unlike quantitative research, data collection and analysis tend to occur simultaneously and in an interactive manner (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010). Those who are advocates of the qualitative approach believe that social science research cannot be measured in quantity and frequency. As the focus of social research is on human beings in social situations, qualitative research provides an appropriate alternative (Robson, 1993). While two distinct opinions previously existed; those who supported quantitative research and those who supported qualitative research, a situation has now evolved where researchers follow the path most suited to their area of research, a truce of sorts has emerged (Bryman, 2006). This truce or situation has been referred to as the two solitudes (Stoppard, 2002). In addition, a trend has also emerged where elements of both research styles are combined as researchers recognise the benefits of such a combination. The quantitative approach has historically been

linked to positivism, whereas, the qualitative research paradigm is more suited to a constructivism or interpretivism approach (Decrop, 2006).

**Table 3.1 Basic Differences Between Positivism and Interpretivism (Decrop, 2006: 47)**

| Assumptions | Positivism | Interpretivism |
|---|---|---|
| Nature of reality | Objective, tangible, single, | Socially constructed, multiple |
| Goal of research | Explanation, strong prediction | Understanding, weak prediction |
| Focus of interest | What is general, average and representative | What is specific, unique and deviant |
| Knowledge generated | Laws: absolute (time context, and value-free) | Meanings: relative (time context, culture, value-bound) |
| Subject-research relationship | Rigid separation | Interactive, cooperative, participative |
| Desired Information | How many people think and do a specific thing, or have a specific problem? | What do some people think and do, what kind of problems are they confronted with and how do they deal with it? |
| Research methodology | Hypothetical-deductive approach (experimental design) | Holistic-deductive approach (naturalistic inquiry) |

## 3.4 Selection of an Appropriate Research Approach

Selecting an appropriate research approach depends on the nature of the research question and the knowledge already existing about the subject area to be researched (Morse and Field, 1995). The objective of this thesis is to understand what factors influence the strategic

priorities of Ireland's higher education public and private sector senior managers. Through this research, knowledge will be added to the existing body of knowledge on strategic priority setting and implementation in Ireland's public and private higher education institutions. Each respondent interviewed as part of this study, will relay their own unique experiences and interpretations, which will contribute to the construction of their own personal reality. A positivist approach for this study, therefore, is inappropriate because there is no exact or one reality, and there are no certain objective facts for the researcher to uncover. An interpretivist approach, rather, is more appropriate as it will allow for multiple realities, different perspectives, the researcher's involvement, and the contextual understanding and analysis of data (Carson *et al.*, 2001). In addition, the interpretivist paradigm attempts to understand opinions and behaviours through the meanings people assign to them (Deetz, 1996). This characteristic of interpretivism is particularly important for the purpose of this study. The role of the researcher in the interpretivist paradigm, consequently, is particularly important because:

> *The interpretive paradigm is underpinned by observation and interpretation, thus to observe is to collect information about events, while to interpret is to make meaning of that information by drawing inferences or by judging the match between the information and some abstract pattern* (Aikenhead, 1997: 296).

Moreover, within interpretivism, the researcher believes that grounded theory is most appropriate for this study. Through the use of grounded theory, the researcher will gather the opinions and experiences of the respondents, and let the data emerge. The following sub-section outlines the grounded theory approach, with particular emphasis on why grounded theory is appropriate for this study.

## 3.5 An Overview of Grounded Theory Methodology

Considering the nature of this study's research question, a method which seeks to obtain opinions, experiences, feelings and interpretations is most desirable. The existing research on higher education strategic objective setting and implementation in Ireland, is not comprehensive. There is little existing research on the role of senior managers in setting and implementing strategic priorities, and sparse knowledge exists in relation to what factors managers believe influence their choice and selection of priorities. A grounded theory approach in this specific area, therefore, is necessary as it offers an opportunity to gain valuable insight into the viewpoints of senior managers in relation to the factors influencing

their strategic priorities. This insight will help to bridge the gap in relation to the existing research on the factors influencing the selection, implementation and accomplishment of their organisations strategic priorities, and, lay the foundation for future research in this area.

The creators of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss:

> *Wanted sociology to build new theories about social processes, rather than merely test inappropriate theories, that is, theories that were grounded in the everyday experience of the social processes between individuals, rather than let a theory decide what data was to be collected and how it was to be analysed* (Carson *et al*., 2001:150).

Rather than expecting the collected data to confirm any predisposed theories, the process of grounded theory allows the researcher to collect the data first, and then after its analysis, make conclusions (Carson *et al*., 2001). The researcher believes, moreover, that the grounded theory approach is suitable as it will allow the opinions and viewpoints of the respondents to emerge before any conclusions are made. A grounded theory approach also allows the researcher to design a creative coding framework that will facilitate the categorisation and development of key themes, as they emerge. Considering the size of the sample, and the depth and breadth of the data that is likely to emerge, a grounded theory coding framework supports the researcher to process and organise the data into meaningful categories and themes.

The grounded theory methodological framework was originally outlined by qualitative researchers Glaser and Strauss in the mid-1960s. The grounded theory methodology is a qualitative approach to generating and developing a theory from the data the researcher collects in the study (Johnson and Christensen, 2011). Moreover, grounded theory is an open, reflexive approach to research where data collection, analysis, the development of theoretical concepts, and the literature review occur in a cyclical process. Daymon and Holloway (2003) believe that there are three primary aspects of grounded theory which distinguish it from other approaches. First, researchers follow systematic, analytical procedures during data collection. Second, researchers enter the research process carrying as few assumptions in advance as possible. Third, researchers do not aim to merely describe but also to conceptualize (Daymon and Holloway, 2003: 117).

Although sociologists Glaser and Strauss originally developed grounded theory together, later, their grounded theory approaches and opinions diverged. Two versions of grounded theory, therefore, have emerged; Glaserian, and Straussian (Daymon and Holloway, 2006). The Glaserian version of grounded theory has its ontological roots in critical realism. Critical realism assumes that an objective world exists independently of our knowledge and belief and, therefore, the researcher is independent of the research (Annells, 1996). Strauss' version developed with sociologist Corbin, however, is markedly different as they believe that the researcher should be involved in the method. A more recent, and influential, perspective on grounded theory was presented by Kathy Charmaz (2006). Charmaz's constructivist approach to grounded theory emphasises the research participants' experience and how the participant constructs their view of reality. Knowledge and grounded theory, therefore, are constructed by both the researcher and research participant. This study has been influenced and guided by both the Straussian version of grounded theory developed by both Strauss and Corbin in 1990, and by Charmaz's interpretation of grounded theory. Furthermore, the grounded theory approach put forward by Charmaz provides the researcher with a pathway for performing a grounded theory study. The researcher gravitated towards Charmaz's approach as her approach views grounded theory as a set of principles and practises, not prescriptive methodological rules and requirements (Charmaz, 2006).

Glaser's interpretation of grounded theory, following his divergence with Strauss, was deemed inappropriate for the purpose of this study, particularly considering that Glaser's stance is that reality is objective and neutral. The researcher, rather, values the individual observations and interpretations of respondents, and sought to conceptualise these observations into meaningful theory. The role of the researcher, in relation to interpreting the opinions, observations and beliefs of respondents was, rather, deemed a fundamental part of this study to construct and explain a new phenomenon of interest. For these reasons, the researcher affiliates more with the Straussian, and Charmazian, interpretations of grounded theory.

The data collection and analysis for this study followed a cyclical process typical in the application of the grounded theory approach, by using early findings to shape the on-going data collection. Following one pilot study, the researcher embarked upon the data-collection phase and interviewed a further 48 respondents with a slightly revised and more appropriate, interview guide. The key findings that emerged in the early interviews assisted the researcher in identifying areas or disciplines that required more exploration or emphasis in the

remaining interviews. Throughout the interview process the researcher, then, was able to continuously address the main issues outlined by respondents, as they emerged.

Furthermore, a key characteristic of a grounded theory framework is that it provides for inductive enquiry, that is, a means of generating new theory and new understandings. Inductive enquiry requires researchers to identify the research problem from the research participants' perspectives (Elliott and Higgins, 2012). Traditional research, in contrast, habitually utilises deductive enquiry, that is, a means of proving or disproving existing theory and requires researchers to identify the research problem from the extant literature (Wilson, 2010). Within grounded theory, the inductive versus deductive inquiry approach is a contentious issue. There is a divergence in opinion and much debate in relation to when the researcher should carry out a review of the literature. Glaser (1978), one of the founders of the grounded theory approach, maintains that it is best to conduct a literature review after the initial findings emerge. He believes that reviewing the literature after data collection helps to ensure that the researcher is not unduly influenced by preconceived ideas throughout the data collection phase. Essentially, Glaser's opinion is that a grounded theory study should employ a purely inductive enquiry to avoid being exposed to, and influenced by, existing bodies of knowledge.

Charmaz (2006), however, does not advocate a purely inductive enquiry. Rather than completely ignoring the existing literature, she believes, that an initial review of the literature should be completed before data collection. Moreover, Charmaz (2006) advocates a dual approach maintaining that it is important for researchers to develop their own ideas about the theory, but, acknowledges that an early review of the literature can also be beneficial for the researcher. Glaser (1998), however, opposes Charmaz's (2006) dual approach and remains staunch in his position in relation to delaying the literature review until after the data is collected. Essentially, Glaser (1998) believes that to understand the participants' viewpoint, the researcher must put aside his or her personal perspective and have knowledge and competence in how to conceptualise data. By delaying the literature review until after data collection, Glaser (1998) believes that the researcher can remain neutral throughout the data collection phase. In this study, however, the researcher agrees with Charmaz's (2006) approach to reviewing the literature in a grounded theory study. An early review of the literature, therefore, was carried out which assisted the researcher to identify unexplored, critical aspects of the phenomenon under study. It was also prudent to conduct an early review of the literature to satisfy requirements of the institute's research committee for the

research proposal. Following the traditional grounded theory philosophy, however, the researcher tried not to let a review of the extant literature overly influence, and thereby, negatively affect the creativity process during the development of the theory.

## 3.6 Selection of a Research Strategy

The adoption of interviewing as a technique to acquire information is very popular, so much so that it is said that we live in an "interview society" (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Silverman, 1993). Interview data is perhaps the major source of information for many qualitative researchers (Carson *et al.*, 2001). Interviews encompass the construction of the interviewer's and the interviewees' biographies, coupled with the existing biographical narratives. Interviews not only offer the opportunity to discover what is currently in existence, meanings and interpretations, rather, predate and continue on, long after they have been conducted (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). Interviews demand real interaction between the researcher and the respondent (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010). Regardless of the interview form adopted, the purpose of interviews as a qualitative research method is to get inside the interviewee's mind:

> *…to find out things like feelings, memories, and interpretations that we cannot observe or discover in other ways* (Carson, *et al.*, 2001: 73).

Interviews are often used as the primary research method in a study. They do, however, work well with other methods such as observation or when combined with a case study (Robson, 2011). There are many types and styles of interviews; they tend to be differentiated on the interview's degree of structure or standardisation.

**Table 3.2 Types and Styles of Interviews (Robson, 2011: 279)**

| Fully-structured interview | Has predetermined questions with fixed wording, usually in a pre-set order. The use of a greater number of open-response questions is the only essential difference from an interview-based survey questionnaire. |
| --- | --- |
| Semi-structured interview | The interviewer has an interview guide that serves as a checklist of topics to be covered and a default wording and order for the questions, but the wording and order are often substantially modified based on the flow of the interview, and additional unplanned questions are asked to follow up on what the interviewee says. |
| Unstructured interview | The interviewer has a general area of interest and concern but lets the conversation develop within this area. It can be completely informal. |

The format of the interview schedule chosen can impact the approach of the interviewer and the response of the interviewee. Structured interviews, for example, tend to decrease the probability of an interviewer bias and assist in the categorization and comparison of responses. The semi-structured schedules, conversely, provide the interviewer with considerable freedom as to how to conduct the interview. However, interviewer bias is more likely to occur (Thomas, 2004).

## 3.7 The In-Depth Interview

Where a deep understanding of a research problem is required, in-depth interviewing is most appropriate (Patton, 1990). Personal interviews are also known as in-depth interviews and they can be conducted on a one-to-one, or, a one-to-many basis (King, 2004). In-depth interviews allow the researcher to obtain a more accurate and clear picture of a respondent's position or behaviour – made possible by the open-ended questions and the freedom of the respondent to answer in accordance with their own thinking (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010). Although in-depth interviews have previously been referred to as conversational in manner, strong in-depth interviews bear little resemblance to an everyday conversation (Legard *et al.*, 2003; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The in-depth interview, therefore, creates a scenario in which knowledge about the social world is constructed through regular human interaction (Rorty, 1980). Postmodernism, constructionism and feminism have had the effect of creating new perspectives on in-depth interviewing, and new forms of interview (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Kvale, 1996). Postmodern approaches, for example, draws attention to the way in which an interview inevitably constructs a reality, and to the relationship that inevitably develops between interviewer and interviewee (Legard *et al.*, 2003).

The in-depth interview can be utilised in order to capture the lived experiences of participants (Robson, 2011). The in-depth interview was deemed as most suitable for this grounded theory study because of its exploratory design and ability to unearth individual responses. In-depth interviews allow for not only collecting attitudinal and behavioural data, but also all time frames, past, present, and future, can be researched (Hair *et al.*, 2006). It can be considered as one key aim of qualitative interviews to see the research topic from the respondents' point of view and to understand how, and for which reason, they have obtained this perspective (Hair *et al.*, 2006; King, 2004). Furthermore, an in-depth interview can help to uncover the complex personal framework of beliefs and values of respondents in order to help explain and predict events in their world (Jones, 1985).

In-depth interviews must be sufficiently prepared in order to achieve the desired objectives. In the preparation of interviews, many different aspects and issues must be addressed. A good interview requires not just the right technique and method; the researcher, rather, should be inquisitive and exploratory in their effort to uncover new and exciting insights (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). According to Seidman (1991) many researchers find it most difficult to remain silent whilst listening intensely to the respondent. In failing to do so, the researcher may shift the respondent's train of thought and neglect to uncover the true response. Interrupting or making suggestions while the respondent is being interviewed is, therefore, to be avoided, and the researcher should practice keeping quiet in advance of the interviews.

There are several steps to be taken in preparing for an interview:

1) Analyse your research problem
2) Understand what information you really need to have from an interviewee
3) See who would be able to provide you with that information
   (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010: 127).

The researcher followed Ghauri and Gronhaug's guidance, and clearly identified the research problem, which assisted in determining what questions must be asked. In doing so, Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010) proposed that it will become more apparent which individuals will be able to provide answers that will address the research question, and what exactly they should be asked. Following this, the researcher then drafted an interview guide. The interview guide serves to assist and guide the researcher in the process of carrying out the interview (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011).

The nature of the interview style will largely be dictated by the research objectives and the type of research being carried out. The types and styles of interviews, as outlined by Robson (2011) in Table 3.2, range in style from a formal, rigid approach designed to obtain standardised data to less formal and relaxed methods designed to allow a conversation take a natural and informal course. The fully structured approach, therefore, is more suited to researchers following a positivist approach. The other methods, however, more closely fulfil the objectives of researchers following an interpretivist approach (Carson, *et al.*, 2001). For this research, a semi-structured approach was deemed as most appropriate because semi-structured interviews allow respondents to explore issues in a conversational manner, while still operating within a framework of predetermined questions (Longhurst, 2010). On this

premise, an interview guide was designed to address the research gaps as highlighted in Chapter One. This interview guide can be viewed in the Appendix.

According to Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010), to test the interview guide and its suitability for addressing the research question, a pilot study should be carried out. Testing the interview guide through a pilot study will determine whether there are any flaws or limitations in its design (Turner, 2010). Following a pilot study, the researcher can adjust the interview guide to address any discrepancies highlighted in the testing phase (Kvale, 2007). For this study, the researcher followed the guidance of Ghauri and Gronhaug and it was, therefore, deemed appropriate to conduct a pilot interview to test the interview guide. A pilot interview was carried out with one respondent and following this, small adjustments were made to the interview guide to ensure that it was clearly understandable for all respondents, and best represented the research question and aims of this study. Once all aspects of the interview guide were considered and tested, the researcher approached the interview respondents.

## 3.8 The Sample Structure and Size

In qualitative research, consideration must be given to understanding what or whom to study. The researcher, rather, selects cases, sampling units, or units of analysis for examination (Thomas, 2004). The selection of these interviewees is done in accordance with the research objectives. Essentially, the researcher approached the sample composition from the perspective of what cases or individuals will offer the most value and insight for this piece of research. In order to address the primary research questions and to understand the factors that influence HE managers' strategic priorities, the researcher determined that it was necessary to interview respondents in senior academic managerial roles. This particular position was considered important as senior academic managers assume an integral role in creating, developing, and disseminating their organisation's strategic plans and priorities. Furthermore, this sampling unit was considered the most appropriate for this research because senior academic managers are strongly positioned to ascertain and detail the factors that affect and support the selection, implementation, and accomplishment of their organisation's strategic priorities.

It was decided that two senior academic managers per higher education institution would be included in the sample. These two senior managers were selected from the higher education institutions' largest colleges or faculties. The sample allowed for different organisational structures and titles in existence in Ireland's various public and private higher education

institutions. Senior managers in universities, for example, were most likely to be defined as Dean of College, whereas, senior managers in equivalent positions in institutes of technology were more often referred to as Head of Faculty, or, Head of School. In some private higher education institutions, no equivalent position or title existed. In this situation, due consideration was given to understanding and determining the relevant and nearest equivalent in private sector institutions. Contact was then made with individuals in positions such as Head of Strategy, Head of Quality or the president of the organisation.

Additionally, in selecting and determining appropriate interview respondents, the researcher required potential candidates to meet particular criteria in order to be considered for the purpose of this research. In particular, it was required that respondents assumed a key role in their institution's strategic plan, and oversaw key aspects of the plan's implementation in their respective faculties or colleges.

When the researcher is satisfied that the data are rich enough and cover enough of the dimensions that they are interested in, then the sample is large enough (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). With qualitative research, the sample is considered large enough when it can support the desired analysis. In addition, the quality and richness of the data is deemed more important than the actual size of the sample in qualitative research (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). Within the parameters of grounded theory, Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocate sampling to the point of redundancy. This purposive sampling endeavours to build meaningful, detailed data:

> *The sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus redundancy is the primary criterion* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 202).

This approach, however, is more suited when the research question is more basic and the researcher does not have time or resource constraints (Patton, 2002). For the current research, it is more suitable to estimate a reasonable sample size that the researcher can cover in the time and resources available to her. In terms of ensuring the quality of the data collection and analysis, fifty individual interviews can be considered as an upper limit for a single study and exceeding this number is advised against, unless absolutely necessary (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003). With the parameters set, it was decided that the sample size should consist of between forty and fifty interviews. In order to achieve a satisfactory overview of the strategic objectives being prioritised by senior managers, at present, in Ireland, it was

considered beneficial to include all of Ireland's public higher education institutions with the exception of Ireland's teacher training colleges. The teacher training colleges are currently going through an amalgamation phase with neighbouring or similar universities. To avoid duplication of interviews during this amalgamation phase, thereby, the researcher decided to exclude the teacher training colleges from the study. In relation to private higher education institutions, the researcher's preference was to include well-established private higher education institutions, with QQI accreditation. The researcher believed that established private higher education institutions with QQI accreditation would provide more representative and qualitative data for this study. Including two senior managers per higher education institution, allowing for declinations and scheduling conflicts etc., brought the sample size towards fifty. A total of 49 respondents participated in the study.

## 3.9 Recruitment of Interviewees and Interview Setting

The respondents for this study were not difficult to identify. The contact details for the respondents were publically available. An interview request was sent to respondents via email. The email detailed the purpose of the research, the requirement of the interview, assurance of confidentiality, and requested respondents to provide a suitable time and date to conduct the interview. Subsequently, if the interviewee did not respond via email, they were then contacted via telephone to arrange the interview.

Interviews with senior managers typically have to be arranged some time in advance, since the respondents can often have busy schedules. This is even more important if the interviewer has to travel long distances to conduct an interview or a series of interviews in a given area. It is recommended that initial contact should be made three to four weeks in advance of the time the researcher wishes to conduct the interview (Grøholt and Higley, 1970).

The researcher followed this recommendation of making initial contact three to four weeks in advance of each interview. This was also necessary because of the busy schedules of many of the interviewees. The interview dates and times were then confirmed by email and, finally, the day before each interview was due to take place the researcher telephoned interviewees to ensure that their schedules had not changed and that interview would go ahead at the time agreed.

Legard *et al*. (2003) suggest that the first few minutes after meeting the interviewee can be crucial as these introductory minutes offer a valuable opportunity for the researcher to

establish a relaxed atmosphere conducive to obtaining qualitative material. During the initial introductory stages the researcher, moreover, must assume the role of a guest and avoid the research topic until such a time that the respondent is ready to commence. Once the interview officially commences, the researcher should clearly direct the interaction process. Furthermore, as well as establishing a relaxed atmosphere prior to the interview, and then unambiguously guiding the direction of the interview, the researcher should also pay attention to the period immediately after the interview concludes (Legard *et al*., 2003).

The period after the interview concludes offers a valuable opportunity for the researcher to inform the respondent with regard to how their contribution assists the research. It also gives the researcher further opportunity to clarify any questions or issues that the interviewee may have had before or during the interview. The researcher followed the guidelines of Legard *et al.* (2003) when conducting the interviews. Forty-four of the interviews were held in participants' offices, five were conducted over the phone due to scheduling conflicts. Interviewing in the respondent's place of work helped to ensure the respondent was relaxed in their own environment and more at ease when answering questions.

**Table 3.3 Interview Respondents**

| Respondent ID | HEI Classification | College/School/Department | Gender | Date and Time of Interview | Length of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Institute of Technology | Science and Engineering | Male | 1/11/12    2 pm | 30 minutes |
| 2 | Institute of Technology | Business and Humanities | Male | 6/11/12    3 pm | 1 hour 40 minutes |
| 3 | Institute of Technology | Registrar's Office (Pilot) | Male | 31/10/12    10 am | 40 minutes |
| 4 | University | Science | Female | 4/2/13    9 am | 30 minutes |
| 5 | University | Science | Male | 25/2/13    10 am | 30 minutes |
| 6 | Institute of Technology | Business | Female | 14/2/13    9 am | 30 minutes |
| 7 | Institute of Technology | Science | Male | 14/2/13   10:30 am | 50 minutes |
| 8 | Institute of Technology | Humanities | Male | 19/2/13    2 pm | 40 minutes |
| 9 | Institute of Technology | Business | Male | 19/2/13    4 pm | 50 minutes |
| 10 | Institute of Technology | Business and Computing | Female | 28/2/13    12 pm | 1 hour 10 minutes |
| 11 | Institute of Technology | Health and Social Science | Male | 28/2/13    2 pm | 40 minutes |
| 12 | University | Science, Engineering and Food Science | Male | 27/3/13    9 am | 1 hour |
| 13 | University | Business and Law | Female | 20/6/13    4 pm | 50 minutes |
| 14 | Institute of Technology | Business | Male | 18/4/13   11.30 am | 1 hour 50 minutes |
| 15 | Private College | Business | Male | 7/5/13    8.30 am | 50 minutes |
| 16 | Private College | Law | Male | 1/4/13    9.30 am | 1 hour |
| 17 | Private College | Quality Office | Male | 18/4/13    10 am | 50 minutes |
| 18 | Private College | President's Office | Male | 27/4/13    4 pm | 1 hour |
| 19 | Institute of Technology | Business | Male | 19/4/13    2 pm | 1 hour 30 minutes |

| 20 | Institute of Technology | Science and Engineering | Male | 30/5/13 | 2.30 pm | 1 hour 15 minutes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 21 | Institute of Technology | Science and Engineering | Male | 25/4/13 | 11 am | 1 hour |
| 22 | Institute of Technology | Business | Male | 19/4/13 | 11.30 am | 1 hour |
| 23 | Institute of Technology | Business | Male | 2/5/13 | 12 pm | 50 minutes |
| 24 | Institute of Technology | Humanities | Female | 2/5/13 | 2 pm | 1 hour |
| 25 | Institute of Technology | Business | Male | 27/5/13 | 3.30 pm | 45 minutes |
| 26 | Institute of Technology | Engineering and Science | Male | 2/5/13 | 2 pm | 1 hour |
| 27 | University | Science | Male | 3/5/13 | 9.30 pm | 30 minutes |
| 28 | University | Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies | Male | 3/5/13 | 11 am | 35 minutes |
| 29 | Institute of Technology | Science | Male | 15/5/13 | 11 am | 40 minutes |
| 30 | Institute of Technology | Business and Social Sciences | Male | 15/5/13 | 9.30 am | 50 minutes |
| 31 | Institute of Technology | Science | Female | 18/6/13 | 9 am | 1 hour 10 minutes |
| 32 | Institute of Technology | Business | Male | 28/5/13 | 9.30 am | 45 minutes |
| 33 | Institute of Technology | Business | Male | 16/5/13 | 4 pm | 1 hour 10 minutes |
| 34 | Institute of Technology | Health and Science | Female | 16/5/13 | 3 pm | 40 minutes |
| 35 | University | Economics, Finance and Accounting | Female | 26/5/13 | 10 am | 50 minutes |
| 36 | University | Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy | Male | 26/5/10 | 8.30 am | 40 minutes |
| 37 | University | Science and Health | Male | 25/4/13 | 2 pm | 1 hour 30 minutes |
| 38 | University | Business | Female | 25/4/13 | 4 pm | 50 minutes |
| 39 | University | Business and Law | Male | 17/5/13 | 10 am | 55 minutes |

| 40 | University | Health Sciences | Male | 7/5/13 | 9 am | 30 minutes |
|----|-----------|-----------------|------|--------|------|------------|
| 41 | University | Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences | Male | 14/5/13 | 11 am | 40 minutes |
| 42 | University | Health Sciences | Female | 12/6/13 | 3 pm | 40 minutes |
| 43 | Private College | Business and Law | Male | 17/5/13 | 2 pm | 1 hour 10 minutes |
| 44 | Private College | Business | Male | 17/5/13 | 3.30 pm | 1 hour |
| 45 | Private College | Academic Affairs Office | Male | 21/2/13 | 2 pm | 1 hour |
| 46 | Private College | Business | Male | 18/4/13 | 2.30 pm | 1 hour 30 minutes |
| 47 | Private College | Computing | Male | 18/4/13 | 4 pm | 1 hour |
| 48 | Institute of Technology | Science and Health | Male | 21/3/13 | 3 pm | 1 hour 10 minutes |
| 49 | Institute of Technology | Business | Female | 21/3/13 | 2 pm | 40 minutes |

## 3.10 Interview Guide

An interview guide is a set of questions, which the researcher outlines throughout the course of each interview (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). In the period leading to the interview process, the design of an interview guide can help articulate and organise the researcher's thoughts on the topic (Mey and Mruck, 2007), as well as to ensure all relevant topics are covered (Seidman, 2012). For the purpose of this study, an interview guide was prepared to try to ensure the researcher remained consistent in the collection of data, across the 49 interviews. In addition, Patton (1994) believes that an interview guide helps to ensure that the same basic information is obtained from the respondents, because the interviewer systematically goes through a set of predetermined questions.

In constructing and adhering to the interview guide, Seidman (2012) highlights the importance of not using the interview guide to steer the responses of interviewees. Furthermore, the researcher must realise that what may be of interest to them and, therefore, reflected in the interview guide, may not be of interest to the person being interviewed. The researcher allowed for this inevitability, and while recognising that the respondent may want

to discuss topics outside the realm of the study, regularly attempted to guide the respondent back to more relevant topics. Patton (1990) believes one of the merits of the interview guide lies in the ability to focus on the subject areas and to eliminate subject areas not of interest to the researchers. The interview guide or 'topic guide', as it is sometimes referred to, also allows the researcher to flow more easily from one subject area to another (Ritchie *et al*., 2013).

Based on the questions and topics discussed earlier in this study, an interview guide was created. The interview guide attempts to provide an appropriate structure for conducting the interviews and to assist in ensuring the researcher covers all the issues of relevance to the study. The interview guide used in this study, comprises eighteen open ended questions. The questions follow a precise, systematic order and reflect areas of interest that arose in an initial review of the literature. In addition, the interview guide was structured enough to ensure all subjects of importance to the researcher were covered, but also flexible enough to allow each respondent the freedom to adequately express themselves.

## 3.11 Procedure of the Interview

Regardless of the form an interview takes, its main purpose is to get inside the respondent's head and gain an understanding of their unique perspective (Patton, 2002). Interviews can be similar in style to a relaxed conversation around a particular theme or chosen phenomenon (Carson *et al.*, 2001). Although qualitative interviews might not appear very different from regular conversation with a friend, they display quite fundamentally different characteristics (Blackstone, 2012). The researcher, for example, wants to understand how the respondent, views, or feels about, a particular topic and guides the interview in manner that helps to ensure the attainment of such data. Additionally, with qualitative interviews the researcher has identified a particular structure for the interview and uses a prepared list of topics or questions throughout the interview, something that is uncommon in a casual conversation among friends (Blackstone, 2012). Unlike an everyday conversation, the interview requires a different emphasis in the social interactions that occurs. The interviewer is required to encourage interviewees to talk freely and openly while also understanding that their own behaviour will strongly influence this. In this context, Robson (2011:282) suggests that the interviewer should abide by the following rules:

- Listen more than you speak: Most interviewers talk too much. The interview is not a platform for the interviewer's personal experiences and opinions.

- Put questions in a straightforward, clear and non-threatening way. If people are confused or defensive, you will not get the information you seek.

- Eliminate cues that lead interviewees to respond in a particular way. Many interviewees will seek to please the interviewer by giving 'correct' responses ('Are you against sin?').

- Enjoy it (or at least look as though you do). Do not give the message that you are bored or scared. Vary your voice and facial expression.

Throughout the interview, the researcher should carry out particular rituals such as a murmur of understanding every now and then, eye contact and positive body language, repeat the respondent's own words back to them when clarification or elaboration is required, and to ask non-directive questions such as 'could you please elaborate?' (Armstrong, 1985).

Non-directive questions can also be referred to as probes. The interviewer, as suggested by Armstrong (1985), and Lamputtong and Ezzy (2005), was alert to opportunities to probe the respondents, particularly, when she believed that the respondent had more to say on a particular issue. Probing was used to 'fill in the blanks' in the respondent's initial response to a question (Lamputtong and Ezzy, 2005: 63). There are many different tactics that can be employed to probe, such as a period of silence, an enquiring glance or enquiring what the respondents own personal opinion is on the matter (Robson, 2011). The style of probing can change course once the interviewer has become more familiar with the topic or the responses of previous respondents. When this happened, the researcher used probes to compare the responses of the previous respondents, or tried to uncover why a particular respondent had not responded in line with the theory (Lamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). As the researcher progressed through the interview process, the copious notes that she took during and after the interviews helped to form particular probing questions for the remaining interviews. Additionally, grounded theory studies advocate the coding and analysis of data immediately following each interview. The researcher, therefore, was able to identify key themes and categories emerging from an early stage and, as a consequence, ensure that she had a list of follow up questions to ask interviewees if they mentioned these particular themes.

Another important consideration for ensuring that interviews achieve the goal of gaining particular information lies in the design and address of the opening question. While the opening question must relate to the research topic, the researcher ensured that the opening

question did not address a sensitive or troublesome issue. Such a question may make the respondent nervous and more reluctant to relax throughout the interview process. A strong opening question is one that is answerable by every respondent (Mey and Mruck, 2007). The researcher followed Mey and Mruck's principles and chose an innocuous opening question, designed to both put the interviewees at ease, and to set the scene for the remaining interview format.

## 3.12 Tape Recording Interviews

It is considered essential to record interviews in qualitative research and, in case the tape recording fails, to take some notes (Carson *et al.*, 2001). Depending on the nature of the research, the researcher may choose to use an audio tool or a video device to capture the interview (Murphy and Dingwall, 2003). Regardless of the recording tool employed, recording is advisable because:

> *No matter what style of interviewing you use and no matter how carefully you word questions, it all comes to naught if you fail to capture the actual words of the person being interviewed. The raw data of the interviews are the actual quotations spoken by interviewees. Nothing can substitute for these data: the actual thing said by real people. That's the prize sought by the qualitative inquirer* (Quinn Patton, 2002: 380).

The researcher, however, should be aware that the presence of a recording device may impact upon the behaviour or responses of the interviewees. Warren (2002) believes that the use of a recording device can have different meaning for respondents. In a young offender, for example, it may illicit some hostility or suspicion. For others, it may signify that the interview is very serious in nature and influence the respondent to answer in a uniform or preconceived manner. It is, therefore, important to take steps to limit any reaction to the use of recording equipment and to put the respondent at ease (King and Horrocks, 2010). The researcher paid due consideration to this particular factor and ensured that the recording device was discreet and unimposing. The researcher also placed the recording device out of the respondents' direct line of vision to minimise the impact of the device's presence in the interview room.

The use of a tape recorder, as opposed to note taking, frees up the respondent to listen and conduct the interview. In addition to enabling the researcher to be free to guide the interview, the use of recording equipment increases the authenticity of the data (Markle *et al.*, 2010).

This is because any inflections on words or phrases, such as sarcasm, implied by the respondent, are captured. While tape recording can enhance the authenticity of the interaction, Markle *et al.* (2010) state that a lot of this authenticity can be lost when the respondent reaches the transcription stage. If using a tape recorder, it is important that respondents are informed at the recruiting stage. The researcher, therefore, when arranging the interview, requested permission from the respondent to record the interview. Also, at the beginning of the interview, the interviewees were, reminded about the recording device and asked for their explicit consent to record the interview, as advised by King and Horrocks (2010).

McCracken (1988) also promotes the use of tape recorders in interviews. He suggests that interviewers who attempt to make their own record of the interview by taking notes may create an unnecessary and potentially deleterious distraction. Immediately after the interview a verbatim transcript must be created (1988), in McCracken's view. All forty nine interviews for this study were recorded on tape. This relieved the interviewer from the burden of intensive writing at the time of the interview, in order to concentrate on the interview process. The researcher agrees with Quinn Patton (2002) who notes that, tape-recorders do not selectively exclude conversations or allow for interpretation to change what has been said. For these reasons, it was deemed appropriate to utilise a tape recording device throughout the duration of the interviews.

## 3.13 The Interviewer–Respondent Relationship

The interviewer-respondent relationship begins the instant the potential participant hears of the study (Seidman, 2012). According to McCracken (1988), the researcher should aim to conduct the in-depth interview by achieving a balance between formality and informality for each of the respondents. Monette *et al*. (2013), suggest that the researcher view the interview as a social relationship in which information is exchanged. The interview-respondent relationship needs to be carefully cultivated, shaped, and maintained by the researcher, thus, greatly determining the quality and quantity of information obtained (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). In addition, McCracken (1988) maintains that the interviewer should adopt a particular level of formality in dress, demeanour, and speech because it helps the respondent view the interviewer as a professional researcher, and, someone who can ask quite personal questions, objectively. This formality, moreover, also helps to reaffirm the existence of trust and confidentiality between the respondents and the interviewer. Conversely, McCracken

also encourages researchers to maintain a particular level of informality because it helps to reassure the respondent that, while the interviewer is a professional researcher, she is also is not an unsympathetic, indifferent individual. An adoption of a relatively informal style helps to convey to the respondent, that the research can identify with the respondent's situation and interpretation of events, and is non-judgemental.

In this study, the researcher was guided by McCracken's (1988), Holstein and Gubrium's (2003), and Monette *et al*. (2013) principles, and found their recommendations invaluable for creating a strong interview-respondent relationship, and interview environment. The researcher found that interviewees, generally, became more comfortable as the interview progressed. While it was typical for respondents to adopt a guarded attitude while discussing particular topics, respondents tended to relax as they became more familiar with the researcher, format, style, and procedure of the interview.

## 3.14 Maintaining Control of the Interview

Maintaining control over qualitative, in-depth interviews is no easy task and Rubin and Rubin (2012) maintain that inexperienced, as well as experienced researchers, can struggle to get the balance right. Learning and understanding how much to say, for example, is important, as is employing the right terminology and phraseology (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). According to Willig (2013), for the interviewer, maintaining control of the interview includes comprehensively discerning where the interview is going, and allowing the interviewee the necessary space to divulge his or her interpretation of the topic. In doing so, Willig (2013) believes that this will help to generate new insights and avenues for the researcher. A carefully constructed interview guide can assist the researcher in maintaining control of the interview, and ensuring that the original research questions and aims are addressed.

To maintain control of the interview and ensure that the researcher maximises the most qualitative and insightful responses from interviewees, Rubin and Rubin (2012) also suggest that the researcher carefully and openly assess their social identities to ascertain how their presence may affect the responses of interviewees. According to Willig (2013), social identities include factors such as gender, social class, ethnicity, nationality, and age. Furthermore, Willig (2013) maintains that an understanding of these factors helps to encourage the participant to speak freely and openly, and to maximise the researcher's own understanding of what is being communicated in the interview.

Pope and Mays (2006) believe that maintaining control of the interview is reliant on the interviewer's awareness of their level and effectiveness of direction, whether their cues are being acknowledged or ignored, and whether they are allowing the interviewee enough time to respond. The researcher, importantly, applied Pope and Mays (2006) advice, in relation to direction, and found it best to apply a level of direction appropriate to the particular interviewees. Some respondents, for example, provided more elaborate and distracted responses, so, the researcher employed a suitable level of direction to ensure that the interview was not side-tracked, and that the key issues were addressed. Patton (1990: 130) provided three strategies for maintaining control of an interview, these are:

- Knowing the purpose of the interview
- Asking the right questions to get the information needed
- Giving appropriate verbal and non-verbal feedback

These three princples provided an effective means of maintaining control of the interview for the researcher. Maintaining control of an interview not only means asking the right questions and understanding how to illicit appropriate responses, it also means that interviewers must take care not to interrupt or disturb respondents while they are answering a question (Weiss, 1995). Importantly, Weiss (1995) advices that even if an interviewee does go off-topic and is demonstrating no inclination to return to more appropriate topics, the interviewer must not engage in a struggle to maintain control of the interview. In situations where this did occur, the researcher issued subtle prompts, or waited for an appropriate time to remind the interviewee that time is precious, and that there are more questions to address before concluding the interview.

## 3.15 Interviewer Bias

All researchers are affected by observers' bias. The ability of the researcher's beliefs and opinions to bias the data has been one that qualitative researchers have struggled with for many years (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). What is important when dealing with interviewer bias is for the researcher to recognise and deal with their bias (Rajendran, 2001).

To avoid interview bias, O'Reilly (2005) suggests that the researcher practice a particular level of standardisation in the way that they approach and ask questions throughout the interviews. A standardised approach can help to neutralise any bias that may arise as the interview can objectively draw comparisons between one set of results and another

(Schostak, 2005). Naturally, and perhaps unavoidably, however, the interviewer's facial expressions, attitudes, gender, and responses may cause some bias to arise, but, an attempt must be made to minimise this from occurring (O'Reilly, 2005). The researcher ensured that she regularly reminded herself of the purpose of the research, and clearly identified her own particular interest in the subject, and motivation for undertaking a study in this area. Through following these guidelines, as identified by Seidman (2012), the researcher was able to limit any potential bias or prejudice arising before, during, and after the interview process.

Patton (1990) maintains, however, that avoiding a bias is significantly difficult as interview guides are created by humans, and human beings are not objective instruments. Researchers, however, can take steps to ensure that the study's findings are the result of the observations and ideas of the respondents, rather than the views and predispositions of the researcher. A further means for minimising interview bias in a qualitative study is put forward by Shenton (2004), who maintains that researchers can invite colleagues and peers to review their interview guide before conducting the interviews. In doing so, researchers create an opportunity to identify any obvious or potential biased or prejudiced terminology in the interview guide. Moreover, the researcher can conduct regular debriefing sessions with their supervisors or a steering group, to ensure that their vision is continuously challenged, and new approaches and discussions about the emerging data are explored and discussed (Shenton, 2004). The researcher found it beneficial to discuss emerging concepts with her supervisors throughout the interview process, both to ensure objectivity was maintained, and to garner new perspectives on the potential direction of the emerging data.

Essentially, the researcher believes that a strict adherence to the interview guide, combined with a professional, yet friendly approach, helped to collect data that was free from interviewer bias.

## 3.16 The Period after the Interview and Transcribing the Interview

Rubin and Rubin (2011) believe that the period immediately after the interview is of critical importance, and researchers should, at this time make copious notes on how the interview progressed, and to record any unusual or interesting occurrences. Patton (1990) advocates that the interviewer should, as soon as an appropriate time presents itself, verify that the recording has worked and that the quality is satisfactory. The researcher followed the guidelines of Rubin and Rubin (2011), and ensured that any occurrences of interest, that would perhaps be unidentifiable through the interview recoding, were noted and stored as a

potential aid for the data analysis stage. The researcher, after all interviews, immediately sought a quiet place to process the outcome of the interview. She also recorded some initial, key thoughts and observations about the interview, which were referred to at a later stage. In addition, throughout the interview process, and immediately following the interviews, the researcher, in accordance with Patton's (1990) advice, discreetly checked the recording device to ensure that it was functioning satisfactorily.

According to Rubin and Rubin (2011), after the interview, creating a transcript of the interview should be a priority for the researcher because if there is something unclear in the recoding, the researcher may still have a vivid memory of the conversation and be able to complete the sentence, or viewpoint. Transcribing is often described as time consuming, however, transcripts can be enormously useful in data analysis, or later, in replications or independent analyses of the data (Pope and Mays, 2006). For the purpose of this study, each interview was transcribed verbatim shortly after each interview. Each interview was transcribed in the same format, with single line spacing, and the length of each transcript typically totalled ten pages. The researcher had approximately 500 pages of transcribed interviews.

## 3.17 Analysis and Interpretation of Data

The completion of 49 interviews generated a large volume of data for the researcher to synthesise. In order to answer the pertinent research questions, this collective body of data would need to be translated into meaningful information in order to finalise the process of knowledge creation and understanding (Gibbs, 2007). The analysis of qualitative data is a creative and engaging process, there are no formulas, as might be the case in statistically driven research. Consequently, the process of analysing qualitative data is intense and requires relentless intellectual rigour and a great deal of hard, critical work (Patton, 1990). In approaching data analysis, there are several techniques prescribed by qualitative research literature. It is important to note, however, that there is no universally correct approach to the task (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). The approach to develop an analytic description of the phenomenon under study, however, should be flexible and not prescriptive. It should reflect the rich, lived experiences of the research participants, and a number of strategies can be adopted in pursuit of this goal (Easterby *et al*., 2002).

In a grounded theory study, for example, coding is an important step in the analysis of data as it allows the researcher to translate separate sentiments or ideas into more abstract

interpretations of the interview data.  Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that researchers use a codified procedure for analysing data which allows readers to understand how the analyst obtained his or her theory from the data.  They believe that this helps to convey credibility of the grounded theory approach.  Kothari (2004) states that coding is the process of assigning numbers, for example, to responses so that the data can be categorised into a limited number of themes or classes.  In addition, coding is necessary to analyse the data in an efficient manner and to allow the researcher to whittle down the large volume of data into meaningful categories for analysis (Kothari, 2004).  Developing meaningful theory, for a qualitative study, from large volumes of data is exceptionally difficult if no codified procedure is employed.  The coding process provides the researchers with a tool for linking key categories to allow important themes to emerge, and without this linking process, interested parties are likely to feel that the theory is somewhat impressionistic (Glaser and Strauss, 1987).

The grounded theory approach begins with qualitative data (a transcript) and then engages in a "process of sifting and categorising in an attempt to develop hypotheses grounded on the data" (Beard and Easingwood, 1989: 3).  Coding, therefore, assists the researcher to code, find, and conceptualise the underlying issues hidden within the data (Allen, 2003).  Strauss and Corbin (1990) posit that there are three steps involved in the coding process, these are: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.  The researcher aimed to use Strauss and Corbin's coding process to transform the data into meaningful categories and, ultimately, allow the theory to emerge.  By using the coding process, the researcher was able to develop and build several different categories to represent the most important, emerging data.  While continuing to create new categories and add to existing categories, the researcher also regularly compared the data of each existing and emerging category to highlight any similarities, connections, or contrasts.  In grounded theory, the process of comparing and searching for any potential similarities or differences is referred to as 'constant comparison' (Daymon and Holloway, 2003).  Boeije (2002) believes that constant comparison is the core step of the qualitative analysis, in a grounded theory study.  As the researcher applied and organised the themes arising from the coding process, the storyline for the study began to emerge and several linkages between the major themes began to take shape.

For this study, all three steps of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) coding process were applied sequentially.  First, the researcher used open coding to break down and conceptualise the data. Initially, the researcher analysed the data paragraph by paragraph to identify separate ideas and gave these ideas a label.  Any ideas that were similar or had commonalities were

assigned the same label. There were many labels at the beginning, but as the researcher progressed through the coding process, the labels began to merge and align into more manageable and concise categories. As an exercise, the researcher also listed the key characteristics of each category to help bring these ideas to life. This list of codes was revised continuously as more interviews were coded. Following the open coding categorisation, the researcher then progressed to axial coding where she re-examined the emerging categories and grouped them into new major categories. The major categories were then relabelled to most appropriately represent the sub-categories within. Throughout the transcripts, for example, ideas or topics relating to the interviewees' relationships and interactions with the government featured regularly. A specific code, therefore, was developed entitled 'respondent-government relationship'. The code for this phenomenon is 'A', and any emerging sub-categories or ideas relating to the respondent's relationships and interactions with the Irish government were further broken down into sub-categories. These sub-categories were then labelled A.1, which represented any data relating to a reduction in autonomy. A.2, then, recorded any references to leadership, and so on.

In addition, during the early stages of data analysis, the researcher found it useful to use the interviewees' terms to break up the data into meaningful segments. When interviewees used terms, such as 'leadership', 'freedom and flexibility', and 'world-class' these terms generated more focused, and refined categories. The respondents' own terminology, therefore, helped to form more detailed codes, following a more general coding and categorisation of the data. At this point, the researcher was also able to identify some categories or ideas that were already discovered and outlined in the existing literature.

The emerging ideas and categories were recorded on a large A1 size poster. Writing and linking the emerging categories served as a strong visual reference and supported the researcher throughout the coding process to analyse the data and to identify core patterns and concepts. The researcher, simultaneously, grouped all data relating to similar ideas and concepts together in a Microsoft Word document and continuously refined and developed these ideas as more and more data was coded. Memos were also written throughout this exercise to keep track of thoughts and ideas regarding the data analysis.

The third step applied, in analysing and interpreting the data, is selective coding. Selective coding is defined as the 'process of integrating and refining the theory' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 143). Through the application of selection coding the researcher identified a core

concept to which all the other concepts were linked. This concept helped form the narrative of the emerging grounded theory, and to identify other categories that needed further refinement or development. Throughout the analysis stage, moreover, the researcher also discarded several codes or categories because they were insubstantial, and did not add value to the main phenomena emerging. The researcher followed Glaser's (1978) principles in relation to earnestly evaluating individual categories to determine whether they were important enough to contribute to the emerging theory. Glaser states that categories essentially have to earn their way into an emerging theory. Glaser's approach to selective coding is to follow on from early analysis stages and essentially continue to compare and contrast any emerging relationships between data. During the selective coding process, the researcher, like Glaser, was concerned with ensuring that categories and theories emerge from the data, rather than making the data fit with existing categories (Mills *et al*., 2009).

While the grounded theory approach does not advocate obtaining meaning from quantifying data, the researcher found it useful to evaluate the strength or quality of emerging categories by recording the frequency with which they occur. Categories that lost relevance and appeared far less frequently as the coding process continued and evolved, therefore, were unlikely to appear in the emerging theory. The selective coding stage largely supported the researcher to further develop and refine previously identified, discrete, categories and concepts and to, essentially, tell and complete the bigger picture (Mills *et al*., 2009).

As previously stated, the researcher also engaged in memo writing to support the process of coding and to develop categories. In this study, memo writing was particularly useful as it provided a record of the researcher's key thoughts and emerging ideas as they related to the phenomenon under study. Charmaz (2006) states that memo writing is an essential part of the grounded theory process because:

> *Memo writing is the methodological link, the distillation process, through which the researcher transforms data into theory* (Charmaz, 2006: 245)

The memos were written from the first stages of coding and continued right through to the end. The chronological memos, therefore, enabled the researcher to reflect on the interviews and to form a dialogue about the collected data. Memo writing also provided the researcher with the opportunity to ask questions, compare concepts, philosophise about particular interviewee sentiments, and compare the emerging concepts with the existing literature.

The process of coding and analysis in a grounded theory study requires patience, and Charmaz (2008) highlights the need for researchers to expect a certain level of ambiguity during the early stages of coding and indeed as the process evolves. Furthermore, the presence of ambiguity, as analyses moves towards theory, will test a researcher's ability to use grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2008). Segmenting and coding the data enabled the researcher to think about the data, to break the data apart in analytically relevant ways in order to lead toward further questions about the data. Furthermore, this coding procedure assisted the researcher to think creatively with the data and generated theories and frameworks. Strauss (1987) suggests that the process of coding is about asking oneself questions regarding the data, and those questions help to develop particular lines of enquiry, and help the grounded theory phenomena to emerge. Using the category 'respondent-government relationship' as an example, the researcher tested the strength of the hypothesis by asking questions such as 'has the publication of a national strategy altered the relationship that HE managers have with the government?', 'what direction and leadership is the government providing for Ireland's HE managers?'. This process of asking questions relates to axial coding, as it identifies key patterns and assists the researcher in connecting the emerging theories.

Coding shapes the analytic frame and provides the skeleton for the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz, moreover, sees coding as an important link between collecting data and developing theory and also as a connection between empirical reality and the researcher's view of it. Coding highlights problems, issues, concerns and matters of importance to those being studied. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to categories as having 'analytic power', due to their potential to explain and predict. Furthermore, 'constant comparisons' between collected data, codes, categories and initial findings significantly assisted the researcher to crystallise ideas that, in turn, formed part of the emerging theory. From the data analysis in this study, four main themes emerged and the findings relating to these themes are discussed and analysed in detail in Chapter Four.

## 3.18 Summary

For the purpose of this study, a grounded theory approach was deemed most suitable. A grounded theory framework is typically best suited and employed in research projects where little is known about a phenomenon. Considering the dearth of literature on the factors influencing the strategic priorities of managers in Ireland's higher education system, a

grounded theory research approach provided a suitable framework to examine this topic. The framework provided by grounded theory studies also emphasises the role of the researcher in recording and constructing the beliefs and opinions of respondents into meaningful data and hypothesis (Charmaz, 2006). This characteristic of grounded theory was considered particularly important because the nature of this study centred on gathering the views, opinions, and perceptions of managers in relation to their organisations' strategic priorities. The role of the researcher in establishing trust and rapport in order to illicit meaningful responses, and in constructing new theories, therefore, is a highly intrinsic and valuable element of this study. A research aim or objective of this study, for example, was to capture the observations of HE managers in relation to how they believe their organisations are currently coping in the economic environment. A grounded theory methodological approach, therefore, provided the researcher with adequate freedom and flexibility to explore, compare and conceptualise data relating to emerging themes, all within a rigorous and methodical framework.

## Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

The main findings and analysis from the interviews are presented thematically in this chapter. As previously described in Chapter Three, the 49 respondents are all employed in senior management positions across Ireland's public and private higher education institutions. These managers assume an integral role in the development of their respective institutions strategic plans, and, the implementation and accomplishment of these plans within their own faculties or colleges. This chapter will present direct quotations from the managers, as they relate to four key thematic areas. As table 3.3 demonstrates, each respondent has been allocated a unique number, to respect their identity. Each quotation is accompanied by the respondent's assigned number, as well as detailing the particular sector the respondent works in. A full transcript of each interview is available from the author.

This chapter presents the key findings that have emerged from this study. Each key thematic area is supported by a range of quotations and analysis from the interviewees. The key themes will be presented in this chapter in the following order:

- The Role of the Government in Impacting the Strategic Priorities of Senior Managers in Ireland's Higher Education Institutions

- Strategic Planning and Priorities in Irish Higher Education Institutions

- Developments Occurring in Irish Higher Education Institutions

- Outlook and Attitudes of Senior Managers in Ireland's Public and Private Higher Education Institutions

## 4.2 The Role of the Government in Impacting the Strategic Priorities of Senior Managers in Ireland's Higher Education Institutions

The Irish economy, as mentioned in Chapter One, is experiencing significant challenges. The Irish government, as the primary funder of higher education in Ireland, is required to make decisions to reduce overall expenditure on all public services including higher education. These decisions are impacting the internal operations of Irish higher education institutions, most notably public universities and institutes of technology. All 49 senior managers from across Ireland's higher education system, however, made reference to the influential role of the government on their organisations' strategic priority processes. This section will outline the various means by which the actions of the government impact senior managers' ability to select and implement their strategic priorities. This section is sub-divided as follows:

- The Impact of the Reduction in State Funding on Irish Higher Education

- The Impact of the Employment Control Framework, Employment Contracts and the Croke Park Agreements

- National Leadership and Direction from the Government for Higher Education Institutions

- The Changing Relationship between Higher Education Institutions and the Government

### 4.2.1 The Impact of the Reduction in State Funding on Irish Higher Education

When interviewees were discussing their ability to implement and achieve the strategic priorities set out in their strategic plans, one of the recurring difficulties they cited was the reduction in funding from the government. Thirty eight public sector managers cited the reduction in state funding as a negative factor affecting the achievement of their strategic priorities. It should be noted that the reduction in state funding does not impact private sector

respondents because they are not reliant on the state for funding. The following quotations represent the sentiments of these 38 senior managers:

*With cuts in funding we are being forced to rationalise our courses, so, even though the HEA are not saying to cut courses, they tell us to work within a budget and they give us a budget so in effect they are forcing us to cut courses (*Manager 31, IoT Sector).

*I have just done my own five year plan and the main difficulty is staffing, resourcing and budgeting because we are getting severe cuts at all levels* (Manager 34, IoT Sector).

The reduction in funding is also having a knock-on impact on these 38 managers' higher education institution's ability to make changes, to grow and to remain competitive:

*For the last five years we have had a decreasing budget and so how do you manage to continue to improve and grow on a decreasing budget?* (Manager 4, University Sector).

*The growth aspect of our organisation is being affected now and our ability to meet an increased demand that is out there* (Manager 6, IoT Sector).

*The decrease in funding in comparison to our international competitors, who are delivering similar programmes, disenfranchises us from being able to compete because our level of resource is so much different than our international competitors* (Manager 42, University Sector).

The reduction in state funding prohibits public sector respondents from committing to progressive strategic priorities and maintaining a competitive advantage over rival higher education institutions, both domestically and internationally. These managers perceive that senior managers, in competing privately funded, or foreign institutions with higher funding levels, are more strategically positioned than managers in Ireland's public higher education institutions. This finding supports the research of Wang and Cai Liu (2014) which indicates that higher education institutions require high levels of funding to operate optimally, compete with fellow institutions, and ultimately, become global beacons for their nations. These 38 managers, however, are increasingly limited, from focusing on key growth areas because their attention is directed to the day-to-day running costs. The findings suggest that because

Ireland's public HE institutions are restricted from sufficiently investing in, and developing strategically important projects they cannot fulfil one of their most integral functions, that is, to lead and direct Ireland's economic and social development.

A further factor that is impacted by the role of the government and the challenging economic environment is the academic quality of public higher education institutions. Of these 38 respondents, 16 interviewees express concern in relation to the current state, and direction of, academic quality. The concerns expressed over changes to academic quality are only evident in the public HE sector. No private sector interviewees express concern in relation to their organisations' academic quality. This is perhaps because public sector managers are trying to manage in an environment characterised by: less funding and resources and; a more diverse and expanding student population. In addition, it should be noted that eleven of the sixteen respondents, who highlight their concerns regarding their organisations' academic quality, are from the IoT sector. The following quotations illustrate how the interviewees perceive the changes occurring to academic quality within their higher education institutions:

> *In times of very tight budgetary control or even budgetary cutbacks, on top of staff cutbacks - something has got to give, and at the moment I think you are seeing all of the institutions working to the best of their ability to minimise the impact on quality* (Manager 20, IoT Sector).

> *The strive for more efficiencies, bigger class sizes, and the reduced budget have affected the academic quality and the students' experience etc. In any situation there is a little bit of slack in the system, so, when you apply pressures, you can do it to a certain point and maintain quality. But, I think we are rapidly going over that point. It is becoming very tough* (Manager 7, IoT Sector).

> *The challenging environment has helped my organisation achieve efficiencies that it might not have otherwise achieved without having been made to. But, we are ultimately driven by quality, and, if this challenging environment goes on much longer then we are going to be in trouble* (Manager 12, University Sector).

Throughout the interview process public sector respondents continuously referred to negative aspects within their organisations, such as their decreasing budgets, stretched resources, limited capacity of their physical premises, and an inability to recruit new employees to cope with demand. The findings reveal that these negative aspects make it challenging for Irish

HE managers to maintain and uphold academic quality. The findings support the research of Hazelkorn (2014), who indicates that the impact of the economic crisis on the quality of Ireland's higher education system is particularly alarming for Ireland's international reputation. In examining the opinions of these sixteen managers on the status of their organisation's academic quality, the findings suggest that their organisations would be able to cope with one or two negative decisions or developments. It is, however, the combination of so many aggressive and persistent changes to their individual operations that make it far more challenging for them to safeguard their organisation's academic quality from being negatively affected. The particular challenge, for these 38 respondents, in particular, relates to how the government is managing Ireland's higher education sector through this economically challenging time. The following quotations capture this sentiment:

> *My organisation was already a very efficient organisation so when the financial cuts and rationalisations came through we were badly impacted. The more efficient you were as an institute, the greater you suffered* (Manager 7, IoT Sector).

> *My organisation had two particular employees, who set up a research centre and were doing fantastic work, but we had to pull them back, so, the centre collapsed. It is terrible that people like that who are bringing in money, and who have research students cannot continue because of a lack of funding* (Manager 31, IoT Sector).

While these 38 managers are significantly vocal about the impact of the funding cuts on their institutions, the primary issue that these managers have with the funding cuts relates to the manner in which the funding cuts are applied. These respondents are realistic about the government's necessity to reduce public sector spending, their issue, however, is that all public higher education institutions, regardless of their individual performance and progress, are subject to blanket cuts. The findings of this study suggest that sector wide financial cuts penalise managers and their institutions who have worked hard to develop a reputation or expertise in a particular area. As a result of the funding cuts, Ireland's public sector managers have had to reduce their commitment to particular disciplines that were considered to be of strategic importance to their organisations and, moreover, disciplines in which their organisations were exceling. Existing public sector HE funding is insufficient for these managers to continue to commit to some of their strategically important projects. The notion

of performance-based funding was formally introduced in the Irish government's first national HE strategy, and in subsequent HEA documents. These documents indicated that a performance-based compact will determine the levels of funding awarded to individual public institutions. The findings of this research, however, suggest that managers' perceive their organisation's levels of funding to be decreasing despite their organisation's strong performance across key activities. These managers, therefore, do not believe that they are receiving the adequate financial support from the government to achieve their strategic priorities.

Furthermore, 12 of these 38 respondents, question the validity of strategic planning and the setting of strategic priorities in an environment where state funding is unpredictable and declining:

> *It is not really a good time to be bringing in a strategic plan because there are financial restrictions* (Manager 36, University Sector).

> *I am not sure how much is strategic when most of the things are fixed – you have a budget that is fixed by the state* (Manager 8, IoT Sector).

> *We are constrained by finances which means that we have less resources which means that we have got to be particularly careful on the strategic priorities that we select, and we can support fewer priorities than we did in the past* (Manager 11, IoT Sector).

These 12 interviewees believe that decreasing or unpredictable state funding undermines the purpose of strategic planning. The experience of these managers is that the achievement of particular strategic priorities is jeopardised or undermined each time there is a new financial cut from the government. The research findings of Epstein and Buhovac (2006) posit that managers need to be fully informed, in relation to the factors that could affect their organisation's performance, to effectively and strategically manage their organisations. The findings of this research, on the contrary, indicate that managers are not fully informed because they do not know what changes the government are going to make to the funding levels. The motivation and enthusiasm surrounding the accomplishment of priorities which were selected in a more favourable financial environment, therefore, reduces significantly as soon as the government introduce a further budget cut. The findings suggest that this

development encourages managers to focus on more short-term, attainable priorities and diminishes the potential effectiveness or benefits of strategic planning in higher education.

From this perspective, the continuous and unforeseen reductions in funding are negatively affecting the strategic planning function within public higher education institutions. While the findings of this study are quite critical of the government's actions and decisions, it is worth considering that Mishima *et al.* (2012) posit that higher education systems globally are experiencing unprecedented challenges. In Ireland, the government's control over the dispersion and allocation of funds negatively affects the strategic priority process because public sector managers cannot forecast any potential budget adjustments by the government. Being sufficiently informed of future budgets, and potential cost cutting measures, would, ultimately, assign a marginal but important amount of control to these public sector managers in an environment that is already turbulent and unpredictable.

Additionally, 13 senior managers find that the reduction in state funding is negatively affecting the physical environment in which they work. They also believe that the existing physical infrastructure of their organisations is inappropriate for their students' needs. For example:

> *The morale of our organisation is suffering. This is partly because our buildings are packed to capacity. We do not have the money or space to improve the student environment. How can we enhance the student learning experience if we do not have space for students to meet, work on projects and develop as independent learners* (Manager 19, IoT Sector).

> *There was a time where we would have updated our computers in the labs on a regular basis. Now there is no money to do so* (Manager 10, IoT Sector).

> *We are at breaking point at this stage because we do not have big enough facilities so we have to make sure that we do not recruit too many students because they need to be housed, and our biggest theatre only seats 250 people* (Manager 48, IoT Sector).

The findings suggest that because public sector managers have insufficient funds to direct towards the design and maintenance of their physical infrastructure, the quality of their students' experience is compromised. These managers' organisations have more students but far less space in which to teach them, and for students to study and socialise. These

respondents perceive their existing buildings and student environment to be insufficient for students' needs, and therefore, are anxious about its impact on the students' experience. Moreover, because of the limitations of their respective organisation's existing physical infrastructure these thirteen managers are considerably restricted from responding to their particular region's demand for higher education. Even if demand among potential students is buoyant and persistent, these managers can only recruit the number of students that their premises can accommodate. This development has implications not only for the students who are competing for a place in their local higher education institution but also for local businesses and industries that require a steady supply of high quality graduates. The sentiments of these managers support the research findings of Hazelkorn (2011), who suggested that a country's national and global competitiveness can be measured by examining the capacity of their respective higher education systems. Clearly, these managers' existing physical infrastructures are limiting the capacity of their individual institutions, and therefore, the development of Ireland's higher education system as a whole. It is evident that the government's objective is to reduce HE spending, but reducing funding to a level that restricts individual HE institutions from responding to regional demand is regressive for Ireland's higher education system, and subsequently, Ireland's economic development.

The challenges that arise, as a result of the decrease in funding from the government also prompted four senior managers to question the higher education funding structure that is in place in Ireland. They believe that the government needs to look at alternative means to fund higher education, to prevent further cuts to their budgets, and potential long term damage to the sector:

> *You wonder whether any government is really going to address the underlying funding issue. Because until basic funding is sorted out, we are going to be perpetually living from hand to mouth* (Manager 28, University Sector).

> *If you cannot charge fees then you are dependent on an ever decreasing amount per head* (Manager 38, University Sector).

These four respondents are frustrated that alternative funding avenues, for example, introducing student fees, does not appear to be a genuine alternative for consideration by the government. These respondents' opinions concur with research conducted by Hazelkorn (2014), which found that the existing higher education funding model is no longer adequate

for a country with such high participation rates of third level students. The issue of student contributions is a contentious one in Ireland, and is referred to by Hazelkorn (2014) as a 'political hot-potato', and one elected governments are likely to avoid addressing because of the political unpopularity it causes. The findings of this research reinforce Hazelkorn's (2014) research and indicate that the existing higher education funding model in place in Ireland needs to be addressed. Public higher education institutions are significantly underfunded and, as a consequence, are competitively and strategically constrained. The data from this study indicates that it is not feasible for Ireland's public HE sector to be solely funded by public funds, particularly considering Ireland's high demand for higher education services, and Ireland's challenging economic and financial circumstances.

The findings also suggest that the government's drive towards a more efficient and leaner public higher education system is also having a negative impact on the morale of employees in public sector higher education institutions. Eighteen respondents state that reduced employee salaries and stressful working conditions, coupled with the absence of performance-related pay incentives, significantly threatens the levels of morale within their organisations:

> *Employees really feel that they have been pushed. The public say we have great jobs and suggest that we work 16 hours a week, or whatever small number it is. There has been an increased monitoring of the academics lately and because of this we feel that we have to justify ourselves more and more but in justifying ourselves more and more we have less time to do what we are supposed to do* (Manager 35, University Sector).

> *People are going to get stressed and it is not really their job that is going to stress them, it is all the other things in addition to their job, which we are asking them to do. I think that there is going to be a cost to all of this – what is called efficiency out there is to be seen to be getting more out of the public service. There are going to be fallouts, and it is going to take a toll on people's physical and mental health unless we are very careful* (Manager 48, IoT),

> *You cannot, in the public sector, incentivise in any financial way and this is obviously against the backdrop of further considerable pay cuts so their salaries are cut, their work conditions are disimproving, the demands on them are greater. You have very little to play with* (Manager 13, University Sector).

The findings suggest that public sector managers are in a very difficult position in relation to motivating and incentivising employees. First, salaries have been reduced and workloads have increased for individual employees. Second, there are no pay-related performance incentives in existence in the public HE sector. Public sector managers, therefore, cannot financially reward high-performing employees, nor can they boost the performance of employees who are not excelling by introducing pay related targets. This situation provides public sector managers with little leverage to optimise the performance of employees and secure their commitment to their strategic priorities. The research findings of Salmi (2013), suggest that higher education institutions must provide incentives, if they aspire to retain their best academic scholars and researchers, and ultimately, improve their organisation's performance. The findings of this research, however, suggest that this is not occurring in Ireland's public higher education institutions. For public higher education institutions to excel and build strategic competencies, managers need to be permitted to reward high performing employees and discourage behaviour or patterns which do not contribute to the overall growth and development of their organisations. Additionally, without such financial incentives, public higher education institutions are arguably more likely to lose their best academic staff to more competitive and financially endowed institutions. Considering the emphasis on global league tables and rankings in higher education systems across the world, Ireland's higher education institutions cannot afford to lose high calibre staff in whom they have invested. The government, therefore, need to understand that building a strong, high performing HE system is intrinsically linked to attracting and retaining academically excellent, highly motivated employees. Designing and implementing equitable and pragmatic financial incentives, therefore, needs to be an option available to senior managers in the public sector.

While the private sector is also experiencing funding difficulties as a result of the challenging economic environment, private sector managers are not restricted from implementing instruments such as performance-related pay. Interestingly, private sector managers in this study do not report any change to employee morale to occur within their organisations. Private sector employees have not been affected, to the same extent as their public sector counterparts, by pay decreases and changes to their terms and conditions; factors which can hugely impact upon employee morale. Additionally, as a result of factors, such as deep and steady cuts to government funding, and the uncertainty of Ireland's future HE landscape with HE cluster and TU proposals, the morale of public sector employees has been understandably

impacted. Considering these factors, this finding supports the research of Cartwright and Cooper (2007) who maintain that employees can become stressed during uncertain periods when, for example, a merger or consolidation is proposed. The private sector, on the other hand, has not been affected by these particular factors, which is perhaps a further reason why a reduction in employee morale has not been observed within private sector HE organisations.

A further means by which the role of the government is affecting the strategic priorities of managers in the public sector, is through changes to recruitment, and employment policies and conditions. National agreements, such as the Employment Control Framework and the Croke Park Agreements, outlined in the next section, are specifically mentioned as factors that negatively affect the strategic priorities of managers.

## 4.2.2 The Impact of the Employment Control Framework, Employment Contracts and the Croke Park Agreements

The findings from this research highlight that controls and restrictions imposed by the government in relation to employment in the public sector, create challenges for senior managers. Selecting, implementing, and achieving strategic priorities is made more complex for senior managers because of the employment policies and agreements in existence in their respective organisations. Ten senior managers, for example, suggest that the current academic contract for public sector higher education employees is restrictive. These restrictions impact on their ability to implement and achieve their priorities:

> *The biggest difficulty for us is the national contract for everyone who works here. It would be much better to have contracts that suit the area, suit the region within national parameters* (Manager 9, IoT Sector).

> *If we want to do all that the HEA expect of us then the whole area of academic contracts need to be looked at. At the moment, because of the high teaching load, there is very little time for the other activities such as research* (Manager 23, IoT sector)

The issue of the academic contract is particularly acute for managers in the IoT sector because of the high teaching commitments of IoT lecturers. Public sector managers, particularly, in the IoT sector require a more flexible academic contract so that their employees can be assigned to key strategic tasks and to assist their organisations to,

consequently, perform more effectively. The findings of this study suggest that public sector HE employment contracts need to be more reflective of the broad and dynamic demands placed on today's higher education institutions, as well as the diverse skillsets of individual employees. These ten managers perceive the existing academic contract to be too narrowly defined, as it primarily focuses on core teaching functions. An academic contract, for example, designed to support managers in achieving their teaching, research, and collaboration priorities would enable managers to identify and leverage the individual strengths of their employees and create competent, goal-oriented teams. Public higher education institutions in Ireland are increasingly expected to contribute to Ireland's national economic goals and objectives. The existing academic contract has not, however, been modernised to reflect the wide range of roles and functions that public HE institutions and their employees now perform.

The finding that academic contracts need to be amended, is in agreement with the plans of the government because the issue of academic contracts is addressed in government publications such as, *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) states that the existing academic contracts are to be amended to recognise the qualifications and experience of employees, and to allow for accountability measures that are reflective of best practice in the wider public and private sectors. The *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape* (2012) report also referred to the necessity to amend higher education employment contracts. The report reiterated the requirement to design employment contracts that are reflective of a modern higher education institution, and that make efficient use of an institution's resources and infrastructure, throughout the entire calendar year. Recently, Hazelkorn (2014) also stated that some progress has been made with higher education unions, on this issue. There are positive indications, therefore, that the particular contract challenges, encountered by respondents in this study, will be addressed in the near future. Perhaps the political impetus will be forthcoming when Ireland's clustering and technological university agreements are finalised. The power and capacity for the government to change or amend existing academic contracts is perhaps just not possible at present because of existing national agreements with the higher education sector and the Teachers Union of Ireland. Any purposeful changes to Ireland's higher education landscape such as the technological university, therefore, may afford the government the opportunity to modernise public sector academic contracts. This study reinforces the urgent requirement for the government to redesign academic contracts so that

they more closely reflect the performance requirements and expectations of public higher education institutions today.

A further, and similar, observation made by four respondents relates to the challenges that can arise because of permanent employment in Irish higher education institutions:

> *Permanent employment is a disaster from a flexibility point of view. Some people use it fantastically well; they will do three times the amount that any job demands, others use it as an option not to participate* (Manager 1, IoT Sector).

> *In the public sector, employees who have a permanent job are part of you organisation permanently, so, if you have somebody who has a function which is no longer needed it takes time to retrain that person.  There can be a difficulty, consequently, in terms of aligning people to the strategic plan* (Manager 37, University Sector).

The current public sector HE academic contract restricts the ability of senior managers to first assess an employee's abilities, strengths, work ethic, and whether or not they will positively contribute to the organisation's strategic direction, before he or she is offered permanent employment.  As a result of these factors, the ability for managers to develop and shape their academic teams, as well as to secure commitment from individuals to their strategic priorities is limited.  These managers have little power to influence or persuade individuals to direct their attentions and efforts towards their organisations' strategic priorities.  This particular situation makes it very challenging for managers to realise their vision for their organisations.

Furthermore, rigid and defined salary scales and restrictions set by the government were cited as a further challenge by five senior managers, particularly in the university sector. These salary restrictions impact their institutions from implementing strategic recruitment policies. For example:

> *There is still a national salary scale and many people would argue that that is a problem. In this context recruiting, retaining and developing key researchers is our main difficulty* (Manager 41, University Sector).

> *If a philanthropist gives us funding to make a strategic hire, we are constrained by the salary caps from the government, even though the government is not*

*paying, the philanthropist is. This means that we might not be able to attract the person who the philanthropist expects us to* (Manager 39, University Sector).

These five respondents believe that salary restrictions, such as these, significantly constrain their organisations from attracting philanthropic donations, attracting high calibre employees and, ultimately, from excelling academically. The government's public sector salary cap also applies to funds received from philanthropic donations. Arguably, if managers cannot use philanthropic funds to attract high calibre employees, they are not strategically maximising the use of these philanthropic donations. This particular finding supports the research of Salmi (2013) who suggests that higher education institutions need a high level of autonomy and flexibility from key HE governors, to make the key strategic decisions that will enhance their organisation's performance. The findings of this study, however, suggest that the current government's policy disincentivises philanthropic donations because managers cannot autonomously direct the money to where, they and their donors perceive, it is needed. It could be argued that the continued supply of philanthropic donations is logically dependent on the most strategic spending of those funds by higher education managers. If philanthropists perceive that their donation has been ineffectively spent and has not realised its intended impact, then, philanthropists are, arguably, less likely to donate money in future.

Sector-wide policies, that do not consider individual situations or scenarios, or permit managers to make strategically important decisions, are damaging for the competitiveness and performance of Ireland's HE institutions. Moreover, considering that the government is urging institutions to create alternative revenue streams, the government need to closely examine any existing policies or national agreements that are unsupportive of this instruction. The observation that existing public sector salary scales and salary caps are unsupportive of the strategic priority process is a sentiment held by public sector managers only. Private higher education institutions in Ireland do not have to adhere to any salary caps or rigid salary scales imposed by the government. From this perspective, senior managers in the private sector are less restricted from paying competitive salaries and, thereby, have more capacity to attract high calibre employees.

A further means by which the role of the government is being negatively experienced by respondents, is through the introduction of the Employment Control Framework (ECF), which is in place in Irish public higher education institutions. The ECF does not apply to managers and institutions in the private higher education sector. The ECF was heavily

criticised by 38 public sector managers for restricting potential growth avenues; and for limiting their ability to set and achieve ambitious goals. Specifically, ten senior managers outline how the ECF restricts their ability to respond to initiatives or trends that were outlined by the government as important for Ireland's economic and social development. The sentiments of these ten interviewees are captured in the following quotations:

> *If we come up with a new initiative, it inevitably requires some staffing support and that is the major difficulty because of the employment control framework. This would at times be contradictory because you are trying to respond to government initiatives such as setting up programmes designed to bring people back into the workplace yet you are constrained by the ECF* (Manager 7, IoT Sector).

> *The ECF is too blunt an instrument and because there is a cap on numbers, it prevents us from expanding in areas where we have student demand. So Information Communication Technology related programmes, where there is a short fall of 4,500 jobs and we could actually deliver out more graduates into that space, we cannot because we are not allowed recruit the staff to do so* (Manager 25, IoT Sector).

> *The ECF is a mind boggling restriction on what you can do. It means that we waste vast amounts of time trying to work out ways essentially to get around it. Paradoxically, it involves you spending more money rather than less money because you have to put in place very short term and very expensive solutions because you are not allowed employ or appoint full-time lecturers* (Manager 41, University Sector).

> *If the HEA/Department of Education and Skills are saying that they want us to: attract more international students; offer more places for people who are doing certain type of studies; be more active in applied research; apply for more research funding – well, that is done by people* (Manager 30, IoT Sector).

The ECF significantly restricts the ability of public sector managers to achieve their priorities, many of which mirror the government's own objectives. Irish public higher education institutions, for example, are significantly restricted from making strategic appointments in areas or disciplines that are considered, by the government and their advisors, to be of strategic

importance to the Irish economy. The observations of these ten respondents, in relation to the ECF, support the sentiments of authors such as Harmon (2011), and Von Prondzynski (2011). These authors believe that the ECF is too restrictive a measure because it prohibits higher education institutions from, for example, investing in their research portfolio and developing strategically important programmes. From this perspective, Ireland's universities and institutes of technology are severely limited from excelling in key strategic areas and competing internationally.

Moreover, for six of these 38 senior managers, the constraints of the ECF were most keenly experienced when academic staff within their faculties retired. The ECF and the conditions that it imposes upon public higher education institutions, make it more challenging for these respondents to make strategic hires and to replace those who retire. The sentiments of these six respondents are captured in the following quotations:

> *We are losing a lot of our experienced staff through retirement, the ECF says we cannot rehire. You would like to have some bandwidth to make some strategic hires* (Manager 37, University Sector).

> *The employment control framework is an absolutely massive constraint on us - we have a lot of staff tied to trades. The impact of the ECF was most keenly felt when we lost 26 people in the first run of retirements. Many of those were senior management so the biggest single impact was the loss of all those people; the loss of knowledge, wisdom and experience but also in terms of the day-to-day management* (Manager 8, IoT Sector).

The findings suggest that the loss of skilled and experienced employees through retirements is a significant challenge for managers and their organisations to overcome. This issue is further compounded by the restrictions imposed by the ECF as managers cannot substitute the loss of their most experienced employees by hiring new, skilled employees. Although new employees would, arguably, not have the same level of experience as the retiring employees, the findings indicate that the ability to recruit new individuals into their organisations would certainly alleviate the negative effects of large numbers of employees retiring. Research by Douglass (2010) found that, during periods of economic turbulence, it is not unusual for governments to introduce recruitment restrictions such as the ECF. The problem in Ireland, however, is the lack of flexibility afforded to public sector managers by the government in applying the recruitment restrictions.

Additionally, twelve of these 38 public sector respondents believe the impact of the ECF will have a negative effect on the future operations of Irish higher education institutions and their ability to compete internationally. The sentiments of these 12 managers are captured in the following quotations:

> *Because of the ECF there is no new blood coming into the organisation. There are no permanent or long term positions in the organisation and existing staff need to be regenerated all the time. I think that that is going to have a major impact – it may impact the quality of programmes in the future* (Manager 10, IoT Sector).

> *If you look at trying to get up the university ranking internationally, staff-student ratio plays into that. So, the changes in the ECF means that staff student ratios are worsening. If you want to become world class in a particular area and you need to recruit two or three staff into that area, you are not permitted to do so even if you have the budget* (Manager 28, University Sector).

> *With the ECF it is one of the reasons why we are not in a position to be more active in terms of our research initiative, it is one of the reasons why we cannot take on developments in areas related to engagement or technology transfer* (Manager 30, IoT Sector).

The limited staff profile, arising from the high number of retirements, and the inability to recruit new employees, means that managers are significantly challenged to advance key research projects, develop new programmes in emerging disciplines, and provide students with the level of attention that they require. The restrictions imposed by the ECF are limiting public sector organisations' competitiveness and development. For institutions that are particularly concerned with league tables and global rankings, the ECF significantly negatively affects them. The restrictions imposed by the ECF, are undermining public sector managers' ability to strategically lead and develop their institutions as they see fit. This development is damaging for the integrity and culture of public sector HE organisations. The government are continuously communicating that Ireland's HE system plays an integral role in building a knowledge-based economy, yet, restrictive measures such as the ECF fundamentally contradict this message. From this perspective, public higher education institutions cannot fully realise their role in building and developing Ireland's knowledge-based economy.

Interestingly, although the ECF does not apply to the private HE sector, the presence of the ECF is also indirectly experienced by private sector managers in this study. Three respondents from the private sector note how the ECF impacts their organisations:

> *We used to find it difficult to keep staff but with the ECF in the public sector that has curtailed slightly for us* (Manager 43, Private Sector).

> *I would be anxious about the possibility of the ECF lifting as I believe we would lose some key lecturers to the public sector* (Manager 15, Private Sector).

Private sector managers have been impacted by the ECF in a considerably different manner to their public sector counterparts. The findings indicate that prior to the ECF, a significant number of employees left private higher education employment for opportunities in the public HE sector. The reduced number of employment opportunities in the public sector, because of the ECF, however, has afforded private sector organisations the opportunity to retain their best employees. Private sector managers perceive that they may encounter more competition for high calibre employees when the ECF is no longer in effect. Additionally, in contrast to the public sector, the sentiments of two private sector managers demonstrate the levels of flexibility afforded to their organisations because there are no employment restrictions, in place:

> *If the number coming into first year suddenly doubled we would not just say 'no we cannot take you', we would employ more staff and we would source more rooms. It is that simple* (Manager 16, Private Sector).

> *We can respond very quickly. We can develop and run new courses, if there is a market and if it fits in with the overall vision of the college* (Manager 43, Private Sector).

Private sector managers and their institutions have significantly more flexibility to respond to opportunities because they can recruit lecturers to deliver new modules or programmes. Private sector managers are not subject to recruitment embargos, therefore, they can invest in new programmes and take more students into existing programmes with relative ease. The findings demonstrate, therefore, that in comparison to the public sector, private sector managers are better positioned, as they can freely, strategically recruit new employees to grow and direct their organisations as they see fit.

A further means by which the actions of the government are negatively influencing the strategic priorities of higher education institutions is through the Croke Park Agreements. In this study, the effects of the Croke Park Agreements are most evident in the IoT sector, perhaps because Croke Park measures significantly increased the number of lecturing hours for IoT academic employees. Similar to the ECF, the Croke Park Agreements do not apply to the private sector. Private sector managers and their respective organisations were not affected by any measures introduced by the Croke Park Agreements.

According to 22 public sector managers, measures imposed by the Croke Park Agreements have negatively affected their ability to accomplish their strategic goals. Fourteen of these 22 senior managers criticised the Croke Park Agreements for increasing the workloads of lecturing staff. The collective sentiments of these 14 respondents are reflected in the following quotations:

> *We have had a huge amount of sickness recently which you could argue is related to the extra hours people are working associated with the Croke Park Agreement and the extra pressures staff are under* (Manager 23, IoT Sector).

> *We have increased the student numbers by 15% and decreased the staff numbers by 15% and the funding has been more or less the same. So, if that is not providing the efficiencies that Croke Park asked for then I do not know what more my organisation can do* (Manager 12, University Sector).

> *My colleagues are required to teach more, and the more you teach the quality of that is going to go down by default. There are international benchmarks and we are over doing it and it does lead to the quality of what is being delivered in the classroom going down. Teaching more hours means there is less time to do all the tasks well. It is not possible to do more and maintain the prior levels of quality* (Manager 9, IoT Sector).

The extra workload, and emphasis on efficiencies, resulting from the Croke Park Agreements has an impact on aspects such as the morale and well-being of lecturing staff, and academic quality. These fourteen managers believe that the increased workloads and demands placed on lecturers are negatively affecting their ability to perform their roles effectively, and to maintain optimum levels of quality. This particular finding supports the research findings of Hemer (2014), which contend that academic quality has become very difficult to safeguard because of the increasingly demanding workloads of academic employees. The measures

introduced by the Croke Park Agreements require some lecturers in the IoT sector to teach up to twenty hours a week. The experience of IoT managers, however, is that lecturers have far less time to engage with students, to prepare for class, and to perform other associated roles, such as work placement co-ordinator.

Additionally, four of these 22 public sector managers are critical of the Croke Park measures because they believe that the increased workload has the potential to negatively affect employee participation in the workplace, for example:

> *With the extension of The Croke Park Agreement, it could row back a lot of good things that have been developed over the last year or so. Goodwill is something we do not want to lose* (Manager 49, IoT Sector).

> *The number of staff willing to engage on a voluntary basis has decreased. I think with what is currently happening with the Croke Park Agreement, that negative impact will only continue* (Manager 10, IoT Sector).

The measures imposed by the Croke Park Agreements have created additional work and responsibilities for employees but with less favourable conditions, therefore, when managers were previously able to rely on employee goodwill to drive the priorities, they no longer can to the same extent. The findings suggest that longer working hours and more responsibilities have significantly impinged upon employees' willingness to engage in activities that are considered to be non-core activities, such as strategic planning. Unfortunately, for public sector managers, however, reduced finances and resources have made employee contribution, volunteerism, and goodwill considerably more important than in previous years. While policies such as the Croke Park Agreements are implemented with the intention of reducing costs and making savings, the arising costs associated with such policies, such as poor employee morale and diminished goodwill cannot be overlooked. The government, therefore, should weigh the cost savings of the Croke Park Agreements against the long term implications of significantly reduced employee goodwill.

Alongside formal policies and national agreements such as the ECF and the Croke Park Agreements, senior managers also cited the poor strategic leadership and direction by the government as having a negative impact on their strategic planning and priorities. The next sub-section outlines managers' sentiments on this topic.

## 4.2.3 National Leadership and Direction from the Government for Higher Education Institutions

The findings of this research demonstrate that national leadership and direction from the government, in relation to the future of Ireland's HE system, is important for HE senior managers. Leadership and direction is significantly important for public sector managers, in particular, because they are funded and governed by the government. Thirty two public sector managers believe that stronger leadership and direction, by the government, is required. The following quotations represent the collective sentiments of these 32 respondents:

> *What is needed for us to drive our strategic priorities is a clear direction to be set nationally* (Manager 1, IoT Sector).

> *The higher education system is in such a state of flux, things are changing so rapidly and are imposed upon us by government. So I find that kind of stuff, on a day-to-day basis very difficult in our strategic planning* (Manager 37, University Sector).

The findings suggest that the government is not clearly and consistently articulating their plans and intentions for Ireland's HE system to Ireland's HE managers and, as a result, managers encounter challenges when selecting, implementing and attempting to accomplish their strategic priorities. The issue of ineffective leadership is also closely connected to the number and variety of policy and strategy publications that the government have published in recent years. Twenty of these 32, public sector managers referred to the proliferation of policy, strategy, and/or other documents published by the government, that they are expected to be aware of and, in some cases, comply with. The collective sentiments of these 20 interviewees are reflected in the following quotations:

> *Everybody is finding it difficult to know what to do because there have been so many different documents* (Manager 12, University Sector).

> *We are almost jaded from the last 10 years; we have been inundated with change documents but we have not actually seen a lot of implementation* (Manager 48, IoT Sector)

*The government constantly change and switch: the Department of Education and Skills can commission a report and then put it on the shelf or in the bin. You do not exactly know what government or the HEA wants* (Manager 49, IoT Sector).

The findings suggest that although the Irish government regularly publish strategy documents and introduces new policies, 20 respondents believe that these documents do not convey a consistent, clear message. The government's documents present different viewpoints and recommendations, and new documents often have no connection to previous publications. The publication of several different strategic documents by governments in recent years, therefore, has not effectively supported the lifecycle of public sector managers' strategic priorities. These 20 interviewees, and their organisations, regularly have to amend or change the focus of their priorities to adhere to the latest government thinking. It is primarily from this perspective that public sector respondents are dissatisfied with the level and style of leadership practiced by the Irish government.

In analysing respondents' sentiments on the perceived dearth of direction, the findings suggest that there is much confusion among managers in relation to the government's current and future plans for Ireland's higher education system. Lillis and Lynch (2013) posit that the publication of a national strategic HE plan should assist higher education institutions to develop their own strategic plans that would be reflective of national objectives. The findings of this study, however, demonstrate that Lillis and Lynch's (2013) expectation has not occurred in practice. The findings suggest, rather, that the publication of a national strategy for higher education, on its own, has not been enough to effectively lead and direct Ireland's higher education institutions.

Despite criticising the government's style of leadership and, in particular, the frequent publication of policy and strategy documents, respondents are acutely aware of the most recent documents and, furthermore, are aligning their strategic priorities to these documents. Examples of these strategy documents include *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011), *The Report of the Research Prioritisation Steering Group* (2011) and publications from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. A total of 45 managers, from both the public and private sectors believe they are influenced by national strategy and policy documents, published by the government, when selecting and implementing their strategic priorities. Interestingly, three of the 45 respondents, who consider it strategically important

to be aware of the government's various and most recent publications, are from the private HE sector.  For example:

> *We consider reports like The National Skills document for our part-time offerings, in particular. Then we also consider whether we can fill a skills deficit in a particular area* (Manager 44, Private Sector).

> *We closely monitor government initiatives such as the ICT programmes and government publications like the Hunt report etc. and try to see where future opportunities lie* (Manager 15, Private Sector).

> *Any of the position papers or strategy documents that come out influence us, such as The Hunt report.  We would consider how the measures from those reports affect us* (Manager 45, Private Sector).

Even though private sector institutions are not funded by the government, private sector managers believe that they can more effectively accomplish their priorities if they apply some of the government's key recommendations.  Additionally, the findings suggest that these private sector managers perceive the government's publications to be useful and informative for capitalising on particular opportunities, and to enable their organisation's to become a more integral part of Ireland's HE system.  These documents, for example, direct private sector managers in relation to what disciplines are going to be strategically important for Ireland's economic development, and of interest to potential future students.  In contrast to the public higher education sector, however, private sector managers are selectively choosing what aspects of government policy measures and recommendations that they want to apply.  Unlike their public sector counterparts, they are not required to apply key government recommendations.

The findings further suggest that *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, in particular, is a significantly important document, and a total of 45 managers referred to it throughout the interview process.  The following quotations reflect the sentiments of these 45 managers on the influence of the government's national HE strategy:

> *On an hourly basis, I am concerned with what our positioning is, in the context of what is defined by The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 and related reports* (Manager 1, IoT Sector).

*We, as an institute, are marching almost exclusively to the drum beat of The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. No dialogue, no debate, no point of view is allowed* (Manager 14, IoT Sector).

*The Hunt report has an influence on us. You have to be aware of it and you have to realise that when the HEA looks at your strategic plan they are going to be looking at it in the context of their main pillars in the Hunt Report* (Manager 35, University Sector).

*No global trends and developments are influencing our strategic thinking. We are being partly directed by the HEA policy, and partly directed by local lobbying. There is very little reference in our strategic priorities to higher education trends and developments globally* (Manager 8, IoT Sector).

*The priorities and actions that are coming out of national policy and the Department of Education and Skills currently, are not the right ones for our organisation. They are not the priorities that I would choose if I had the freedom to do so* (Manager 9, IoT Sector).

The findings suggest that the government are playing an increasingly important role in the management and operations of public sector higher education institutions. These managers must now, frequently and formally, consider their institution's priorities within the context of the government's national HE strategy, and subsequent policy documents. This finding, therefore, supports Bok's (2003) research findings, which found that governments, particularly in Europe, are escalating their monitoring and involvement in the management and direction of publically funded higher education institutions. The publication of these various documents has more comprehensively aligned the operations of public HE institutions with the plans and objectives of the Irish government. This development is further discussed in section 4.3.

The strong influence of the government's national strategy on managers' priorities can partially be explained by the emerging Technological University process, in which many IoTs are currently involved. All 26 IoT sector managers, interviewed as part of this study, are closely monitoring government publications which relate to the TU proposal, and, are making decisions in accordance with these publications. Furthermore, in relation to the TU

proposal and process, ten senior managers in the IoT sector criticised the government for their lack of strategic leadership in relation to the Technological University proposal. As a result of the slow and insufficient direction from the government with regard to the Technological University proposal, these ten respondents believe that they are less equipped to develop and commit to a strategic plan for their organisations:

*We have been working on the proposed Technological University for two and a half years. One of the huge challenges with the TU is that the HEA keep moving the targets. They are still moving them so it is hard to know what you are aiming for* (Manager 11, IoT Sector).

*The strategic plan will almost stay in abeyance for the moment until we are absolutely certain what is going to happen in relation to the amalgamated entity* (Manager 20, IoT Sector).

These managers perceive that until they know how the TU will be established, how the new entity will function, and their organisation's position as it relates to TU designation, they are constrained from achieving their strategic priorities. The findings suggest that the government's lack of communication and clear direction in relation to the TU process is constraining managers from investing in, and implementing, effective strategic plans for their organisations. An analysis of the findings suggests that these managers are finding it difficult to invest in, and pursue, priorities that are currently relevant for their existing organisations, but, may be of little relevance for their new TU entity. The perceived lack of information from the government on the development of the TU proposal contributes to a significantly uncertain and unstable environment for managers and their respective priorities.

The findings also suggest that the performance of individual higher education institutions and the overall HE system is fundamentally supported by a stronger, more definitive national direction set by the government. The gaps and shortcomings in governmental leadership and direction, therefore, must be bridged in order to enable institutions to effectively perform their roles in building a competitive and sustainable Irish economy.

Finally, in relation to the role of the Irish government in impacting managers' strategic priorities, the findings indicate that managers believe that their organisation's relationship with the government has changed significantly over the last few years. The next sub-section

outlines the sentiments of managers in relation to the how their organisation's interact and communicate with the government.

## 4.2.4 The Changing Relationship between Higher Education Institutions and the Government

The results of this study suggest that a change has taken place in the relationship between the individual higher education institutions and the government. This observation applies to both the public and the private sectors. The following quotations, however, represent the collective sentiments of 13 respondents from the public higher education sector. These 13 public sector respondents believe that the government have significantly changed the means by which they govern and manage publically funded institutions, for example:

> *With the HEA now, there is much more oversight and intrusion. There is no doubt that there is much more second guessing and certainly an idea at government level of how can we get more value from money from the education sector* (Manager 19, IoT Sector).

> *We are at the moment neither fish nor fowl in terms of an institution that is under state control but does not really have proper state support. We have got to be released from that and told we are on our own or we have to be funded and managed properly like a proper state-funded institution* (Manager 13, University Sector).

The findings suggest that the altered relationship between the government and public HE institutions is motivated by the government's objective to reduce public sector expenditure and to reform Ireland's higher education sector. As a result, these 13 public sector managers perceive that they are not as empowered and entrusted to manage their respective organisation's operations, as they were previously. These managers must report and correspond with the government, more frequently, in relation to their organisations' activities and plans and, furthermore, await government approval for many basic operational activities. An analysis of the data suggests that managers' activities and decisions are monitored more intensely, and, the government's various agencies have significantly more involvement in the operations of these managers' organisations. Bleikle *et al*. (2013) suggest that in recognition of the ever-increasing important contribution that higher education institutions can make to the economy, European governments are modifying traditional HE models to more

comprehensively reflect modern day requirements. The findings of this study support the research findings of Bleikle *et al.* (2013) and suggest that because of the government's increased emphasis on economic stimuli, the relationship and *status-quo* between higher education institutions and the government has altered significantly. The altered relationship is causing some disruption for managers, and, they are striving to adjust to this new form of governmental monitoring and involvement.

Similarly, an additional ten respondents, from the IoT sector, believe that their relationship with the government has changed because of an increase in the level of bureaucracy that they encounter in performing their duties, for example:

> *For major programmes we need the approval of an external panel, and our approval process for minor awards also involves an external person. There is a little bit of bureaucracy there and it is difficult to actually work your way through it, to try to be nimble* (Manager 26, IoT Sector).

> *When we want to do something new we are told we have to draft a new policy. Then, it has to be brought through to academic council, it has to be rubber stamped by the governing body, and the unions may need to be negotiated. So, by the time your original proposal comes through all those various processes, it looks completely different* (Manager 48, IoT Sector).

The findings suggest that the day-to-day activities and functions of IoT managers, in particular, would be significantly more supported and attainable, if the government addressed the bureaucratic culture that has developed in these managers' organisations. These managers perceive that the government requires them to fill out more forms, and engage in significantly more meetings with colleagues to make progress on their priorities. As a result, the volume of paperwork that these managers have to engage in has increased. Making progress on new priorities, such as the development of new programmes has, therefore, become significantly more challenging for these managers.

The change in the relationship between higher education institutions and the government was not only evident in the public sector. Six interviewees in the private sector, observe that the government have made small, but significant, changes to how they view the role of private higher education institutions in Ireland's HE system. For example:

*I do think the present minister for education is more in tune to knowing that there is so much private education can give to the state and there are certain projects that private education institutions are much better at* (Manager 43, Private Sector).

*The private colleges are starting to be recognised and to be seen as key players in the government's strategy. There are winds of change, certainly* (Manager 16, Private Sector).

In contrast to public sector interviewees, the findings suggest that the majority of private sector managers are experiencing an improved relationship with the government. These six private sector respondents believe that the government has significantly adjusted their view and opinion of the contributory role that private colleges can play in the development of Ireland, both socially and economically. This finding agrees with *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011), which states that Irish private higher education institutions are likely to be an important contributor to Ireland's higher education system. The perceived improved relationship between private HEIs and the government is a positive finding as private colleges are now a firmly established sector in Ireland's higher education system. Earlier, in section 4.2.3, it was outlined that three private sector managers consider it important to keep informed of, and to implement, particular measures from the government's various publications even though they are not obliged to do so. The findings suggest, therefore, that private sector managers believe that a positive, mutually respectful relationship with the government is important for the accomplishment of their priorities and their organisation's future competiveness. There is also a clear indication that private sector respondents want their relationship with the government to continue to improve, and for private HE institutions to be recognised as an integral part of Ireland's higher education system.

Returning to the public sector, and in particular the university sector, ten university respondents believe their relationship with the government has changed, most notably, because of decreasing levels of autonomy. The following quotations are representative of the ten university respondents' sentiments:

*If this university is to do what it can do for the country as a whole, it needs an awful lot more autonomy than it currently has* (Manager 41, University Sector).

*In relation to the reduction of autonomy, it has been something that has been creeping in and it is chipping away at the sector. We have had landscape documents and we have had different reports which have come out over time and each one of those, directly or indirectly, chips away different levels of autonomy. It makes it much more cumbersome to achieve our strategic objectives* (Manager 42, University Sector).

*Either we are autonomous institutions with all that that involves or we are state institutions with the benefit of that and at the moment we do not seem to be either. We are being told what to do and we do not have autonomy in relation to what we are doing* (Manager 13, University Sector).

*If my organisation had control over funding it would be a lot easier to address our priorities. My title is Executive Dean; an Executive Dean is a dean who has full control over the budget. Understandably, then, I choose to not use Executive Dean on my signature* (Manager 37, University Sector).

The findings suggest that, as a consequence of the government's more active role in the operations of public higher education institutions, the capacity of Ireland's HE managers to make the decisions necessary for their organisations future competitiveness and development, is limited. The government's actions and increased monitoring restricts managers' ability to make decisions that they could have previously made, relatively independently. The research findings of authors such as Musselin (2012), and de Boer and Jongbloed (2012), suggest that government involvement, particularly in Europe, aims to increase the quality and efficiency of the outputs of publically funded institutions. The findings of this study, however, suggest that this is not occurring in Ireland. The government's increased involvement, and subsequent reduced levels of autonomy, rather, is not supporting managers to increase the quality of their outputs. The decreased discretion and autonomy is visibly affecting the confidence and determination of Ireland's public sector managers to perform the necessary tasks to accomplish their strategic priorities. These managers outwardly possess the title of a manager, yet, they are increasingly prohibited from carrying out actions that are ordinarily associated with their title and position. The findings suggest that these managers know what needs to be done to accomplish their priorities, but, the insufficient and decreasing levels of autonomy significantly challenge and complicate the strategic priority process. As a result, the Irish government's current style of management does not support managers to both

achieve their organisations' goals and targets, and, to underpin Ireland's economic development.

In relation to the perceived changing relationship between Ireland's higher education institutions and the government, there was a common observation by respondents from all three sectors. Twenty five interviewees from across the public and private higher education sectors believe that the government favours particular higher education sectors or individual institutions more than their own sector or institution. The following quotations capture the range of sentiments held by these 25 respondents:

> *You have private institutions with a fraction of the restrictions that we have imposed on us and that, certainly within the last five years, has been very difficult* (Manager 13, University Sector).

> *I think there is a public policy favouring of private institutions. The HEA seems to think that the private providers are a cost effective solution* (Manager 14, IoT Sector).

> *The universities seem to be able to manoeuvre in a different space than the IoTs in terms of strategic direction. It is more challenging for the IoTs because the universities seem to be able to manoeuvre their way around difficulties whereas the IoTs are constrained by legislation* (Manager 8, IoT Sector).

> *I would like to think that because private colleges are self-funded they would be looked-upon more favourably by the government. I do not think that is the case. My suspicion is that the government see private colleges as being somewhat inferior to public sector colleges* (Manager 45, Private Sector).

Furthermore, eight of these 25 managers, state that the government's bias or favourable treatment is demonstrated through the government not penalising higher education institutions that break the rules:

> *In the public sector the reward for success is far less than the penalty for failure. There is no benefit to us that we have behaved well, whereas, other institutions that have broken the rules in all sorts of ways are not spoken to* (Manager 19, IoT Sector).

*A fellow university I know has decided that the regulations are ridiculous so they are just going to break them. Not alone does that mean that they have a competitive advantage in what is not a very big market but it puts us at even more disadvantage. The colleges that do break the rules do not get penalised; it just makes for an uneven playing field* (Manager 38, University Sector).

These twenty five interviewees believe that their sector or institution is not treated favourably by the government, particularly in comparison to fellow sectors or institutions. The issue that these respondents have with this development is that institutions, that are treated more favourably by the government, have the potential to become more competitive because their organisations have considerably more conducive conditions for operating and executing their priorities. The perception that different rules exist for different institutions or sectors is not conducive for the continuing improvement of Ireland's higher education system. While it is reasonable that there may be a perception that particular institutions or sectors maintain a better relationship with the government, resulting in more favourable conditions, the government needs to address any visible scenarios that allow for these ambiguities to arise.

In summary, respondents in both the public and private higher education sectors believe that their organisations now interact and communicate with the government in a different manner than in previous years. An analysis of the findings suggests, however, that with the exception of the private sector, managers do not consider their existing relationship with the government to be an improvement. The findings suggest that public sector managers perceive the relationship, that their organisations previously had with the government, to be significantly more productive and supportive for the achievement of their organisation's priorities.

Finally, it was outlined previously, in Chapter Two, that governments around the world are stimulating a more commercialised environment within their nation's higher education institutions by emphasising the link between higher education operations and economic performance (Drucker, 2015). The findings of this study, therefore, support the existing research by authors, such as Drucker (2015) on commercialisation, and, illustrate that the role of the government is a significant factor influencing the strategic priorities of Ireland's higher education institutions.

The following sub-section further reveals the impact that the government has on a manager's selection and implementation of their priorities. The next theme outlines the objectives that

Ireland's HE managers consider important for their organisations, and the progress of strategic planning in Ireland's HE institutions.

## 4.3 Strategic Planning and Priorities in Irish Higher Education Institutions

The findings from this research demonstrate that strategic planning and the setting of strategic priorities is a fundamental activity for senior managers in Irish higher education institutions. All 49 respondents state that their organisations have a strategic plan, and they are familiar with the main strategic headings identified in their plans. This section presents the strategic objectives that senior managers, in this study, are prioritising. In addition to outlining their specific strategic priorities and the means by which they monitor and facilitate the achievement of these priorities, respondents also discussed factors that support and inhibit the strategic priority process. This section, therefore, is divided into the following sub-themes:

- The Strategic Plans and Priorities of Irish Higher Education Senior Managers
- Implementing Strategic Priorities, and the Evolution of Strategic Planning in Irish Higher Education Institutions

## 4.3.1 The Strategic Plans and Priorities of Higher Education Senior Managers

The findings illustrate that senior managers across Ireland's higher education system have approximately seven key strategic priorities for their organisations. These are research, engagement, retention, internationalisation, e-learning, financial sustainability and the student experience. The following section outlines these particular priorities, in addition to other objectives of relevance for managers in this study. There are significant commonalities across the three higher education sectors, in relation to the objectives and activities that their organisations are prioritising. Thirty six senior managers, for example, from the IoT and university sectors indicate that they have identified strategic priorities to develop their organisation's research agenda:

> *Trying to increase research visibility is a big driver for us* (Manager 37, University Sector).

> *The college has prioritised research in very defined areas* (Manager 34, IoT Sector).

*The other area that we are pursuing would be research. As a School of Science we are very active in research and a priority would be to collaborate with quite a number of organisations outside Ireland from a research point of view* (Manager 49, IoT Sector).

Twelve of these 36 respondents indicate that they have a separate strategy developed to pursue their faculty's research objectives. Developing a research specific strategy, that is separate to the organisation's core strategy, is deemed a logical approach by these respondents because of the important role that research plays in their organisations. In other words, the level of investment and emphasis that their organisations' attributes to research projects and priorities, merits the development of a separate research strategy. For 12 respondents, the importance of a research specific strategy is evident in these quotations:

*We have grown our research organically, we had identified thematic areas and as part of our research strategy we identified three thematic areas and were able to identify the staff to focus on those areas in terms of their research* (Manager 20, IoT Sector)

*The strategic plan of the faculty has got two components: The first one is the development of a research focused strategic plan which has five main goals in it. The main ones being developing a research ethos with the staff, building research capacity and developing research productivity in terms of research outputs, and a fourth would be the research monies that we bring in* (Manager 4, University Sector)

In the context of decreasing funding for universities and institutes of technology, it is encouraging that a significant percentage of respondents are continuing to prioritise the development of research in their institutions. While research is evidently a fundamental activity of public higher education institutions, particularly universities, the influence of the government's HE strategy, which places significant emphasis on Ireland's research capacity, is arguably further heightening the importance of this priority. Moreover, it should also be noted that when these managers discussed their research priorities, they spoke about the negative implications of the reduced levels of HE funding on their ability to implement and accomplish their research priorities. Section 4.2 discusses and analyses the deep and impactful effects of reduced funding on key institutional elements, such as research.

Research activities and projects, however, are not currently considered a top priority for private sector respondents, in this study. Five private sector senior managers, however, did express the ambition and intention to pursue research activities in the near future. The following quotations capture the sentiments of these five managers:

> *The next move academically for us will be Research Masters, and possibly Doctorates. Research activity will be important for us in the future* (Manager 17, Private Sector).

> *We want to develop our research side. We do not want it to completely define us, but, we do want to expand and grow our research* (Manager 43, Private Sector).

As mentioned in section 4.2, six private sector managers believe that their relationship with the government has improved recently, particularly because the government is considering private colleges in their higher education policy related decisions. It could be argued, therefore, that private higher education institutions are considering research more intensely because the government has identified research as important for the future development of Ireland's HE system. The intention to increase research activity marks a significant advancement in the development of private HE institutions because private higher education institutions in Ireland, are more closely associated with the provision of teaching rather than research. Additionally, in analysing private colleges' move into the research space it is worth considering that *The Times Higher Education World University Rankings* (2014) attribute a significant weighting to research activity. The findings indicate, thereby, that for several of the aforementioned reasons, increasing the focus and investment in research activities is, for private sector managers in this study, considered a smart investment for their organisations' future.

A further priority that is prevalent among higher education managers in this study is the priority to pursue activities that serve the region in which they operate. The ability to serve and respond to their region is considered a key strategic priority for 25 respondents in the public sector. The sentiments of these 25 respondents are reflected in the following quotations:

> *The priority of the school is very much to serve the needs of the region and provide appropriate relevant programmes to cohorts of students* (Manager 33, IoT Sector).

*From a strategic point of view our objectives are to keep this institution strong and to keep the academic quality high and to be in the best position to serve the immediate region* (Manager 49, IoT Sector).

*We want to be seen to be a top quality university attracting top quality students and producing students who are of relevance to the region and the country as well* (Manager 27, University Sector).

Fifteen of the 25 managers, that identify the priority to pursue activities that directly contribute to their region, are from the IoT sector. The findings suggest, therefore, that institutes of technology have not drifted from their original mission or purpose. The institutes of technology's original mission or purpose, as defined by French (2010), was to educate and reskill individuals so that they could positively contribute to local enterprise, and meet the needs of industry. The findings, therefore, reflect the observations of French (2010), as institutes of technology interviewees still consider their organisations as key strategic actors in driving the economic and social development of their regions. These fifteen respondents are highly cognisant of their organisation's activities relating to their region's development. Moreover, an analysis of these respondents' sentiments suggests that these managers believe it is their organisation's responsibility to educate local students, and to support local businesses and industries. Essentially, this study confirms that IoT sector managers are still highly cognisant of their sector's original mission and purpose, and are conscientiously trying to embody that mission or purpose throughout their various activities and decisions. It is perhaps reasonable, therefore, that five IoT respondents raised their concerns in relation to their ability to continue to contribute to their region, if they were to become a Technological University, with broader and more diversified objectives. For example:

*Whether we become a TU in the next couple of years or not, our objective is to be in the best position to serve the immediate region. We will be cognisant of the different government reports, but, obviously, if the TU measures are unrealistic and inhibiting our ability to serve our region then we have to stand up and say no* (Manager 49, IoT sector).

Considering this finding, it is advisable that any purposeful changes to Ireland's higher education landscape should support and nurture this intrinsic priority of the institute of technology sector. Careful management of the TU proposal and entity should help to provide

a structure and framework that enables IoT managers to continue to serve their regions, and simultaneously build a robust higher education system.

The priority of these 25 respondents to contribute to the region in which they are based, is closely connected to another priority identified in this study. Forty five respondents, across the public and private sector, outlined that strengthening and deepening their level of engagement with industry, local enterprise, and community groups is a strategic priority. These 45 managers' sentiments are reflected in the following quotations:

> *We would see engagement with industry and the community as a very important objective* (Manager 18, Private Sector).

> *We have got to look at engagement in terms of engaging industry and businesses in the region, and also engaging society and communities – helping to support them and helping them grow. We also view engagement with industry and the community as an opportunity for our students to undertake, for example, a work placement. Engagement and knowledge transfer is a two way street* (Manager 32, IoT Sector).

> *The direct connection with business and industry, such as the large pharmaceutical and IT multinationals that are here, has greatly assisted us across many dimensions of our organisation. We are very strongly connected to them and we would like to be more strongly connected with them. Our connection with small companies is also important* (Manager 12, University Sector).

> *We are going to be dependent, very much, on private funding going forward. We will be engaging with the private sector much more and we will support them as well of course. That would not have happened five years ago – we would not have needed to approach the private sector for support* (Manager 10, IoT Sector)

An analysis of these 45 respondents' sentiments suggests that collaborating with industry and consulting industry representatives on their organisations' objectives, assists their organisations to become more responsive to the needs of their community, and the labour market. Additionally, these respondents believe that becoming more embedded and engaged with the wider business and civic community enhances their organisation's research and teaching activities. Moreover, a more engaged HEI, ultimately, provides students with a more relevant third level experience as they can obtain first-hand knowledge of the

challenges and opportunities that businesses and civic groups encounter.  Collaborations with industry provide students with more opportunities to engage in live, applied projects and assignments with meaningful and impactful results.  This particular finding, however, disagrees with the research findings of Perkmann *et al.* (2013) who found that higher education-industry engagement can often be associated with sub-standard academic outcomes, particularly across research dimensions.  The findings of this study, on the contrary, indicate that engagement with industry and the community is perceived as a very positive dimension of these organisations, and they want to continue to prioritise and advance this objective.

These 45 interviewees believe that their continued association and connectivity with industry will assist them in safeguarding the quality of their programmes, and consequently the supply of students in the future.   From the perspective of building a globally recognised higher education system that produces a high standard of graduates, the development of a more collaborative and synergistic relationship with industry is a positive one for Irish higher education institutions.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that, as a consequence of decreasing funding, most acute in the public sector, Irish higher education institutions are turning to industry as an alternative and convenient funding source.  Managers are appreciative of industry's financial support and without such support believe that the accomplishment of their strategic priorities would be compromised.  It is not, however, industry's responsibility to fund Ireland's public higher education sector and is, moreover, not a long term or reliable funding solution for these higher education institutions.  This issue further emphasises the government's need to address the Irish higher education funding model because higher education-industry collaboration should not be considered just for its remuneration potential.  It is arguably short-sighted for Irish higher education institutions to measure their relationship with industry primarily for its ability to generate money and bridge the funding gap.

A further strategic priority identified by respondents relates to retaining students throughout the duration of their studies.  Thirty three public and private sector senior managers believe there is a need to sustain and improve the retention rates of students in their organisations.  The following quotations represent the range of sentiments outlined by these 33 respondents:

*We spend an awful lot of time and effort on attracting students in the first place. Reasonably, then, one of our broad over-arching goals is to retain those students - we have an 85% retention target* (Manager 16, Private Sector).

*Maintaining quality and upholding the student experience is a priority because we need to focus on student retention. To achieve retention targets, we have to keep redoubling our efforts* (Manager 26, IoT Sector).

*I think that the fact that we have moved to a recurrent grant allocation model, for the state grant funding, and we have come to heavily rely on fees, has meant that we are now more focused on student numbers and retaining students* (Manager 25, IoT Sector).

First, with regard to the public sector, there are perhaps a number of reasons why public sector respondents, in particular, are prioritising student retention. *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) outlines the necessity for Ireland's higher education system to increase participation and ultimately produce more graduates. Additionally, the national HE strategy also details the intention to change the funding model currently used to a Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) across all of Ireland's public higher education institutions. The RGAM model provides the allocation of funding to public sector institutions based on the number of enrolled Full-Time Student Equivalents (FTSE), and was outlined previously in Chapter Two. Essentially, the RGAM model, and within that the FTSE, has made it more important for public sector institutions to retain students from year-to-year, to ensure that funding levels are maintained.

The changes to the funding model are encouraging a more pronounced commitment, among public sector HE managers, to monitoring student enrolment, attendance, and retention. The primary motivation behind setting retention goals and objectives is to maximise, or, at least maintain existing government grant levels. Although these managers' motivation to improve retention rates, is largely monetary motivated, an examination of managers' sentiments indicates that their organisations have made substantial progress in directing resources and attention to improving their students' academic and social experiences. These respondents have had to examine the student experience more closely to understand what factors influence students to drop out of their programmes, and ultimately, to understand how they can prevent students from exiting their organisations. The findings suggest that managers have successfully addressed key issues, such as helping first year students to overcome the

transition from second to third level education. Factors such as this, therefore, have contributed to a less stressful and more seamless higher education experience for third level students. This finding agrees with the research findings of Drumbridge *et al.* (2013) which state that meeting HE retention objectives requires institutions to examine the individual experiences of students, and understand how they can be transformed and improved. In the context of the disruptive changes to the HE funding model, and significant reductions to funding levels, improving the students' HE experience can be considered a positive development, for Ireland's public higher education institutions.

The RGAM model does not, however, apply to private sector institutions. For private sector managers, rather, the findings indicate that an emphasis is placed on retention because private higher education institutions are, in most cases, entirely reliant on student fees to remain a viable business. The observations of private sector respondents reveal that their organisations have always focused, and will continue to focus, on perfecting students' academic and social experiences to continuously improve retention, and subsequently, attract new students. The findings also suggest that a renewed and intense focus on the factors that influence the retention of students serve as an important self-evaluation process for Irish higher education institutions as it encourages them to assess the various aspects of their students' experience within their institutions. It should be noted, however, that the prevalence of retention, as a top strategic priority among public and private sector respondents is very symbolic of the challenging environment in which Ireland's higher education managers operate. Managers, therefore, are more interested in prioritising retention because funding has substantially decreased, and competition for students is intense.

An additional strategic priority that arose from the interviews relates to internationalisation, a factor outlined in Chapter Two as having an influence on higher education systems and institutions, around the world. The pursuit of internationalisation activities is considered a strategic priority for 38 respondents. The following quotations capture the sentiments of these 38 interviewees:

> *Previously, we were just focusing on the domestic market, but that is something we want to change. We now place a great emphasis on international students, and we have taken on more staff to attract more international students and to develop international partnerships* (Manager 16, Private Sector).

*The internationalisation targets include a very active pursuit of an international accreditation and that in itself brings criteria which are very important around internationalisation such as the diversity of staff and the diversity of students* (Manager 13, University Sector).

*We want to develop our relationship with China to get their staff to come over here more, and vica versa. It is big revenue. We need a slice of that market, it is a small slice but if we can grow it and manage it well our reputation will grow, and with that revenue* (Manager 46, Private Sector).

*When we got into international education five years ago we said that we would do so because we want to internationalise: internationalise the curriculum; staff exchange, etc. Now we have changed our tune, we are doing it because we want to make money - we have to pursue internationalisation to supplement our loss of income* (Manager 26, IoT Sector).

Thirty eight senior managers across Ireland's HE system recognise the importance and value of pursuing internationalisation activities. It should be noted, however, that only seven of these 38 senior managers, who identified internationalisation as a strategic priority, refer to the value that internationalisation can potentially add to the culture of their organisations. These seven senior managers believe the benefits of internationalisation are not solely limited to the monetary outcomes:

*We are trying to think about internationalisation in a genuinely strategic way. I think it is often thought of as the answer to the funding crisis – go out there and get some non-EU students – which I think is not achievable. It is a magic bullet fantasy. Effectively, internationalisation is about long partnerships which are mutually beneficial not purely to pull resources from one college to another* (Manager 28, University Sector).

*You can look at internationalisation as money in, but, there is also a cultural aspect attached to it. I think both of those elements of internationalisation are in my organisation* (Manger 34, IoT).

*Internationalisation is probably being followed by everybody because public higher education globally is under attack. All the Americans are focusing on internationalisation, so are the Europeans – everybody is focusing on India and*

*China who are they themselves investing in their own universities which are of increasing quality. Internationalisation is really important for lots of educational reasons so pursuing international students for their income is a very short term strategy* (Manger 38, University Sector).

*We are not just pursuing internationalisation because we believe it is about getting more students in to cover costs. We believe it is about globalisation of attitudes and inclusiveness of the mind* (Manager 17, Private Sector).

It is important to note that these seven respondents are in the minority, the majority of respondents, rather, primarily referred to internationalisation in the context of generating new revenue streams for their organisations. This finding, therefore, is in contrast to the research of De Haan (2014), and Valiulis and Valiulis (2006). These authors posit that engaging in internationalisation activities can create multiple advantages for a HEI, such as enhancing inter-cultural experiences for staff and students. The findings of this study suggest, however, that internationalisation is not being considered, by the majority of Irish HE managers, for the wider benefits that it can stimulate in their organisations. Moreover, an analysis of the data suggests that the acute pressures of the economic environment are limiting managers' interpretation of internationalisation, and preventing them from approaching internationalisation in a genuinely strategic way for their organisations.

Although an international student population has the potential to generate much needed income for Irish higher education institutions, in the long term, the advancement of Irish higher education institutions would be more supported if managers, as suggested by Egron-Polak (2012), considered internationalisation for the accruing, non-monetary benefits that it has the potential to create. Moreover, considering the level and intensity of global competition for international students it is imprudent to become dependent on the revenues associated with internationalisation, and to consider internationalisation as the solution to the funding challenges facing Ireland's higher education managers. It could be argued, rather, that Irish HE managers need to develop a broad, ambitious internationalisation strategy which aims to deliver, long-term, accruing benefits for their organisations.

In Chapter Two, several authors (Lumby and Foskett, 2015; de Wit, 2014; Bonaccorsi, 2014) argued that internationalisation is one of the most dominant factors influencing higher education systems and institutions around the world. The findings of this study confirm the presence and influence of internationalisation in Irish HE and suggest that through the pursuit

of internationalisation as a strategic priority, these managers' organisations have experienced significant changes and implications. Twelve managers, for example, outline a range of implications that have occurred within their organisations, arising from the influence of internationalisation. The following quotations capture the sentiments of these 12 interviewees:

*We have, over the years, developed a number of successful collaborations with other educational institutions in China and in Malaysia, in particular. These are all very worthwhile, but, they do take a fair bit of work and resources, and increasingly, they are competing for the places of Irish students. So, there was a time when we had a lot of space, but now we are running out of space to accommodate these students* (Manager 49, IoT Sector).

*We get quite a number of international students and they present another set of problems, including the problem of working with them in English. There is massive diversity in the classroom. We now have staff development programmes for teaching diverse classes, where English is not the students' first language* (Manager 26, IoT).

*There is a big learning curve for our organisation with the mix of international students. Brazilian students are very similar to Irish students, in terms of their culture and their way of life. Whereas, our Chinese students are just here to learn, are very diligent, and want to learn every word of the book. There is a sharp difference within a class, in terms of how to address that, which can be a challenge for lecturers* (Manager 44, Private Sector).

Clearly, the unique learning styles of international students has an effect on other students in the classroom as lecturers have to adapt and adjust their teaching styles to cater for the varying abilities of students' present. Continuously having to adapt and alter the provision of education to meet the different styles of the international student groups, places added pressure on already stretched resources. This finding also draws attention to the potential negative impact, of a more internationalised student population, on the academic quality of Irish higher education. This finding does not support the research findings of Egron-Polak (2012) which found that internationalisation helps to generate a cross-cultural learning environment and, consequently, enhance academic quality within HE institutions. The findings of this study, rather, suggest that this is not occurring in these managers'

organisations because the standards of English, and the varying educational background of international students, are not at a sufficient level to generate such benefits. In attempting to achieve internationalisation targets, therefore, managers should carefully consider the implications that a more internationalised student population can have on academic quality, as a result of the different educational backgrounds of students.

The findings also suggest that these 12 managers' organisations are already at, or close to, their capacity for domestic students. As a result, they are anxious about their organisations' ability to simultaneously meet their internationalisation objectives, while also continuing to meet the demand from domestic students. Should the displacement of domestic students occur, as a consequence of pursuing internationalisation, these respondents believe their organisations will have failed to support their region effectively. This particular finding is closely connected to a finding, discussed earlier, which highlights that 25 managers consider their organisation's ability to serve its region as highly important. Any objectives that could potentially threaten this priority, such as increasing the number of non-EU students, therefore, are considered very carefully by these 12 respondents. Considering that two of the five pillars in *The National Higher Education Strategy to 2030* (2011) are internationalisation and engagement with society, it is important that HEIs are supported by the government to achieve these priorities. Moreover, considering that the government is encouraging Irish HEIs to increase their international student population and, subsequently, become less reliant on government funding, policy-makers, therefore, need to reassess the capacity and flexibility of Ireland's existing higher education system. Currently, the existing capacity of Ireland's HE system is limiting these managers from recruiting international students, while also, continuing to meet the demand from students in their region.

This study further reveals that Ireland's HE managers are prioritising activities relating to the development of e-learning. A total of 37 respondents outline the objective to recognise and embrace online pedagogies and approaches more comprehensively for their organisations. The following quotations represent the collective sentiments of these 37 respondents:

> *We have an e-learning coordinator appointed. We have a long way to go in the e-learning space but we are also starting to introduce more e-learning assessments, and also introducing moodle* (Manager 34, IoT Sector).

> *MOOCs, technology, e-learning all have an impact. The world is changing rapidly. This is where e-learning is critical. We have to have a very strong e-*

*learning platform, and a strong e-learning presence because if we do not we will be overtaken by technology, there is no question about it* (Manager 18, Private Sector).

*E-learning impacts us, including the MOOCs, those are important for us. We need to think about how we might respond to that and obviously how the landscape is changing. I believe there is a need for an e-learning piece but my organisation is behind the curve on that. Third level education is set to change dramatically over the next 5-10 years and we need to be in the e-learning space much more prominently* (Manager 39, University Sector).

These 37 respondents are cognisant of the changes taking place to the traditional provision of higher education partly as a result of technological developments, globalisation and increased competition in the HE sector. In addition, they are aware that their organisations need to respond to this new dimension of higher education by developing and investing in their e-learning portfolio. The research findings of Bowen (2015) demonstrate that HE systems and institutions around the world are being significantly affected by technological advancements. The findings of this research support Bowen's (2015) research, and illustrate that Ireland is no exception.

Although 37 respondents state that their organisations are prioritising online learning, the majority of the sentiments on the topic of e-learning reveal that, as a priority, it is not as advanced as it should be. Research conducted by Hainey *et al*. (2014) indicates that many higher education institutions around the world struggle to exploit, and take advantage of, advances in technology. The findings of this study support the assertion of Hainey *et al*. (2014), because the majority of higher education institutions are in the infancy stages of developing an e-learning dimension to their organisations. It is apparent that Irish HE managers are aware that technology developments are going to continue to impact their organisations and, are currently considering how their organisations can take advantage of the technological opportunities. With the exception of five respondents, however, the language and phrasing employed by managers, in relation to their e-learning priorities, is slightly casual and non-committal.

In addressing this challenge, Irish HE managers and their organisations would benefit from clear and strong leadership from the government, and e-learning policy leaders. Moreover, international literature surrounding e-learning developments (Eisenberg and Fischer, 2014;

van Liempd, 2013), indicates that there is a MOOCs, and online programme development, investment race occurring among the more competitive and innovative higher education institutions. For the future competitiveness and success of Ireland's higher education system, therefore, Irish higher education institutions and the Irish government need to adopt a stronger positioning in relation to their e-learning policy and direction. The steady and competitive development of the MOOCs, and their implications for Ireland's HE institutions, is a theme that arose throughout the interview process, and is discussed in further detail in section 4.4.

A further strategic priority identified, by 33 respondents, is the necessity to focus on financial sustainability, to cut costs and create efficiencies within their organisations. Respondents reveal, however, that this particular priority is not necessarily articulated in their organisation's strategic plan but is, nonetheless, very important for their respective organisations. The sentiments of these 33 managers, to make cost savings and efficiencies, are illustrated in the following quotations:

> *We try to offer students the best service but at the same time we have to be as efficient as possible so we just cannot let costs overrun in any significant way* (Manager 44, Private Sector).

> *There are also unarticulated priorities such as cost cutting and budget constraints that we must follow which are not articulated in the strategic plan. Probably the biggest unspoken strategic priority for us is that we have to cut costs* (Manager 8, IoT Sector).

> *The next objective is financial stability because there is a funding deficit within the university system which needs to be addressed. We have a very strong need to put financial sustainability for the college into our plan* (Manager 12, University Sector).

> *We are staying still which is an improvement because it is sustainability. We are really in retrenchment or consolidation mode. We are trying to batten down the hatches and get through this* (Manager 43, Private Sector).

For these 33 managers, the existing financial environment dictates that they must prioritise actions and decisions that secure their organisation's continued survival and development. The findings indicate that decreasing government funding and the challenging economic

environment in which Irish HE managers operate, is strongly influencing the pursuit of financial sustainability as a strategic priority. The findings support recent research carried out by Hazelkorn (2014), which found that Irish public higher education institutions are now far more concerned with expenditure and cutting-costs, than in previous years. Managers are experiencing a higher demand for their organisation's educational services, but, they have less money and resources to provide these educational services. In order to maximise their funding and resources, therefore, public sector managers need to carefully monitor their spending, and develop more efficient ways of performing core activities.

The sentiments of private sector managers, on the topic of financial sustainability, indicate that they must continuously focus on efficiencies and their cost base, because they are entirely reliant on student fees to operate, to provide value for money for students, and, produce a profit. The findings reveal that because private higher education institutions are answerable to their shareholders, the taxing economic environment is applying an even more pronounced focus on generating efficiencies both for the survival of the organisation, and to satisfy shareholder expectations.

An additional strategic priority that is prevalent among respondents in the IoT sector is in relation to the proposal for a Technological University sector in the Irish Higher Education System. Nineteen respondents, from the IoT sector, observe that meeting the Higher Education Authority's criteria for TU designation is a key strategic priority for their respective organisations. The sentiments of these 19 respondents are captured in the following quotations:

> *One of the things we have done is we have attempted to consolidate our programmes to identify programmes that are no longer popular and to reduce internal duplication. The reason for this is to be smarter, leaner and a little bit fitter going into our discussions with other IoTs, for TU designation* (Manager 20, IoT Sector).

> *The amalgamation criteria are one of the main strategic objectives within our existing strategic plan. The strategic plan, and the priorities articulated in it, is a plan for the institute in the context of applying for TU recognition* (Manager 22, IoT Sector).

*The establishment of a technological university, which will encompass my organisation, is of huge importance to me. It will be of added value to our graduates and provide them with parity of esteem, because a university graduate has a certain cache* (Manager 2, IoT Sector).

This finding illustrates that TU designation is considered to be of high importance to IoT managers, and is at the forefront of their agenda when making and implementing key decisions for their organisations. Additionally, this study highlights that managers, whose organisations are applying for TU designation, are largely positive in relation to how the process will affect their organisations development. Eight managers, however, did express some anxieties in relation to the TU process. These eight managers' sentiments, on the potential negative implications of the TU process, are captured in the following quotations:

*You do not get into a strategic alliance with another organisation unless there is a good fit and the synergies are obvious. The government are bundling institutes together for the sake of reducing the number. The TU process will distract senior management's attention away from what they should be doing. I question the value of that* (Manager 25, IoT Sector).

*We are in discussions with the HEA at the moment in relation to forming a new TU entity. That is shaping how we establish priorities going forward, but, until we get even firmer confirmation from the HEA in relation to the merger we are plateauing in relation to strategy because we do not know which way we are going, so, it is very difficult to plan* (Manager 11, IoT Sector).

From this perspective, these eight interviewees are concerned about their organisations' integrity and best interests if they were to put significant energy and resources into a new entity that does not transpire, or, functions ineffectively. These concerns are merited, considering the viewpoints of Maguire and Phillip (2008), and Van Dick *et al*. (2006) which highlight the complex and dynamic challenges that can arise before, during, and after a merger. The task for these respondents, therefore, is to safeguard their organisations by continuing to implement strategic priorities that advance their individual organisation's development, while simultaneously meeting TU criteria. Similar concerns were previously raised in section 4.2.3.

The final strategic priority that is considered to be of importance, to managers in this study, relates to the student experience and the satisfaction levels of students. Both public and private sector managers identify the priority of maintaining and improving the student experience. Twenty four public and private sector respondents outlined the priority to maintain, and where possible improve, the student experience. The following quotations capture the sentiments of managers from the public sector, in relation to prioritising the student experience:

> *Our aim is always to provide a good education experience for the student. We are trying to manage our finances to ensure that the student experience is maintained* (Manager 6, IoT Sector).

> *The quality of our students' experience is top strategic priority. We have tried not to let the increased pressure that employees are under, and the fiscal constraints have an impact on the student experience* (Manager 4, University Sector).

Public sector respondents are concerned about the student experience in their organisations particularly because of factors, such as reduced funding levels and heavier workloads of employees. From this perspective, maintaining the student experience, and minimising the impact of the challenging economic environment, on the student experience, has become a strategic priority. The findings suggest that this is not an easy task, and in some instances, managers have not been able to prevent their organisation's challenging circumstances from impacting upon the student experience. Earlier, for example, in section 4.2, respondents outlined the impact of the reduction of funding on their organisations' operations. It was revealed that managers have significantly less to money to input into the physical capacity, design and layout of their organisations. It is factors such as these that managers perceive that they have been unable to improve or address, and therefore, prevent the student experience from being impacted. It should also be noted that, maintaining the student experience, is closely connected to one of the priorities, previously mentioned, which is to increase retention levels. A more satisfied student population will, reasonably, contribute to the accomplishment of retention goals.

Private sector respondents also consider the student experience a strategic priority, however, for slightly different reasons to the public sector. The findings illustrate that the experience of students is a crucial and a highly consuming priority for private sector managers. The

substantial emphasis that is placed on the satisfaction levels of students in private higher education institutions can perhaps be explained by drawing attention to the funding model of private higher education institutions.   With the exception of occasional government initiatives, private colleges in Ireland receive no funding from the government, rather, they rely on the fees paid by their students to remain viable organisations. Failure to prioritise the student experience and monitor the satisfaction levels of students, therefore, could have more devastating implications for private colleges than for public colleges, as expressed in the following quotation:

> *The consequences for a private sector institution can be terminal to the institution; the consequences for a public sector institution may be terminal to the chief executive* (Manager 18, Private Sector).

Consequently, for all nine private sector senior managers in this study, the necessity to maintain a satisfied student population is a top strategic objective.  This view is illustrated in the following quotations:

> *The number one strategic objective we have is the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. That has to be constant – there is a constant remorseless attention to ensure quality is maintained* (Manager 18, Private Sector).

> *Our job is pretty clear, we have to enthuse the students, we have to retain their interest, their sense of satisfaction with the college, and their sense of value for what they are doing* (Manager 17, Private Sector).

> *If you get a query from a student and you are busy, you do not leave it or you do not lose it; the student is the customer and because you want student satisfaction you address it straight away* (Manager 16, Private Sector).

If students are not entirely satisfied they may reconsider their commitment to the college, or, they may tell their friends and family of their unsatisfactory experience, thereby, affecting the reputation of the college. This could also occur in the public sector, but for private colleges, a reduction in student numbers could threaten the private sector organisation's future existence. The findings demonstrate that satisfied students are an important marketing tool for private Irish higher education institutions, and throughout the interview process all nine private managers expressed genuine concern and interest in the progress, development and welfare of their students.  This finding disagrees with the research of Harkin (2012), and three public

sector managers in this study, who suggest that private higher education institutions are more concerned with profit than the quality of their students' experience. The findings, on the contrary, demonstrate that a relentless effort is dedicated to improving the student experience, and, ensuring that students have a meaningful and high quality educational experience. Ensuring that students are satisfied with their educational experience, reasonably, leads to an enhanced institutional reputation and, ultimately, a profitable organisation.

Finally, throughout the interview process respondents also outlined the selection of tools that their organisations are utilising, to implement and accomplish their stated strategic priorities. The next section presents the most prominent means, outlined by the respondents, of implementing and measuring the progress of their strategic priorities. In addition, the following section charts the most recent strategic planning developments in Irish higher education institutions.

## 4.3.2 Implementing Strategic Priorities, and the Evolution of Strategic Planning in Irish Higher Education Institutions

The findings suggest that all respondents employ particular tools or processes to implement and monitor the progress of their strategic priorities. The means by which they do this, however, varies, although some similarities do exist across particular sectors. The use of KPIs, for example, are most prevalent in the public HE sector, however, they are less evident in the private sector. Seventeen managers in this study assess which objectives are of importance, and track the progress of these objectives through the adoption of KPIs. The quotations below illustrate the use of KPIs in the Irish higher education sector:

> *Every unit has an operational plan with particular targets in it and then we have KPIs for the over-arching targets to see that those are being met* (Manager 28, University Sector).

> *We run a system of KPIs and they float from the strategic plan down into all of the aspects under the functional areas of the institute. The KPI indicators are matched up into each objective* (Manager 32, IoT Sector).

> *The strategic plan must have an implementation plan and implementation means KPIs, balance scorecard etc. If you do not have KPIs attached to your implementation plan, you will simply disillusion everybody involved in the strategic plan* (Manager 18, Private Sector)

These 17 interviewees believe that applying KPIs assists them in tracking the progress of individual strategic priorities. Through the use of KPIs, these managers can measure how their organisations are performing in relation to their strategic priorities. Furthermore, through the use of KPIs, senior managers can share the objectives that are to be prioritised, and the progress of these priorities, with their academic colleagues. Managers and employees, therefore, have a more comprehensive understanding in relation to what actions and decisions need to be made to meet their KPIs, and importantly, can visibly assign individuals to perform those actions. The adoption of KPIs, as the primary tool for implementing and measuring the progress of the priorities, can, in part, be explained by the government's increased emphasis on the adoption of KPIs. The publication of several government reports, such as the *Higher Education Systems Performance Framework 2014 – 2016* (2013) outline the requirement for public higher education institutions to formally adopt KPIs.

A less formal means than KPIs, to monitor the progress of the strategic priorities, referred to by five respondents, is the adoption of a traffic light system. A traffic light system assigns a colour code system (green, amber and red) to the various strategic priorities. Green indicates that the priority has been or is close to being achieved, amber indicates that the achievement of a particular priority is under way, and red highlights any situation where the achievement of a strategic priority has been delayed, or if the particular priority is not feasible. The following quotations demonstrate how the traffic light system is utilised in these respondents' organisations:

> *We review the progress of our priorities by adopting a traffic light system. If a priority is fully completed, it is in green, if it is on-going it is in amber, and if it is red it obviously has not been touched. Red could mean that something has changed and we are not going to be able to complete the priority - maybe something has happened in the external environment which makes the priority less important or less strategic for us* (Manager 48, IoT Sector).

> *A traffic light system will be used to find out how the heads of department are doing on certain objectives. That helps them see that they need to start paying attention to certain priorities* (Manager 27, University Sector).

The findings suggest that implementing a colour coded system, such as the traffic light system, affords these five respondents the opportunity to track the performance of their

individual strategic priorities at particular points in time. It provides managers the opportunity to visually map the progress of their priorities, and, to readily identify any factors that could potentially delay, or downgrade the importance of, particular priorities.

A further informal method of measuring the progress of the strategic priorities, which the respondents refer to is regular management meetings and discussions. Twenty seven respondents engage in a process of continuous dialogue with staff, and fellow senior managers across the organisation to ensure that their priorities are progressing. The following quotations represent the sentiments of these 27 managers:

> *I report to the governing authority and let them know where I am, relative to the university's strategy. I have board meetings with my own staff with regard to what our metrics are, and we would keep track of those metrics. The progression of our strategic plan is a dynamic process. The senior management team review the priorities all the time, and we figure out if we are on the right trajectory* (Manager 4, University Sector).

> *Every six weeks there is an open staff forum which the president runs, and everything, including the progress of the strategic priorities, is on the agenda* (Manager 21, IoT sector).

> *We do monitor our strategy on an on-going basis. Management, at a corporate level, meet routinely about every two weeks and aspects of the strategic plan form an implicit and explicit part of the management team agenda* (Manager 45, Private Sector).

The findings demonstrate that respondents monitor the progress of their strategic priorities in a variety of ways. Furthermore, managers and their organisations are employing a measurement tool that they deem to be most appropriate for their organisations. Their collective sentiments suggest that the measurement and monitoring tool they are utilising is respected by employees, and effectively allows them to work towards accomplishing their priorities. A total of twenty seven public sector managers predominantly employ less formal methods of measuring the progress of their strategic priorities such as, regular team meetings, staff forums etc., despite the government's consistent message, since the publication of the national strategy, for public sector institutions to adopt KPIs. From this perspective, the government's insistence for public higher education institutions to adopt KPIs could

potentially limit public sector managers from independently deciding how to monitor the achievement of their priorities, in a manner deemed most appropriate to leverage their organisations strengths. The Universities Act 1997, for instance, states that a university shall "be entitled to regulate its own affairs in accordance with its independent ethos and traditions and the traditional principles of academic freedom." Arguably, insisting upon the adoption of a set of agreed KPIs, which demonstrate alignment to the government's higher education plans, does not grant a university manager the autonomy to decide how best to implement and accomplish their respective organisation's individual strategic priorities.

In the context of Ireland's challenging financial situation, however, it is perhaps reasonable that the government is introducing KPIs, because KPIs will allow the government to more transparently assess how public higher education institutions are spending public funds and to what extent their efforts are contributing to the national HE strategy. The government can, therefore, through the application of KPIs, more effectively monitor the progress of Ireland's individual public HE institutions in addition to the overall development of Ireland's HE sector. Implementing a KPI framework across Ireland's public HE sector, arguably, will assist the government to identify what areas or disciplines Ireland is excelling at, and to isolate any potential challenges associated with particular strategic priorities. The mandatory requirement for public higher education institutions to adopt an agreed set of KPIs does, however, signify a formal move towards commercial or business-like practices in Irish universities and institutes of technology.

Throughout the interview process, respondents regularly referred to their organisations' improved ability to create and implement more effective strategic plans and priorities, than in previous years. The following quotations outline the variety of reasons why 15 respondents believe that the process of strategic planning in their organisation has improved:

> *The previous strategic plan was not quite as focused as this one is. Previous strategic documents were more operational. The current one is more focused on the educational experiences of the students, and the core functions of the college as an educational provider* (Manager 45, Private Sector).

> *People across the faculty now know what the strategy is and they are engaged with it. The strategy in the past was very top down. It was also very generic and faculty engagement with it was quite limited. Because staff were not as familiar with it, and it was not any different to other college's plans they only had a vague*

*idea what it was about - it was not specific enough for staff to engage with it* (Manager 39, University Sector).

*Our strategic plan is a fifteen page document, it is very user friendly and straight forward, it has performance indicators so it becomes easier for people at all levels of the organisation to relate their job to it. The whole planning exercise is not just an exercise when it comes to our organisation; it is very much embedded in the operations of the institute, and it is a living document here* (Manager 30, IoT Sector).

The findings suggest that the strategic plans, and the strategic planning process, of public and private higher education institutions have significantly improved. The existing strategic plans are more concise, utilise less complex terminology, and are easier to refer to than previous strategic plans. Factors, such as employee engagement in the strategic priority process, and the identification and implementation of more pronounced organisational goals have contributed to a more seamless and effective strategic planning process in their respective organisations. Considering the turbulent economic environment and the variety of challenges HE respondents are encountering, the observation that the strategic planning process has improved is positive.

While the observation that strategic planning has improved is a positive development, it is worth putting this finding into context by considering that strategic planning is a relatively new development in Irish higher education. The findings of this study support the research findings of Lillis and Lynch (2013) who posit that strategic planning in Irish higher education institutions significantly developed over a period of ten years, from 2000 to 2010. Research by Lillis and Lynch (2013) found that the majority of colleges in Ireland had no strategic plans in place in 2000, but, when they returned in 2010, strategic planning was a more established function within Irish higher education institutions. The findings of this study build upon Lillis and Lynch's research, and suggest that managers are continuously evaluating the success of their plans, in an attempt to understand how their future plans can be improved. Clearly, faculty engagement and unambiguous, identifiable goals are perceived by higher education managers as important factors for successful strategic planning.

A further perspective in relation to the improvement of the strategic planning process is offered by private sector respondents. Three private sector managers believe that their strategic planning process had to improve because of the highly competitive and challenging

environment in which they now operate. The existing environment, essentially, does not allow managers in the private sector to create ambiguous or unfocused strategic plans because their strategic plans have to ensure the continued survival of their organisations. Essentially, there is no room for error with their more recent strategic plans and priorities. Failing to create and implement successful strategic priorities, in this challenging environment, could threaten the future viability of their organisations, for example:

> *In 2006, higher education organisations had a lot more freedom in relation to strategy. Now, however, we cannot afford to miscalculate the time between investment and return. We have to get the timing absolutely right because we are operating in a completely different economic climate and that puts much tighter constraints on strategy execution* (Manager 18, Private IoT).

Strategic planning, for the majority of respondents, is a valuable tool for identifying and implementing their organisation's key strategic priorities, particularly during economically challenging periods. The findings suggest that public and private sector HE managers utilise strategic planning to more effectively manage their finances and resources to, ultimately, accomplish their most important goals and objectives. To further illustrate how the strategic planning process has improved in Irish HE organisations, 42 respondents outlined single or multiple benefits that have arisen as a result of setting and implementing particular strategic priorities. These 42 respondents can visibly see where their individual strategic priorities are making a positive contribution to their organisation's development. For example:

> *We are much more coordinated in terms of how we interact with one another internally and externally, and that is because of all this documentation. The strategic planning process has made us constantly review performance and ensure that the various entities of the institute are moving along in tandem. That is a silver-lining because it makes us go through things in a much more robust way* (Manager 26, IoT Sector).

> *We are more focused because of our strategic objectives. Morale is stronger because there is a sense of meaning for people that we are making a contribution* (Manager 39, University Sector).

These 42 respondents referred to the evolution of more focused and coordinated teams, as a result of the strategic priority process in their organisations. The findings suggest that the

process of setting and implementing strategic priorities has the ability to unite and motivate employees across a common set of goals for their organisations. The development of more effective and impactful strategic plans has helped employees become more familiar with, their individual role, and the role that they assume within their teams, to develop and accomplish their organisation's stated priorities. Considering the variety and severity of the challenges that managers outlined, it is encouraging to find that the strategic planning process has generated accruing benefits, such as more focused and coordinated teams.

The findings of this study also highlight a potential negative development in higher education strategic planning in Ireland. As discussed in Chapter Two and throughout the thesis, it has been widely reported that the strategic plans and priorities of higher education institutions are increasingly linked to their nation's economic objectives (Rumelt, 2014; Bleiklie *et al*., 2013; Parker, 2011). These authors believe that pursuing objectives to meet national economic goals can, however, encourage the development of more standardised strategic plans across national higher education institutions and, subsequently, limit an organisation's creative approach to strategic planning. The findings of this study support the findings of Rumelt (2014), Bleiklie *et al*. (2013), and Parker (2011) as many Irish HE managers are identifying and implementing a very similar set of strategic priorities across their organisations. An analysis of the findings suggest that the publication of the government's national HE strategy is, significantly responsible for this development.

It should be noted that private sector managers are less reliant on the national HE strategy for guidance and direction, in relation to their strategic priorities. Private sector managers can select and pursue the priorities that they deem most appropriate for their organisations. As a consequence, private sector organisations demonstrated more individuality across their selected priorities because they do not have to follow or implement the government's HE strategy. With regard to the university sector, they are marginally less influenced by the national HE strategy perhaps because Ireland's universities have more formal experience in strategic planning, than their IoT sector counterparts. Universities, and consequently university sector managers, have more experience in strategic planning because The Universities Act (1997) formally introduced the necessity for all Irish universities to develop a strategic plan. It was not until the national higher education strategy was published in 2011, however, that institutes of technology were required to formalise their strategic planning processes. Perhaps this is a reason why managers from the IoT sector, in particular, are significantly influenced by the government's first national HE strategy.

Finally, in addition to outlining the various strategic priorities, respondents revealed numerous developments that are occurring both inside and outside their organisations. These developments are affecting managers' decisions to select particular strategic priorities, and are influencing their ability to accomplish these priorities. The next section presents a selection of the most prevalent developments across Ireland's higher education system.

## 4.4 Developments Occurring in Irish Higher Education Institutions

An analysis of the data indicates that there are particular developments occurring in the Irish higher education system. These developments are impacting senior managers in setting, implementing, and achieving their strategic priorities. In this section, the most dominant developments to emerge from the data are presented in six separate themes. These themes are discussed and analysed in the following order:

- o The role of academic employees in contributing to the strategic priorities
- o Changes to the organisational structure in Irish higher education institutions
- o The changing student profile in Irish higher education
- o The impact of the economic environment on higher education strategic priorities
- o Developments and advances in technology
- o Increased competition nationally and globally

One of the most prominent developments to arise throughout the interview process relates to the important role that employees perform throughout the strategic priority process. The findings suggest, moreover, that managers' attention has now become more focused on maximising employee contribution to the individual priorities. Thirty six managers believe that a trend has occurred within their organisations to substantially increase employee involvement in the strategic plan to, effectively, aid in the accomplishment of the priorities. The sentiments, of these 36 respondents, are reflected in the following quotations:

*We have found that, within the college, there is very much a can-do attitude. The internal environment is important because if you do not have the buy-in from staff and people within the organisation then it is difficult to achieve the strategic priorities* (Manager 15, Private Sector).

*To achieve our strategic objectives I think it will take a very high level of support from all the staff. The key thing will be the capacity of the university to engage its*

*own key employees in the implementation of the strategic plan* (Manager 36, University Sector).

*To have buy-in from the staff and involving them in the planning process helps to ensure that you have a strategic plan that is implementable* (Manager 49, IoT Sector).

These thirty six interviewees, from both the public and private HE sectors, believe that without the "buy-in" and support of employees, developing the strategic priorities, and achieving them within a particular timeframe, is much more difficult. These 36 managers and their organisations have, therefore, become significantly more aware of the important role that employees play in the strategic priority process. Consequently, an internal change has occurred, whereby, managers are adapting the organisational culture and work-flows to more comprehensively support and encourage employee involvement in the strategic priorities. This finding concurs with the research of Lacerdo *et al.* (2014) which found that employee contribution in strategic planning is significantly important, particularly, during the developmental stages of the strategic plan. The necessity to make organisational changes to ensure employee involvement in the strategic priorities is perhaps occurring because, previously, when resources and finances were more plentiful, managers were not as dependent on employee engagement with the strategic plan, to successfully achieve the strategic priorities. Now, however, the findings indicate that managers' approach has changed; the challenging economic environment makes managers' significantly more reliant on employees to be the primary driver in the implementation and accomplishment of the priorities. These managers, therefore, have to put substantial effort into ensuring that employees become an integral part of the strategic priority process, and, that employees are invested in the strategic plan. The issue of employee contribution is further discussed in section 4.5.2, where managers indicate, precisely, what they believe it takes to accomplish their organisation's strategic priorities.

Four respondents, however, do not involve employees more in the strategic planning process. These four respondents, on the contrary, observe that the development and implementation of the existing strategic plan involved employees less than the previous plans. The following quotations reflect the collective sentiments of these four managers:

*The strategic plan has very much been driven by a strategy steering group made up of senior management. I would say it was less consultative than the last one* (Manager 22, IoT Sector).

*Academic staff shape the plan less than they did in the past. Change is occurring really rapidly at the moment so sometimes you have to make decisions and respond in a much quicker way so strategic direction and strategic responses somehow have to be a management issue. That leads to a perception that people are not involved as much as they might have been in the past* (Manager 38, University Sector).

*In academia, if you set a strategic goal and have a clear strategic vision of where you want the college to be – it does not serve your cause well to share that too widely. I do not always share the vision, except with a trusted few* (Manager 46, Private Sector).

These four managers, and their organisations, have made a strategic decision to purposely not involve employees in the strategic priorities. These four interviewees, rather, observe that it is more appropriate for the senior management team to develop the strategic plan, and to be responsible for its application and delivery. In further analysing why these managers have involved their employees less in their organisations' strategic priorities, the findings reveal a perception that particular strategic priorities, in the past, were unsuccessful because of too much employee involvement. Priorities lost their relevance and focus when too many employees were involved in the selection and implementation of the priorities. This particular finding is in contrast to the research findings of Rampersad (2001), which suggested that, during uncertain periods, employees need to be involved in the strategic planning and priority process so that they can invest in their organisation's future direction. Rampersad (2001) therefore, warns against excluding employees from the strategy development and implementation process. Despite this, however, the current findings suggest that these four interviewees have thoroughly assessed their reasoning for involving employees less in the strategic planning process, and believe it is the right decision for their organisations at present. These managers, therefore, are attempting to improve the strategic planning process in their organisations by reserving responsibility for the strategic priorities primarily to the senior management team.

Overall, the observation held by 36 respondents, that employees are playing an increasingly important role in the strategic planning process, is a development that should be nurtured and encouraged. Furthermore, it could be argued that a more flexible and dynamic academic contract, as discussed earlier in section 4.2.2, would empower and support managers in stimulating an environment designed to secure the continued contribution of employees, throughout the strategic priority process. A new academic contract, for the public sector, would offer managers the opportunity to formalise and harness the involvement of employees throughout the strategic planning process. At present, however, the findings suggest that securing employee involvement and commitment to the strategic priorities is largely dependent on the goodwill and voluntary engagement of individual employees.

In Chapter Two, a range of literature was presented to demonstrate that management structures and frameworks within higher educational institutions have significantly changed (Farrington, 2014; Barry, 2009; Middlehurst, 2004). Many of these changes occurred as a result of the influence of particular factors such as globalisation and commercialisation. The findings of this research demonstrate that higher education institutions, particularly in the public sector, have and are making purposeful changes to their internal, organisational structures. The data from this study illustrates that many senior managers believe that changes to their organisational structures are necessary to expertly negotiate the complex environment they and their organisations now operate in.

Twenty managers from the public sector observe key changes that have been made to their internal structures in recent years. This development is not prevalent in the private higher education sector. Private higher education institutions, in Ireland, are smaller and relatively new in their existence, compared to their public sector counterparts. Restructuring, therefore, may be of little relevance to their smaller, less complex organisational structures. In the public sector, however, the findings suggest that an internal development has occurred whereby existing organisational and management structures are being adapted to more effectively respond to the existing environment. The following quotations represent the viewpoints of these 20 respondents:

> *The large volume of retirements in recent years presented the opportunity for the institute to restructure and rethink itself, in terms of its organisation, which was a good opportunity* (Manager 8, IoT Sector).

*In the past, there were seven faculties and the only thing the faculties had any role in was admitting students, providing courses, and examining. The colleges did not really have any role in finances, or staffing, or anything else because all of that was centrally done. Now, because of our restructure, we have that responsibility* (Manager 12, University Sector).

*There was a reorganisation of my higher education institution from six faculties to four colleges. We did a real root and branch examination of other business schools and we went into the current structure because we thought it was fit for purpose* (Manager 14, IoT Sector).

The findings suggest that organisations which undertook a recent restructure did so because they believed that it would have a positive impact on their organisations' operations and the achievement of their strategic priorities. Importantly, the purposeful organisational changes have more comprehensively facilitated these 20 managers to develop strategic plans, appoint individuals to specific tasks, and monitor the achievement of their strategic priorities. This finding supports the research findings of Barry (2009), which found that an effective organisational structure is critical to underpin the achievement of stated objectives. An analysis of the 20 managers' sentiments suggests that the new structures improved communication across the organisation, and between individuals and teams, resulting in a more fluid and dynamic strategic priority process. The following quotations effectively demonstrate the reasons why restructuring has been effective for these 20 respondents:

*The restructuring that we undertook has helped; it makes for a more effective organisation. It reduces the extent to which people are isolated in small disciplinary silos. I think it makes it more plausible or possible for there to be overall objectives, and in translating them down to the ground* (Manager 41, University Sector).

*In terms of restructuring, in more recent months, there has been a degree of unity and purpose about the college that has not existed here before and so that is helping. Better communication is helping the identification of priorities within the college, as well as feeding into the university's objectives* (Manager 13, University Sector).

*We carried out a whole restructuring process last year as part of our intention to become more lean and efficient. This restructure occurred across the entire college. We still have three heads of school but we have less heads of department than previously. This makes for a more robust organisation. The restructuring was a good decision for everybody rather than staying in the traditional mode. It has generated life into each of the schools; moving people around has also created a different dynamic* (Manager 10, IoT Sector).

The findings reveal that, in recent years, changes to the organisational and management structures were undertaken because the old structures were not sufficiently facilitating effective decision making, in relation to the organisation's strategic plan. It should be noted, however, that the decision to restructure is not unique to public higher education institutions, in Ireland. The findings of this research support the research outcomes of Kogan and Bleiklie (2007), which found that, globally, higher education institutions instigated fundamental changes to their organisational structures in order to respond to the fast-paced, dynamic environment in which they now operate. Importantly, the findings suggest that the new structures are now more fit-for-purpose, and facilitate a more seamless strategic planning process in their respective organisations. In the context of this finding, however, it is worth considering that Marginson (2004) believes that restructuring alone, without for example, orchestrating changes to organisational culture, is insufficient for meeting the challenges of the future. It is advisable, therefore, for these managers to continue to make positive changes that help support strategic planning, within their organisations, rather than rely on restructuring alone.

A further development that is prevalent across the entire Irish higher education system relates to the changes that have, and are, occurring to the profile of students enrolling in higher education. The cohort of students attending third level has changed significantly over the last number of years, and, the data in this study demonstrates that there are numerous factors that are contributing to a more diverse and varied student population. A total of 27 respondents observe a number of changes occurring in their organisation's student population. Throughout the interview process, it was predominantly managers from the public sector who observe significant changes to their organisation's student profile. Only two managers from the private HE sector, commented on their respective organisation's more diversified student population, and the arising implications. Private sector respondents are perhaps not experiencing an influx of new student groups, such as those seeking to reskill and find

employment because their organisations are fee paying, and thereby, less financially attractive to these cohorts of students.

Changes occurring in the economic environment have, indeed, introduced a new cohort of non-traditional students, such as mature, employment-seeking students to higher education. These changes create several challenges or opportunities for Ireland's higher education managers, and their respective organisations. The sentiments of these 27 managers, in relation to their organisations' more diverse student population, are reflected in the following quotations:

> *A challenge we have is learning to cope with our diverse population. We have a very diverse student population. We need to be conscious of that and; we need to put the supports in place to allow everybody to achieve their full potential* (Manager 21, IoT Sector).

> *Because of massification we have seen a huge change in the student profile. We have taken down some of the barriers and let more people in, but, it brings in weaker students and that means more student supports. The increase in mature students is a big change as well, which has occurred because of the change in the economy. Mature students are hungry for learning and they want to know everything. There is a whole new mix of students in the classroom now. They do present complex challenges and new demands* (Manager 33, IoT Sector).

> *The profile of the student has changed which has had an impact on our priorities. Our student population has changed in that it is much more of a multi-cultured population now. Mature learners are not just Springboard and Continuing Education students, they are also coming in through the CAO – coming back full time. In all the science programmes there are increases in mature learners; people just want a career change* (Manager 34, IoT Sector).

The findings suggest that a significantly more varied and diverse student population impacts the strategic priorities of HE managers in Ireland. These eight respondents must adapt their priorities to ensure that the needs of all their various student groups are met. Priorities in the area of teaching and learning, for example, must reflect the various educational backgrounds of the different groups and students, and importantly, their primary reason for obtaining a higher level qualification. These managers believe that it is necessary to ensure that lecturers

are adapting their teaching material and delivery style in a way that effectively reaches their various student groups. These managers' sentiments suggest that meeting the needs of a highly diversified student population is a challenging task, and one that requires significant attention and resources. A more diversified population requires managers and their organisations to direct funds and resources to academic support centres, and on-campus services which assist students to complete their studies. Moreover, managers cannot overlook the importance of meeting the needs and expectations of their diverse student population because they need to maintain their existing funding levels from the government. It is, therefore, necessary for managers to monitor their changing student population closely to ensure that their organisations are meeting student expectations and, simultaneously, accomplishing their retention priorities. Failure to anticipate and meet the needs of their more diverse student population could affect retention rates, and ultimately, their levels of funding from the government.

Furthermore, seven of these 27 respondents, report that the academic ability of their organisations' student population, has changed. These seven respondents believe that students are progressing to third level with a number of academic difficulties which, consequently, require higher education institutions to implement extra resources and supports to help counteract these problems:

> *Eighteen year olds are not coming in with study and learning skills, they come in and learn the notes, and learn off what they are told by teachers to get to a certain base minimum. Their integration of learning is very poor. It is challenging because you are fighting a culture, something that is engrained. This type of behaviour among students is also a side-effect from the massification of higher education* (Manager 9, IoT Sector).

> *Students come to third level from second level with issues. Some of them are not really prepared for university. They learned how to pass their leaving certificate exams and get the most points possible, but, that is not going to prepare them to be a good university student* (Manager 35, University Sector).

> *The student demands have changed and the amount of pedagogical infrastructures the student needs now is much greater than it was. The secondary school system is not producing a student that is able to autonomously negotiate a third level curriculum. We then have to provide writing centres, maths centres,*

*and other support centres which require an awful lot of money, and that is diverting money from other places. It is a big drain on resources* (Manager 36, University Sector).

The findings suggest that students advance to third level with difficulties inherited from their primary and secondary-level experiences. Students, then, struggle with the pace and standard of third level education and require additional assistance from lecturers and educational support centres etc. This finding supports the research findings of authors, such as Hemer (2014), and Fristschler (2010) who found that academic quality is significantly negatively affected by a widening and expanding population. They found that a bigger and more diverse student population results in significantly less time for a HE organisation to focus on and uphold dimensions of academic quality. The findings of this study indicate that managers are indeed encountering difficulties in relation to maintaining and upholding academic standards because of their significantly larger and more diverse student population. Furthermore, managers in this study are frustrated that resources, that could be spent elsewhere, have to be directed to student support centres, purposely created to bring students up to the required standard. These managers believe that students entering third level should meet a minimum standard, particularly in relation to numeric and literacy levels.

The experience of these managers is that many students have substandard numeric and literacy levels when they enter third level. If their students entered third level with the skills and abilities necessary for third level, which these managers' maintain past students' possessed, more time and attention could, thereby, be directed towards more aspiring strategic priorities. At present, however, these senior managers perceive that their strategic priorities are, to an extent, hindered because their student population requires a significant amount of attention and resources, just to achieve the minimum standard. This particular finding has implications for a HE organisation's long-term competiveness, because these organisations, subsequently, have less money for activities that would add value to, and improve the global rankings of their organisations.

The findings suggest that there is no longer a typical student in Irish higher education, and a diverse student population is considerably more prevalent. A definitive characteristic of the Irish HE population is that it is significantly more diverse and fragmented and, consequently, it has a wide range of requirements. The changing student profile, therefore, is a development that managers cannot prevent or alter, so, they have little power to prevent the

challenges that the diversified and complex student profile presents. As illustrated through the above quotations, it is evident that Ireland's higher education managers are making alterations to their internal operations to cope with, and more effectively respond to, the changing student profile. It should also be noted that many of the respondents, who note a change in their student profile, have identified retention as an important strategic priority. It is evident, thereby, just how complex a task it is for senior managers to meet their organisation's retention targets, when the student profile is so variable and dynamic. A highly diversified student population has considerably different requirements or needs.

A further development that is affecting the strategic priorities, of HE managers, are the developments and occurrences in Ireland's economic and financial environment. A total of 34 public and private sector respondents refer to the challenges that Ireland's economic climate presents for their organisations. The following quotations reflect the range of sentiments on the challenging economic environment from these 34 managers:

> *Institutions have to be more tactical than strategic. The economic environment means that the objectives have to be much more short term. In the private sector, we have to make an investment and that investment would either be funded by internally generated funds, investment or by equity. The current economic climate demands that those funds generate a much quicker return than they would have seven or eight years ago* (Manager 18, Private Sector).

> *In education some things are very much tied in, for example, we are all focused on our budgets because they are shrinking and when you have students debtors, or you do not reach your target numbers in your academic plan – your revenue reduces therefore you have got less money. You get into this vicious circle of decline of revenue and decline of students. We have become more concerned with money, as have the government, since our country's economic collapse* (Manager 26, IoT Sector).

> *The fiscal environment has been really difficult for my university, and for the fundamental higher education sector in Ireland* (Manager 4, University Sector).

The findings suggest that all three higher education sectors have been affected by Ireland's challenging economic environment. There are aspects of the challenging economic environment, however, that are impacting the IoT and private sectors, more than the

university sector, such as the ability of students to pay their HE fees. Eight respondents, from the IoT and private sectors, believe that the effects of the challenging economic environment are most evident in their students' diminished ability to pay their HE fees. As a result, managers in the IoT and private sectors observe that their organisations are encountering financial challenges and bad debt accumulation. The shared sentiments of these respondents are in the quotations that follow:

> *Financial risk is around all colleges at the moment because fees are not being paid and the problem is we do not consider ourselves a hard-nosed commercial entity, so, what do we do? Because, the problem is, if students do not pay then our budget is down so it is a dilemma* (Manager 19, IoT Sector).

> *Our bad debts are going up simply because students cannot pay fees and they are struggling to maintain their commitment to the courses, so, we need to be conscious of that. That means the student supports need to be increased, everything from hardship funds, to a counselling service, to the medical centre. That is the part that is hidden* (Manager 21, IoT Sector).

> *The chasing of debt is a huge thing for my organisation* (Manager 43, Private Sector).

> *My organisation, and a number of other institutions, have a high level of indebtedness from the non-payment of fees. We are running a huge deficit, which is totally in a league of its own* (Manager 20, IoT Sector).

Evidently, the challenging economic environment quite strongly manifests itself in the IoT and private sectors, through the inability of students to pay their fees, as well as the necessity for managers to intensely focus on budgets. These eight managers have now become more concerned with their students' ability to pay their fees, and, implementing processes and systems designed to collect unpaid fees. This finding illustrates that these managers now have to spend more time on the administrative and more basic operational tasks, than previously. This is a regressive development for Ireland's HE system, and, it does not support the research findings of Bolden *et al*. (2012), who found that higher education senior managers have digressed from the more basic operational tasks to place more emphasis on the higher level, strategic tasks. Instead, the findings suggest that Ireland's HE managers have had to become more focused on operational activities, such as ensuring that fees are

paid and costs are reduced.  It could be argued, therefore, that the time spent by managers in trying to resolve these operational challenges, leaves less time to spend on important strategic tasks.

In section 4.3.1, it was revealed that 30 respondents consider their organisations' financial sustainability as a key strategic priority.  Considering this, it is perhaps reasonable, therefore, that these 34 managers are very concerned with the impact of the economic environment on their organisations, and to secure their organisation's financial sustainability.  Directing senior managers' attention towards non-strategic operational tasks, however, could prove problematic for the future strategic direction of their organisations.  While securing their organisation's financial future is clearly imperative, arguably, managers need to ensure that their time and attention is not overly consumed by the smaller, more operational activities.

As the above quotations demonstrate, private sector managers are also experiencing the impact of the challenging economic environment.  Private sector interviewees, however, have adjusted their payment structures in recognition that the current economic environment challenges students to complete the full fee payment, within a fixed time.  Six private sector respondents outline changes that they have made to their organisation's payment processes, to help students overcome this difficulty:

> *Five or six years ago there was not one student that would come to me and say, I am going to pay for my degree by instalments; they would come in with a cheque for €5,000. Now, it is a case of monthly payments plans, direct debits – we have responded to this change by putting in place processes to allow people pay how they want to pay* (Manager 43, Private Sector).

> *We have tried many new ways of attracting and maintaining existing students such as, we have adjusted the fees downwards as much as we can. We have developed more concrete, fluid payment plans. In Celtic Tiger years you could accommodate the students who could not pay – you could carry those much more easily but we cannot do that now* (Manager 45, Private Sector).

The findings suggest that private sector managers have more flexibility to adjust to the challenging economic environment, than their public sector counterparts.  If private sector managers need to make their payment structures more flexible, and decrease their undergraduate and postgraduate fees, to more effectively respond to the student market, they

have the ability to do so in a quick timeframe. Private sector HE organisations, essentially, have the freedom to increase and decrease their fees so that the fees charged are the most appropriate for the economic environment in which they operate. In contrast, however, public sector respondents are subject to government policy and, therefore, have much less flexibility to adapt their registration fees and payment structures in order to respond to the unique needs of their respective students. It can be argued, therefore, that public sector respondents are at a disadvantage, when compared to their private sector colleagues, because they cannot autonomously make the changes necessary to sufficiently respond to the individual financial circumstances of their students.

The existing turbulent economic environment is also affecting the postgraduate programmes of Ireland's higher education institutions. For eight public sector respondents, the downturn in the economy has contributed to reducing the number of students enrolling on their postgraduate programmes. As a consequence, the priorities and targets in relation to their postgraduate programmes have had to be adjusted accordingly:

> *We were strong in the area of postgraduate studies. Last year, however, the government announced that it was no longer going to fund postgraduate education. Unless a student's parents' income is below a threshold of €30,000 he or she will not get funded. This has really has impacted us significantly. What was a big area for us is effectively in terminal decline, and that revenue was used to fund other strategic activities that we do in the institute* (Manager 23, IoT Sector).

> *The funding that is available to postgraduate students has fallen substantially. Social and county council grants are not available to people and there are fewer funded opportunities out there. All across the country, the Masters programmes are suffering in terms of recruitment because of the funding available to students. We also cannot meet our PhD student recruitment targets.* (Manager 28, University Sector).

This study indicates that the economic environment, as an external trend, is having a significant impact on the postgraduate sector in public higher education institutions. As a consequence of cuts to government funding, many students can no longer afford to undertake a postgraduate qualification. The findings demonstrate, therefore, that higher education institutions that have invested in their postgraduate portfolio and, subsequently, built a

reputation in the postgraduate sector, now have to reconsider their postgraduate offering and cut some of their leading programmes. With regard to the current status of their postgraduate programmes, the findings suggest that managers are frustrated, and believe that the decline in postgraduate funding has been damaging for the integrity and morale of their organisations. Moreover, the restricted ability of managers to meet their recruitment targets for PhD and Master students is concerning, particularly in the context of Ireland's continued economic advancement. These eight higher education managers consider the recruitment of research students important for their organisation's ability to increase research output, obtain additional funding, meet HE ranking criteria, and supply industry with a steady stream of highly qualified graduates.

Interestingly, this particular finding does not support the extant literature (Ravi, 2014; Douglass, 2012; de Weert, 2011) which highlights the link between a highly qualified population, and a competitive, strong performing economy. The decline in postgraduate programmes and students also contradicts the consistent message of the government over the last few years, evident in, for example, *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* (2008), which stresses the importance of a highly skilled and educated population for economic advancement, and to attract foreign direct investment. The findings suggest that the demand for these managers' postgraduate programmes is buoyant but many students cannot financially afford to undertake a postgraduate qualification without some form of financial support from the government. The economic environment has not had the same negative effect on postgraduate programmes, in the private sector, as it has had on the public sector. A reason why this was not outlined as a development or issue within the private sector, is perhaps because private higher education institutions are less active in the postgraduate market, than public higher education institutions.

The findings of this study also indicate that the advances and developments in technology are impacting the operations of Ireland's HE institutions. All 49 respondents refer to the influence of technology on their organisations, and note how it is impacting their various priorities. The findings of this study have already highlighted the significant influence of technology, as 37 managers in section 4.3 stated that e-learning is a top priority for their organisations. This section of the chapter, however, outlines the perspectives of Ireland's higher education managers in relation to how technological advances have created key changes within their organisations, and how their organisations are responding to these changes. The 49 managers discuss the effects, both positively and negatively, of

technological advances on their organisations, and acknowledge the profound changes that technology is stimulating in the higher education sector:

*The greater use of technology has greatly improved our admissions system for registering students. We can now offer better support to our learners because we have Moodle, and we have an internal staff and student portal. Technology has helped to improve the quality of service we provide* (Manager 6, IoT Sector).

*Because we have embraced technology we have become fairly flexible. When I started in this organisation, it was more common to use overhead projectors but now it has since evolved into things like Moodle and Adobe Connect* (Manager 22, IoT Sector).

*There is consensus within my organisation that technology enhances teaching and learning. We have the opportunity to enhance the students' experience, on-campus, through technology* (Manager 13, University Sector).

The findings illustrate that Irish HEIs have made significant changes to the provision of education and are, for example, using a combination of technology supports such as Blackboard, Adobe Connect, and Moodle to enhance and support their programme delivery. When questioned further on this topic, managers believe that technology has been a valuable tool to help counter the negative effects of reducing resources, and an increasing and diverse student population. The advances in technology, therefore, are helping to lessen the impact of funding and resource constraints, for Ireland's higher education managers. These managers' organisations can use technology supports to reach a broad spectrum of students instantaneously, saving lecturers and administration staff valuable time. Without these technological advances and supports, these managers believe that their organisations' existing levels of resources would be insufficient for accomplishing their organisations' varying and demanding operational requirements.

Additionally, 18 of these 49 managers believe that technology advances have significantly changed the means by which students communicate, learn, and their ability to concentrate in class. These factors have encouraged Ireland's higher education institutions to adopt new styles of teaching and operating to more effectively engage and interact with students. The following quotations represent the sentiments of these 18 respondents:

*Technology has been a significant external factor – there are a huge range of technologies available, particularly with student supports, what I call the virtual educational environment. We have been particularly concerned with developing those tools in a way which fosters student engagement with their subject* (Manager 36, University Sector).

*It is undoubtedly the case that technology has had a huge effect on the student in the last ten years. The way students learn and the way they think has changed. The amount of time they waste on the internet, and the amount of unproductive stuff students are doing, because of the internet, is significant. So, when you take the social life, with the e-life, combined with the workload of college the amount of time they have available to engage, be present, and study is diminishing* (Manager 37, University Sector).

*Because of the changing world and the changing forms of communication, you have got to steer what you want to do in a way that is easily acceptable or received by the younger generation, whose whole approach to communications has been totally transformed* (Manager 2, IoT).

*Among students there is an awful lot of butterflying going on - flying from one thing to another. This generation is doing it a lot through the internet, and also this generation is doing an awful lot of multi-tasking. The traditional learning mode whereby you go to a lecture, you go to the library, and do your degree is changing* (Manager 18, Private Sector).

Respondents perceive students' learning and communication patterns to be significantly different to previous years. The findings suggest that smart phones, and instantaneous access to social media limit a students' ability to become totally immersed in course material, and to completely engage with their studies. This development, these managers maintain, has negatively affected the higher education experience of students, and a students' ability to obtain a high standard of education. The findings also suggest, however, that managers can now more effectively communicate and interact with students, through students' preferred technological platform. One respondent, for example, states that his organisation could not deter students from using their smart phones in class so, instead, they encouraged students to interact in the classroom session through using Twitter. This finding supports the research of Rideout *et al.* (2010) who posit that, as a result of digital influences, today's students have a

unique set of characteristics including the need for instant results, learning through social interaction, and multitasking to which higher education institutions must adapt and respond to. The findings suggest that purposely integrating social media, and other technological instruments, into classroom delivery assists lecturers in overcoming the issue of students being negatively distracted by technology.

A further trend that is contributing to a challenging operating environment is the increase in competition among higher education institutions. The findings from this research suggest that Irish higher education institutions are impacted by an increased level of competition both globally, and from higher education institutions in their domestic market. A total of 21 respondents, are experiencing the influence of domestic and global competition on their organisations. This finding concurs with Taylor (2012), and Altbach *et al.* (2009), who note the substantial increase in, and impact of, competition throughout the global higher education sector. The quotations that follow illustrate the presence of domestic competition between higher education institutions in Ireland, observed by 13 of these 21 respondents:

> *We try to spot trends; we have to, in this environment. We must keep a very close eye on our competitors because we have several HE organisations around us, keeping us on our toes* (Manager 14, IoT Sector).

> *We have been hugely impacted by an increase in competition in higher education. The universities have massified themselves and gone into areas that they would not have considered 20 years ago. These are areas that we would definitely consider to be our space, traditionally* (Manager 26, IoT Sector).

> *I think at the moment the key drivers are to keep up with our local competition, perhaps even to gain market share from them* (Manager 44, Private Sector).

> *There has been a reduction in first preferences for our programmes, and that is a great concern. One reason for that is because the universities are increasing their numbers at level 8, so, they are attracting some of the higher CAO point scorers who we would normally get* (Manager 19, IoT).

The findings suggest that, in previous years, there was a more definitive line between the programmes offered by the three HE sectors, and therefore, less competition between the different sectors. A shortage of HE funding, however, is encouraging HE institutions and their managers to reassess their existing programmes, and student recruitment strategies in an

attempt to recruit a higher volume of students, and thereby, increase funding levels. Managers from the IoT sector, in particular, believe that the university sector is now strategically and more aggressively competing for a market share of IoT sector students.

To illustrate this point, one respondent, quoted above, outlines the implications of a neighbouring university's decision to develop programmes in a discipline that his university had built a distinctive, enduring competency. This decision had the effect of substantially reducing the number of CAO applicants for this discipline in his institution. As a result, his institution lost a substantial amount of high calibre students because they chose to study at the neighbouring university. Furthermore, prior to this particular university's decision to diversify into this discipline, this IoT respondent believes his organisation and the neighbouring university enjoyed a healthy competition, with each sector occupying a clearly defined space. This finding does not support the research of Altbach and Salmi (2011), who posit that a strong HE system is characterised by avoiding duplication and, instead, protecting the unique differences of the various HEIs within the HE system. It could be argued that these developments are occurring because of poor planning and regulation of Ireland's HE system. The duplication and prolific development of programmes is recognised by the government as a problem, and one in which they are attempting to address.

With regard to the private higher education sector, private sector managers indicate that their organisations have always been concerned with competition, but, the current economic environment has stimulated a more intensified competitive environment. An analysis of private sector managers' sentiments, on the increased levels of competition, suggests that private HE institutions in Ireland are predominantly competing with fellow private sector institutions for domestic students. Private sector respondents, for example, posit that their institutions, despite their attractive locations, cannot compete with the facilities and services of public HE institutions. As a result, their institutions do not generally compete with public sector institutions for the majority of domestic students. The proportion of Irish students that do, however, consider private HE institutions for their third level education are intensely targeted by private sector institutions, ensuring aggressive competition among private HE institutions.

It should be noted that all of the above quotations, relating to national competition, are unique to the IoT and private sectors. Respondents from the university sector make no reference to increased competition domestically. For university sector respondents, the existence of

global competition is, instead, having more of an impact on their operations. The findings further suggest that competition among international HE institutions has markedly increased, particularly, as a consequence of the opportunities created by technological advances. Increased competition from global HE institutions is strongly linked to, and supported by, advances and developments in technology. This observation is evident in the following quotations, which represent the views of eight interviewees:

> *There are a number of new entrant universities, in emerging countries, that are able to offer cheaper training to their students, than we can. So, the question is, how do we stay competitive in that global environment?* (Manager 28, University Sector).

> *A global trend that is impacting us quite significantly is the increased competition among third level institutes internationally. We need to maintain and increase our standards to effectively compete in the global competitive market* (Manager 42, University Sector).

> *Technology has transformed higher education and one of the big advancements is the open innovation in higher education with the advent of MOOCs. This means that Harvard University and others can use their brand name quite easily to deliver courses into Ireland. As a consequence, there is a significant currency in global HE brands, and huge increase in competition. These developments have huge implications for my organisation* (Manager 32, IoT Sector).

The effects of global competition are more acutely experienced in the university sector, as six university interviewees cite their concerns about the increasing competitiveness of their global counterparts. Students around the world are no longer just considering the third level institutions in their domestic countries, rather, they are evaluating and considering higher education institutions around the world, especially HEIs that score high in the international HE rankings. This finding supports research by Alstete (2015), Blanco-Ramirez and Berger (2014), and Malsen (2012) who posit that higher education systems are now characterised by intense and relentless global competition. The findings of this study suggest that Irish HEIs, therefore, must now examine the programmes, and the higher education experience that they offer, in comparison to their global competitors, if they aspire to attract and retain a diversified international student population.

Additionally, the rise and prominence of powerful higher education entities such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Harvard University, and their subsequent investment and occupancy in the e-learning and MOOCs space, is also of considerable concern for these respondents. The online presence of these prominent higher education brands, has made these organisations far more accessible to students all over the world. Investing in MOOCs and online learning has meant that these global higher education brands have substantially increased their reach and capacity, and created a more competitive environment for higher education institutions. Students who previously would not have been able to study on-campus in Harvard University, for example, can now do so by enrolling in a Harvard University programme online from his or her home. These particular developments make it challenging for Irish higher education institutions, whose brands are perhaps less well known globally, to compete for and recruit students.

The findings suggest that these particular organisations are contemplating their individual responses to such global competition threats. A public sector respondent, for example, believes her organisation should compete with global competitors by highlighting the benefits of their on-campus experience. She believes that her organisation does not have the resources or funds to invest in e-learning or MOOCs to the standard required to effectively compete with the existing higher education leaders in the e-learning field. Importantly, these eight respondents agree that their organisations are at critical junctures in their development, and that without substantial investment in e-learning they will be left behind by global competitors, which have chosen to strategically invest in the online dimension of their organisations. Undoubtedly, however, the current environment makes it extremely difficult for these managers to decide upon, and implement, the best strategy to compete with the strategic manoeuvres of international higher education competitors.

In summary, the key findings illustrate that the current environment in which the interviewees must make and implement key strategic decisions and priorities is complex and dynamic. The strategic priorities of senior managers are challenged because Irish higher education institutions now have a more diverse and academically demanding student population than previously, and, they are operating in a highly competitive market where the rate of change is occurring at a remarkable pace. Moreover, many of the international higher education trends identified in Chapter Two such as technology, internationalisation, and massification are also being experienced in Irish higher education institutions at present. The economic environment, in particular, however, is a development that is significantly impacting the Irish

HE sector. The deep and far-reaching impact that the current economic environment is having on Ireland's HE system is particularly concerning considering that the benefits of an economic recovery may take some time to materialise.

Finally, in addition to exploring the most dominant factors influencing the strategic priorities of Ireland's HE managers, this study aims to understand how managers are accomplishing their priorities in the current environment. The study aims understand the attitude and outlook of senior managers in relation to: how they perceive their organisations to be coping at this particular point in time, and; what they believe it takes for their organisations to accomplish their priorities. The following section presents the findings that emerged in this key theme.

## 4.5 Outlook and Attitudes of Senior Managers in Ireland's Public and Private Higher Education Institutions

Throughout this research, the 49 senior managers interviewed, expressed their anxieties and concerns for their organisations, and Ireland's higher education system. The interviewees detailed the changes that are occurring to their individual institutions and what these changes mean for their organisation's future. From this perspective, it is important to outline how senior managers believe their organisations are coping, and, what they believe it takes for their organisations to achieve their strategic priorities in this current environment. The following theme is broken into two sub-sections. The first section explores how interviewees believe their organisations are coping in this current environment. Following this, the second sub-section outlines what, managers in this study believe, is required in order to achieve their strategic priorities.

## 4.5.1 How are Irish Higher Education Institutions Coping in the Current Environment?

Considering all the challenges that the interviewees outline throughout the interview process, it is worthwhile to explore whether respondents believe these difficulties are insurmountable and too overwhelming, or, whether their organisations can sufficiently overcome these challenges. The findings, thus far, suggest that occurrences in the economic, financial and political environment are, in particular, exerting a substantial amount of pressure on their higher education organisations. Despite this, however, when respondents were asked how

their organisations are coping in the current environment, 26 respondents observed that their organisations are coping *reasonably* well:

> *We are coping as well as we possibly can. We have had to make efficiencies, diversify, think in different ways, try to seek different funding sources, and we have had to think on our feet. We have been able to maintain employment and how long that can continue I do not know, but, we have been able to do that and in that context we are coping quite well* (Manager 45, Private Sector).

> *My organisation is coping – that is the word. It is not thriving. In terms of how do we keep coping? That is really about very tight financial management, and head count management. Coping for the future is the key because these cuts are signalled for the next three or four years* (Manager 37, University).

> *The institution is coping at the moment but if you want to look towards expansion and growth in the future I do think that factors such as finances, national strategy etc. may be affecting us in that regard.* (Manager 6, IoT Sector).

> *We have diversified the funding, we have looked at developing non-exchequer sources. So we are coping ok, but, one worry will be the impact on education based on publications or the lack of recognition of the importance of research. That really worries me* (Manager 40, University Sector).

Previously, these 26 interviewees vehemently stressed the challenges that they regularly face and the many ways in which their organisations have been negatively affected by the challenging economy and the actions of the government. Arguably, because of the variety and strength of these forces, and the negative effects of which respondents unhesitatingly detailed throughout the interview process, it is significant that so many respondents believe that their organisations are actually coping reasonably well. The findings suggest that tight financial management and calculated operational decisions are helping their organisations to cope reasonably well. This finding illustrates the confident and resolute attitude of Ireland's higher education managers with regard to their organisation's future, in spite of the challenging factors that they have unreservedly admitted are causing them and their organisations stress. Clearly, these 26 managers, however, are also concerned about the long term negative effects of the current challenging environment on their organisation's operations. These respondents believe that key aspects of their organisations, such as

research activities, the recruitment and continued professional development of staff, and academic quality are being negatively impacted, as a consequence. An analysis of the data, therefore, suggests that while these organisations have been able to cope reasonably well, to date, their organisations have not escaped unscathed from this challenging period.

Moreover, a further 13 respondents believe that their organisations are coping *very* well. Considering that 38 interviewees, in section 4.2.1, refer to the difficulties created by the reduction in state funding, on their organisations, it is significant that these 13 interviewees believe that their organisations are coping very well. It should be noted, that only respondents from the public HE sector observe that their organisations are coping very well, no managers from the private sector made this observation. The issue of no private sector managers observing that their organisations are coping very well is further discussed later in this sub-section. The following quotations capture the range of sentiments, observed by these 13 public sector managers, in relation to their respective organisation's ability to cope:

> *I think my organisation is coping quite well. Every so often, when the new constraints are announced and suddenly we have got to lose all these posts, it seems how are we going to get through this? But we manage to get through it, and we manage to always come out with a positive outlook to the future. We are surviving and we are looking to the future* (Manager 27, University).

> *I think our organisation is coping brilliantly in lots of ways. People within the university appear to be really, really resilient (Manager 13, University Sector).*

> *I think we are coping very well if you consider that we are growing our student numbers, we are increasing the number of courses that we are offering, we are growing the research base of the institute, and we are achieving that even with all the challenges that we are facing* (Manager 30, IoT Sector).

In examining the attitude and disposition of these managers, it is clear that these respondents are positive and resolute in relation to their organisation's ability to thrive in a significantly turbulent environment. Additionally, the findings suggest that HE organisations that are coping very well are doing so, in part, because they are continuing to plan for and invest in their organisation's future. Their determination to implement their organisation's strategic priorities is not overshadowed or derailed by external developments. This finding supports the research of Stevens *et al.* (2013), which illustrates that organisations that have strong

organisational cultures, aligned with the strategic priorities, are more successful at strategic planning. It could be argued, therefore, that these 13 respondents are positive about their organisation's performance in this current environment because they work in an environment or culture that actively supports and underpins the achievement of their strategic plans and priorities. Perhaps this belief, which contends that their organisations are currently coping very well, is an accurate depiction of their organisation's current performance, or, perhaps it is a reflection of the positive attitude held by these particular managers, and their organisation's culture.

This particular observation, that 13 managers' organisations are coping very well, however, does not support the research findings and opinions of Irish authors, such as Nolan (2012), Garvin (2010), and McKernan (2010). These authors argue that Irish institutions are not performing strongly because they are being negatively affected by the government's funding cuts. These authors strongly believe that Irish higher education institutions are suffering because of the funding and reform decisions of the Irish government. Nolan (2012), for example, believes that the government's failure to address the HE funding crisis limits the ability of Irish HEIs to respond to the individual challenges that they face, and subsequently, negatively affects the third level experience for Irish students. An analysis of the findings, however, do not suggest that these organisations are coping very well because of, or as a result of Ireland's particularly difficult situation, but, that their organisations have dealt with the arising challenges exceptionally well. It is worth noting, however, that particular institutions may be better positioned to cope with the negative implications of Ireland's particular economic circumstance more successfully than others because of, for example, their greater sources of alternative income, or, because they have a more flexible and diverse portfolio of employees.

Conversely, a further ten interviewees reveal that their organisations are currently *not* coping well in the existing environment. The opinion of ten interviewees is that the existing environment severely challenges their organisations ability to cope, as outlined in the following quotations:

> *My organisation is not coping very well. We have massive financial issues, we have fairly decrepit capital buildings with very little opportunity to move out of, given the current climate. We also have a peculiar staff profile, so, I would say that we are not coping very well* (Manager 8, IoT Sector).

*It certainly is challenging, there is no doubt about it. It is very challenging and the decrease in funding, in comparison to our international competitors who are delivering similar programmes, disenfranchises us from being able to compete because our level of resource is so much different than our international competitors. Sustaining our position is an increasing worry all the time* (Manager 42, University).

*We are just about coping – if I were to be honest about it. It is not easy. The economy is not suddenly going to improve overnight. People have less money and if they have less money, then we have fewer students. It makes it difficult. We have no fat here. There is nothing else we can cut. Everything is becoming harder and when things become harder they become more stressful* (Manager 16, Private Sector).

These ten respondents believe that funding cuts, recruitment restrictions, and heavier workloads etc., are making it very difficult for their organisations to cope. It is noteworthy that so few respondents share this view when a large proportion of respondents complained about the stresses and pressures that the current environment is exerting. These ten interviewees, from both the public and private higher education sectors, have less money and flexibility to respond to the challenges in their environment. Moreover, an analysis of the data suggests that these 10 respondents are almost entirely consumed by operational challenges within their organisations and they are, as a result, struggling to implement and accomplish their strategic priorities. Evidently, these ten managers are in crisis management mode and are doing their best to survive this challenging period. The attitude and outlook of these ten managers is markedly less positive than the other managers, who perceive that their organisations' are coping reasonably well, and very well. These ten managers are demoralized because of how changes in the domestic environment have impacted their organisations, and equally, their limited ability to deter or minimise the effects of these changes. As a result, these ten respondents are considerably exasperated, and disappointed in relation to the current performance of their organisations, and their organisations' future potential.

Despite the predominately optimistic sentiments of the majority of respondents, it is important to note that a total of 39 respondents believe that it will be very challenging for their organisations to continue to cope reasonably well for much longer. Strong concerns and

anxieties are expressed in relation to their organisations ability to continue to cope if the exerting pressures do not ease. Research conducted by Lillis and Morgan (2012) suggests that Irish HE managers should be concerned for their organisations as Lillis and Morgan posit that the government's measures are likely to have a deep and lasting effect on the Irish education system. These 39 managers are not confident that their organisations can continue to cope well in the future. They believe that, they have managed to cope well so far, because they have substantially reduced their spending and stretched resources to their limit. If the external pressures were to continue, or to increase, however, they believe that their organisations would not cope and, essentially, valuable aspects of their organisations could be irrevocably damaged.

The findings present an interesting divergence in opinion between public and private sector managers in relation to their organisations' ability to cope. Up to this point, the sentiments of public sector managers suggest that the external environment, the role of the government in particular, is so severe that it is affecting their organisations ability to cope. Private sector managers equally believe that external forces, the economic and financial environment in particular, are extremely harsh, but, overall are less optimistic than their public sector counterparts, in relation to their respective organisation's performance. It could be argued that private sector managers are considerably more pragmatic and realistic about their organisation's ability to cope in the existing environment because they know that a loss making organisation is not a viable business. Ultimately, they also know that if their organisation continues to struggle and the economic environment does not improve, it would take very little to push their organisations towards closure. Private sector managers, therefore, remain in a state of high-alert until such a time that the economic environment improves. Conversely, for public sector managers, they perhaps can state that they are coping reasonably well because they are not fearful that their organisations could be closed by the government. The belief that no matter how difficult operations become, their organisations will not be forced to close, could arguably encourage a more optimistic disposition among public sector senior managers in relation to how their organisations are coping.

Furthermore, it is important to note that when managers discussed their organisations' performance in the current environment, they revealed that there are a variety of factors that influence their organisations' ability to cope, such as the morale of employees, and the volume and intensity of employees' workloads. The issue of employee workloads and

morale levels was previously discussed in detail throughout section 4.2, where it was revealed that the government's priority to introduce more accountability into Ireland's HE sector has negative implications for employees. The employee morale levels and workloads, within managers' organisations, influence why some respondents believe their organisations are coping very well and why others believe that their organisations are coping badly. In addition, when respondents were discussing their organisation's ability to cope, they also referred to the negative impact that the existing economic environment is having on their organisations' academic quality, and future ambitions. These two issues were also outlined in this thesis, it is, however, important to highlight that respondents believe that in their organisations' efforts to continue to cope, factors such as academic quality and ambitious objectives are being negatively affected.

Finally, in conjunction with detailing how their organisations are managing during this turbulent period, respondents naturally drifted towards outlining their organisation's future direction. Respondents discussed and put forward a selection of particular factors that would assist and support the implementation and achievement of their strategic priorities in the future. The next sub-section outlines respondents' opinions and observations in relation to continuing to implement and accomplish their priorities successfully into the future.

## 4.5.2 What is required for Irish Higher Education Institutions to Achieve their Strategic Priorities?

The findings reveal that there are a number of obstacles that make it challenging to achieve particular strategic priorities. The easing or removal of these impediments would greatly assist the implementation and achievement of the interviewees' stated priorities. Furthermore, the respondents make a distinction between the obstacles that they believe can be minimised versus the barriers that are entirely dependent on external developments such as, the global and national economic climates. It should also be noted that several respondents held more than one view on what it takes for their organisation to achieve their strategic priorities.

Nineteen respondents observe that, in order for their institutions to achieve their stated strategic priorities, the commitment and dedication of their employees is necessary. A similar observation was raised earlier, in section 4.4, where it was outlined that HE managers have become significantly more concerned with involving employees in the strategic plan, and have instigated key decisions within their organisations, which encourage employee involvement with the strategic priorities. In this instance, 19 respondents stated that the

achievement of their priorities is primarily dependent on their employees' commitment and contribution to the strategic plan and its priorities. The sentiments, expressed in the quotations below demonstrate how these 19 managers believe the contribution of employees is critical for the achievement of the strategic priorities:

> *Achieving our priorities requires people to give an awful lot more than they are already giving, and they are already giving a lot. There is a very good level of understanding with staff, in terms of taking more on, but from a managerialist perspective you need to understand that staff are the main drivers of everything, so, achieving a balance is very important* (Manager 9, IoT Sector).

> *A lot of goodwill from staff is absolutely crucial. We do have staff who work very hard and give up their time above and beyond their call of duty. Our staff have demonstrated flexibility and adaptability* (Manager 11, IoT Sector).

> *A crucial thing for achieving our strategic priorities is to motivate people. We need to create an environment where people feel that they really want to do their very best. Ultimately, that is what accomplishing our strategic objectives depends on* (Manager 41, University Sector).

In assessing what is required to achieve an organisation's strategic priorities, the findings reaffirm the belief held by senior managers, and discussed earlier, in relation to the critical role that employees play in the strategic priority process. These 19 respondents consider their organisations' employees as the primary instrument for implementing, driving, and accomplishing their priorities. In the context of decreasing resources and the challenging economic environment, the findings suggest that the role played by employees in driving the achievement of the strategic priorities is more important now than before. In previous years, Irish higher education institutions had the benefit of a healthier budget further buttressed by the thriving economic environment, so, they were able to direct money and resources towards a problem or opportunity. Now, however, HE managers are managing on a significantly smaller budget and operating in an unpredictable economic environment, and as a consequence, they are more reliant on employees to support their organisation's activities.

Interestingly, these 19 respondents believe that their employees' ability to fully commit to the achievement of the strategic priorities is under threat. These interviewees, particularly public sector managers, acknowledge that the external environment has been harsh on their

organisation's employees, which can have the effect of disengaging employees from the strategic priority process. The evidence suggests, however, that although these managers recognise that employee morale is low, they hold their employees' contribution in the achievement of the strategic priorities as invaluable. They, therefore, believe that as senior managers, they have a role to play in creating an environment that is more encouraging and supportive of employees so that they can work towards achieving the strategic priorities.

While nineteen respondents believe that their organisation's employees have the potential to contribute to the success of their organisation's strategic priorities, 20 respondents have a markedly different view in relation to what it takes to achieve their priorities. These 20 managers cite the necessity of their organisations to commit to, and determinately focus on, their strategic priorities, in order to achieve them:

> *To achieve our strategic priorities it takes perseverance and the ability to be clear minded. We need to prioritise certain things over others. We are listening and observing and making sure that we are engaged with the outside world. Currently, there is a real need for determination and doggedness* (Manager 12, University Sector).

> *I think a certain ability to walk the straight line and know that this is the right path and to maintain your integrity is really important. It is important not to panic, not to do things because they seem to be the next big thing - confidence and quality, rather, is what we are doing. That, for me, is really important, that we do not chase the goose that is going to lay the golden egg. We have to have confidence that what we are doing is the right thing* (Manager 13, University).

> *We need to focus, plan and be smart to achieve our objectives. I think we need to play to our strengths* (Manager 16, Private Sector).

For twenty respondents, the achievement of their strategic priorities is primarily determined by their organisations' ability to resolutely focus on their selected strategic priorities. Very simply, these respondents believe that priorities are accomplished when they are given 100% commitment and attention by their organisations, at all stages. A lack of focus, or a tendency to become consumed by internal or external distractions can drastically affect the probability of achieving strategic priorities. The sentiments on this topic illustrate that, to achieve

strategic priorities, it is imperative for managers to have a large degree of confidence, perseverance and determination, or as one public sector manager commented 'doggedness'.

This finding indicates that almost half of the interviewees have a very rational and pragmatic attitude towards achieving their strategic priorities. They believe that the accomplishment of the strategic priorities are primarily determined by their, and their organisations', focused decisions and actions at every important juncture. If 20 respondents hold the view that focus and determination is what is needed to achieve the strategic priorities then, it could be argued, that the achievement of their strategic priorities is entirely within their control. This finding should be cautiously considered in the context of the history and evolution of strategic planning in Irish higher education institutions. This finding could indicate that because these 20 respondents have gained valuable insights into HE strategic planning, they can now identify the various aspects that they and their organisations can improve upon i.e. the necessity to resiliently focus on their stated priorities.

Additionally, considering the level of detail that respondents revealed in relation to the effects of the current environment on their organisations, it is significant that so many respondents hold the opinion that they can achieve their strategic priorities simply just by being focused and determined. It could be argued that this viewpoint is quite philosophical, and perhaps oversimplifies the severity of the challenges that these respondents regularly face. Throughout the interview process these twenty managers outlined the negative impact of factors, such as reduced government autonomy, lower levels of funding, and increased competition on their strategic priorities. Despite this, when asked what it takes to accomplish their objectives, their attitude is that their organisations have the capacity to overcome these severe factors by being focused and determined.

A further 12 interviewees observe that the actions or decisions of the government greatly determine the successful outcome of their priorities. Essentially, these respondents believe that the government could create more favourable conditions to enable them to achieve their strategic priorities:

> *If what my school generated, in terms of income, was kept by my school, we would be able to do almost anything. For example, if my school was allowed to keep the income that we generated from our international activity, from our Springboard programmes etc., it would make us very comfortable to do a lot more things. It means that we do not get the just financial rewards for bringing*

*in the additional money into the institute. Permission from the government to do that would help* (Manager 33, IoT Sector).

*Achieving what we set out to achieve absolutely requires negotiation with the HEA and the government to gain more autonomy back. We need the HEA to understand the implications of the cuts and making us try to balance a budget at the end of the year and yet maintain and increase the standards to maintain ourselves globally competitive. There have been numerous conversations with the universities president groups and key people within the HEA, as well as at different ministerial levels, particularly around these issues. But, how much progress we are making is questionable* (Manager 40, University).

These respondents believe that government policy can impede their strategic priorities, and, furthermore, believe that if the government were to make several key changes to how they govern public sector HE institutions, it would greatly assist them in meeting their targets. This finding links to an earlier finding in section 4.2, which highlights the need for public sector organisations to have greater autonomy so that managers can respond more effectively to the needs of their students. A re-examination of the autonomy granted to public sector managers could empower senior managers to make the necessary decisions for their organisations and, consequently, enable them to more effectively adapt to their environments.

The opinion of these twelve public sector respondents illustrates the restricted capacity of senior managers to achieve their strategic priorities because of numerous governmental policies and procedures that exist. Private sector respondents are not subject to as many policies and procedures as their public sector counterparts, which may explain why the government's actions and decision were not observed as a factor impeding the priorities of private sector managers. Interestingly, two private sector senior managers in this study believe that the recovery of the economy and subsequently an improvement in consumer sentiment, is the factor which has the most potential to support the achievement of their strategic objectives:

*The achievement of our goals will take some form of economic revitalisation or indeed a kick-start of the economy. It will take confidence for people to begin to see a future for themselves and a future where education is important. I am not an economics expert but people need to start believing that there is a potential future for them and that education will contribute to their career progression. It*

*is going to take a bit of national confidence building* (Manager 45, Private Sector).

Unlike public sector managers, who refer to the prominent roles that both the government and their organisations' employees play in the accomplishment of their strategic priorities, these two private sector interviewees have a far more simplistic viewpoint in relation to what it takes to achieve their priorities. Fundamentally and very simply, the poor performing economy and lack of consumer confidence is the largest impediment that these private sector respondents face in accomplishing their strategic priorities, and if these factors were to improve there would be little else impeding the achievement of their strategic priorities.

Obviously, a swift economic recovery would also greatly aid public sector managers, but, public sector managers would still have to overcome challenges that they encounter as a consequence of factors, such as low employee morale, high workloads, and reduced autonomy from the government. This study indicates, thereby, that public sector managers have to manage their organisations' operations in a significantly more complex environment than their private sector counterparts.

In conclusion, the subsection of this chapter demonstrates that interviewees have strong opinions in relation to what it takes for their organisations to achieve their strategic priorities. The observations range from the factors that managers believe that they control, such as being focused and resilient throughout the strategic priority process, to factors that they believe are beyond their control, such as particular governmental policies. Importantly, however, this subsection demonstrates the varied outlooks and attitudes of managers in relation to how their organisations are coping, and, outlines several important factors that need to exist to support them in the accomplishment of their priorities.

## 4.6 Summary

In summary, the findings of this study illustrate the key factors that are influencing the strategic priorities of Ireland's higher education managers. These key factors are strongly influencing managers' choice of priorities, and their organisation's ability to accomplish these priorities. Although several of the factors outlined in Chapter Two are indeed influencing respondents' priorities, the findings of this study reveal that there are two factors, in particular, having the greatest influence on managers' priorities, these are: the role of the Irish government, and the economic and financial environment. The final chapter of the thesis

examines the strength and impact of these individual factors, and reveals how they are influencing managers, in relation to how they implement and accomplish their priorities.

Moreover, the findings clearly demonstrate that managers in the three HE sectors are influenced differently by influencing factors. It is clear, for example, that the current role of the Irish government exerts a substantial influence on public sector managers' actions and decisions. The government's first national HE strategy, for example, is a clear indicator of the government's influence on the priorities of public sector managers, as the majority of public sector managers' priorities mirror the key pillars of the government's strategy. Managers, in the private sector, on the other hand, are not as considerably influenced by the government, and subsequently, the key recommendations in the national strategy. The environment in which public and private sector managers operate and make decisions in relation to their organisation's priorities, therefore, is significantly different, which has implications for the implementation and accomplishment of their organisations' priorities.

An analysis of the data also indicates that, despite the strength and dominance of the influencing factors in managers' environments, respondents, overall, are quite satisfied with their organisation's performance, to date. It was revealed that the function of strategic planning is improving in Ireland's higher education organisations. When discussing their organisations' ability to overcome the most immediate obstacles, and accomplish their priorities, moreover, managers indicated that particular conditions or elements greatly assist them. Autonomy and discretion, from their key stakeholders, for example, was regularly referred to throughout the interview process, as an essential condition for Ireland's HE managers. Chapter Five explores this finding further, and outlines a range of conditions which underpin the implementation and accomplishment of managers' priorities in this current environment.

# Chapter Five: Conclusion

## 5.1 Introduction

A primary aim of this study was to ascertain what factors influence the strategic priorities of Ireland's public and private sector senior managers. The findings of this study reveal that the government, and Ireland's particularly challenging economic and financial circumstance fundamentally determine the priorities that managers and their institutions identify as important. The presence and influence of factors such as massification, globalisation, technology, and competition are experienced in Irish public and private sector institutions, but, these factors are not as impactful, as suggested in the literature. The findings suggest that factors, such as technology and globalisation, would have a considerably stronger positive influence on Irish institutions if the government played a less dominant role in Irish HE, and the Irish economic environment was less volatile. At present, however, significant funding and policy issues, particularly as a result of Ireland's challenging economic situation, limit the influence of factors such as technology and globalisation on Irish institutions. In this study, managers' decisions and activities, as they pertain to their strategic priorities, therefore, are predominantly concerned with, and driven by, developments in the domestic, rather than global, environment.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that public and private sector managers encounter markedly different challenges and obstacles in implementing and attempting to accomplish their organisation's strategic priorities. An objective of this study was to identify differences in the strategic priority processes of public and private sector institutions.

The findings reveal that the public and private sectors are influenced by the same major factors, yet, in comparison to their public sector counterparts, managers in the private sector are favourably positioned to respond to the challenges presented by strong influencing factors. This particular finding is significant as it identifies that HE managers require key enablers in their institutions and environments to more positively and effectively respond to the challenges they encounter. The requirement for key enablers is a finding to emerge from this study, and is explored in detail throughout this chapter.
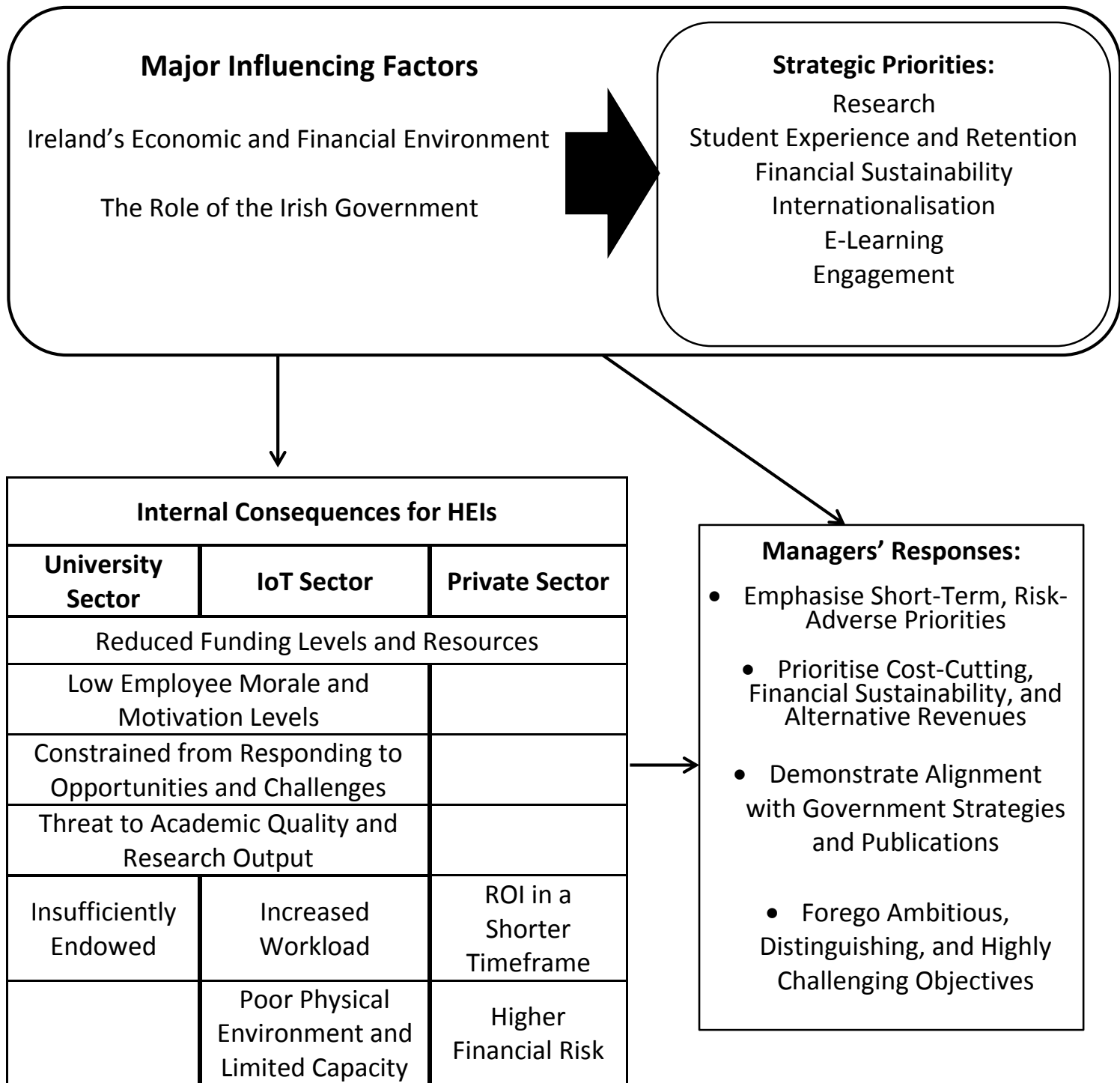
This chapter outlines conclusions and key findings drawn from primary research, in addition to a model which captures the factors influencing Ireland's HE managers in the current higher education landscape. Moreover, this chapter presents a framework which outlines how

higher education institutions and managers can more effectively implement and achieve ambitious strategic priorities. This framework emphasises and illustrates the importance of creating and preserving enablers in managers' environments. First, the model will be introduced and discussed.

## 5.2    Model Illustrating the Research Findings

To illustrate the key findings to emerge from this study a model has been developed. The model, presented on page 216, outlines the means by which prevalent influencing factors in managers' environments impact their strategic priorities. Moreover, the model illustrates how factors exerting a dominant influence on managers' priorities create internal challenges within HE organisations, and illicit particular responses from managers. The impact of prevalent influencing factors in managers' environments, coupled with the internal challenges which the influencing factors create, challenges managers to attain their strategic priorities and to introduce more ambitious priorities into the strategic priority process.

**Figure 5.1** Model Illustrating the Research Findings



| Major Influencing Factors | Strategic Priorities: |
|---|---|
| Ireland's Economic and Financial Environment | Research |
| | Student Experience and Retention |
| The Role of the Irish Government | Financial Sustainability |
| | Internationalisation |
| | E-Learning |
| | Engagement |

| Internal Consequences for HEIs | | |
|---|---|---|
| **University Sector** | **IoT Sector** | **Private Sector** |
| Reduced Funding Levels and Resources | | |
| Low Employee Morale and Motivation Levels | | |
| Constrained from Responding to Opportunities and Challenges | | |
| Threat to Academic Quality and Research Output | | |
| Insufficiently Endowed | Increased Workload | ROI in a Shorter Timeframe |
| | Poor Physical Environment and Limited Capacity | Higher Financial Risk |

**Managers' Responses:**

- Emphasise Short-Term, Risk-Adverse Priorities

- Prioritise Cost-Cutting, Financial Sustainability, and Alternative Revenues

- Demonstrate Alignment with Government Strategies and Publications

- Forego Ambitious, Distinguishing, and Highly Challenging Objectives

The model identifies two particular factors exerting the greatest influence on managers' priorities. These factors are the role of the Irish government, and Ireland's economic and financial environment. These two particular factors are referred to, throughout this chapter, as the major influencing factors because they considerably influence managers to pursue their existing set of priorities. Emerging from this study, it can be concluded that managers' priorities are, in no particular order: research; the student experience and retention; financial sustainability; internationalisation; e-learning and; engagement. The two major influencing factors, that this study identifies, also generate internal challenges in managers' institutions and, consequently, affect a manager's ability to implement and attain their organisations' priorities. The findings of this research as captured in figure 5.1, therefore, suggest that the factors exerting the strongest influence on managers' organisations primarily determine the objectives that managers' perceive as essential, and, have a significant effect on how managers can attain their priorities.

Furthermore, the model illustrates that the major influencing factors are responsible for producing particular internal consequences for Ireland's higher education institutions. All sectors are experiencing reduced funding levels and resources which, as a consequence, significantly challenge the attainment of the priorities. As a result of the influence of the major factors, IoT and university sector respondents are encountering low employee morale and motivation levels, and are significantly constrained from responding to arising opportunities and challenges. Additionally, the dominance of the major influencing factors challenges managers in relation to preserving academic quality and maintaining research output. University sector respondents perceive that, because of the current HE landscape, their organisations are insufficiently endowed to pursue strategically important projects, and to maintain their competitive position in the global HE environment.

In the IoT sector, moreover, the existing economic environment and the role of the Irish government has stimulated an unsatisfactory physical environments for students and staff. The effects of the two major influencing factors are also apparent in the private sector as private sector intuitions are now characterised by higher financial risk, and there is increased pressure for private sector managers to generate a return on investment in a shorter timeframe. The model, therefore, illustrates a finding, that is, that Ireland's higher education managers are attempting to accomplish their strategic priorities while also addressing the internal challenges created by the major influencing factors.

The model captures a further insight to emerge from this study, that is, that managers engage in a series of responses to effectively cope with the influence of the major factors. Managers are responding in a particular style that, they perceive, provides their organisations with an opportunity to cope with the negative influence of the major factors and, thereby, attain their strategic priorities. To overcome funding challenges and to respond to government policy, in particular, managers' responses emphasise short-term, risk adverse priorities, and, forego ambitious, distinguishing and highly challenging objectives. Managers are also responding to the major influencing factors by becoming more concerned with managing costs, and exploring alternative revenues. Moreover, the government's heightened involvement in Irish HE encourages managers across all sectors, but in the public sector, in particular, to respond by emphasising priorities that demonstrate alignment with the most recent government HE strategy and policy documents.

The findings of this study suggest that managers' existing responses are not effective for the seamless attainment of existing strategic priorities, and to pursue challenging, more strategically rewarding priorities. Responding to the existing challenging environment by emphasising short-term priorities, and prioritising cost cutting, arguably, does not support the attainment of priorities, such as research. Furthermore, if managers are continuously striving to reduce costs, they are restricted from investing in and pursuing distinguishing, but considerably more challenging, strategic priorities.

The proposed model provides a concise snapshot of the current environment in which senior managers in Ireland are selecting, implementing and attempting to accomplish their organisations' priorities. The environment in which managers are operating is influenced and characterised by two prominent factors: Ireland's economic and financial environment and the role of the Irish government. It is predominantly the persistent strength of these factors which encourages managers to pursue the priorities identified in figure 5.1. Moreover, the major influencing factors prompt the development of particular consequences within all three sectors which also illicit a series of, largely negative, responses from managers.

The two major factors, identified from the research findings, predominantly influence managers' choice of strategic priorities, and how effective managers and their organisations are at implementing and accomplishing their priorities. The two major influencing factors, identified in this study, are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Ireland's highly challenging economic circumstance, for example, in recent years, has compelled the

government to reassess its public sector spending, implement cost saving initiatives, and to reform Ireland's public HE sector. Reasonably, therefore, the Irish government's current role in HE has been highly influenced and altered by Ireland's economic and financial circumstance, in recent years.

The role of the Irish government, and Ireland's challenging economic and financial environment exert an overwhelming and persistent influence on managers' activities as they relate to their organisations' strategic priorities. The influence of the major factors, to emerge from the findings of this study, extends not just to priorities, such as retention and financial sustainability but also to engagement and internationalisation priorities. The government's recent communications, coupled with, and heightened by, the challenging economic climate is encouraging managers to assess and interpret priorities, such as engagement and internationalisation, primarily from the perspective of potential income generation. Based on existing literature concerning internationalisation, it can be argued that internationalisation should not be interpreted so narrowly. Internationalisation should be viewed for its potential to generate multiple, long-term benefits. In this study, the presence of major influencing factors discourages such an interpretation of internationalisation and engagement, and prompts managers to pursue these priorities for income generation, predominantly.

In addition to determining managers' choice of priorities, the influence of the major factors generates internal implications or consequences for managers and their organisations. Each HE sector, universities, institutes of technology, and private colleges, is impacted differently by the major factors, although some commonalities exist across the sectors, as illustrated in the model. The role of the Irish government is principally responsible for generating multiple consequences in the university and IoT sectors, such as low employee morale and motivation levels, whereas the government's influence is less evident within private institutions. In the private sector, the economic and financial environment is the primary determinant of the internal challenges that private HE organisations encounter. Private sector institutions do not encounter as many challenges as public sector institutions. In private HE organisations, private sector managers can prevent negative consequences occurring, as a result of influencing factors. This particular finding illustrates a fundamental difference between the public and private sectors in relation to how their organisations are affected by the dominant factors, and how each sector is positioned to counter the negative arising implications.

Managers from all three sectors are responding to the persistent challenges and obstacles, presented by the major influencing factors, by temporarily suppressing their organisations' considerably demanding or distinctive objectives. The responses from senior managers, across all three sectors, is to manage their organisations with the intention of minimising the existing and potential damage generated by the major influencing factors. As the existing environment is significantly turbulent, it is not perceived as unusual or unacceptable for managers across Ireland's public and private sector institutions to adopt cautious, risk-adverse responses. Managers, therefore, are reneging on ambitious or distinctive priorities, and instead, emphasising priorities that, essentially, enable their organisations to endure this challenging period in Ireland's economic history. The most prominent priorities across Ireland's higher education institutions, therefore, reflect the necessity to more effectively manage expenditure, explore alternative revenues, and maintain the Irish government's approval. Strategic objectives or projects that do not meet the necessary criteria of cost cutting and government approval are perceived as too risky or controversial and, therefore, are frequently not pursued, regardless of how rewarding the objective may be.

Throughout the interview process, managers, for example, referred to programmes or research projects which had significant strategic reward potential, however, they could not progress these objectives as they had insufficient resources and finances to divert to these objectives. One manager outlined the devastating impact to organisational morale caused by the temporary closure of a thriving research centre, due to insufficient funding and resources. Employees seconded to the research centre, and making a significant impact, were required to return to their teaching duties because their organisation was unable to hire new staff to cover their teaching hours. The findings reveal that higher education managers are frustrated and regretful that they cannot pursue, or continue to emphasise, priorities which best represent their organisations and help to ensure their organisations' continued competitive development. In the context of the major influencing factors, however, managers perceive it to be of considerable importance to adopt a pragmatic response, to minimise the negative and long-term implications for their organisations. If the environment in which their organisations operate was more favourable, their responses would be significantly different.

Managers' responses are perceived by themselves as fundamentally appropriate and reasonable for the existing HE landscape in Ireland. Arguably, however, managers' existing responses are overly-cautious, considerably reactive, and fixated on the present. Responding to the major influencing factors by underemphasising and foregoing ambitious projects and

objectives does not position Ireland's institutions to compete with aggressive global competitors, and importantly, to become a major driver in Ireland's economic and social growth. Moreover, managers' existing responses do not sufficiently prepare Ireland's institutions to optimally perform in a more favourable environment, and have also compounded the negative effects of the role of the government, and Ireland's challenging economic and financial climate. In the context of the major influencing factors, however, managers' existing responses cannot be altered or reversed, if particular enablers are non-existent in their environments. Enablers are conditions or criteria which managers require to perform their roles optimally and, subsequently, to pursue and attain ambitious strategic priorities. Organisations, therefore, need to identify and prioritise the enablers most essential to equip their institutions to more effectively respond, and ultimately, attain their priorities. The requirement for organisations to create, develop and preserve enablers in their immediate and wider operating environments is a key tenet of this research. Based on the primary findings to emerge from this research, therefore, a framework has been developed, which outlines how the attainment of ambitious strategic priorities is facilitated by five particular enablers.

## 5.3 Framework for the Pursuit and Attainment of Ambitious Strategic Priorities

The findings of this research propose that Irish institutions and HE managers require five particular enablers to ensure that ambitious and challenging priorities can be pursued and accomplished. The development and preservation of enablers is essential for empowering managers and their institutions to select, implement, and accomplish more ambitious and strategically rewarding priorities. The important role and function of the five particular enablers, illustrated in figure 5.2, are outlined in the next section.

**Figure 5.2** Framework for the Pursuit and Attainment of Ambitious Strategic Priorities
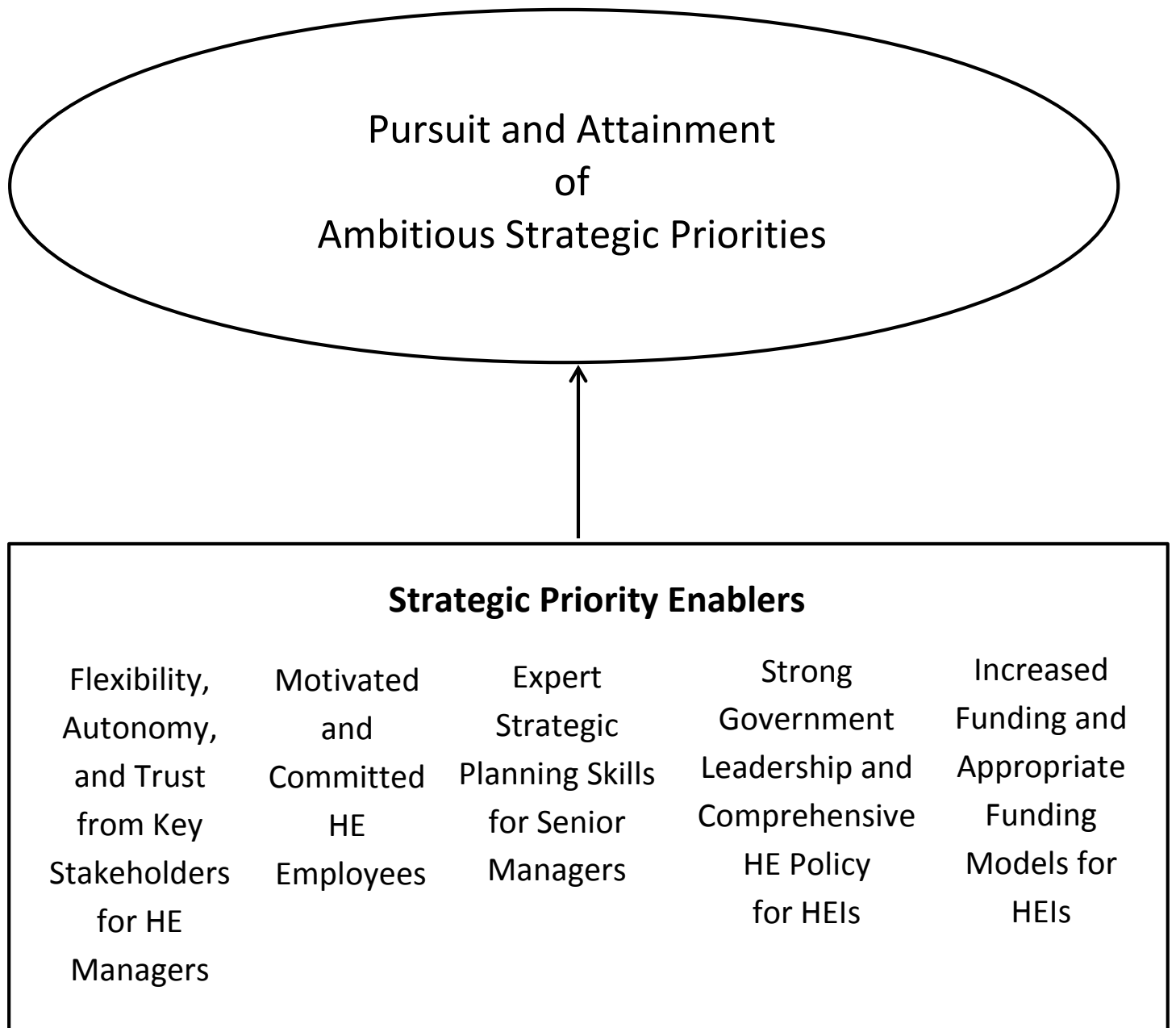
The findings of this study highlight that it is primarily the absence of enablers, in managers' operational environments, that significantly challenges the strategic priority process, and the attainment of ambitious strategic priorities. The absence of enablers, such as expert strategic planning skills, and strong government leadership, moreover, encourages a pragmatic, rather than strategic, approach to strategic planning in Ireland's higher education institutions. The purposeful stimulation and preservation of the five proposed enablers would serve to improve the strategic priority process within Ireland's HE institutions, and, ultimately, facilitate HE to optimally perform its role in Ireland's economic and social development. The five particular enablers that the findings of this study highlight as important for the discipline of strategic planning in higher education will be individually outlined.

First, the findings reveal that it is important for managers to have sufficient levels of flexibility, autonomy, and trust from the key stakeholder, in this case, the government and shareholders. This enabler is significant, because where managers are granted flexibility, autonomy, and trust from their key stakeholders they are substantially more empowered to make strategically important decisions in an appropriate timeframe. Managers in the public sector do not have sufficient levels of flexibility, autonomy, and trust, from the government. This particular challenge is a significant debilitating factor in a public sector manager's ability to respond to an arising opportunity, and to select and invest in meaningful and aspiring priorities.

Private sector managers, however, have optimum levels of flexibility, autonomy, and trust which offers private sector HE organisations distinct advantages in comparison to their public sector counterparts. There is a clear and unambiguous understanding that each party, managers and shareholders respectively, serves a different set of functions and, importantly, each party is awarded the independence to fulfil those functions. It is important for private sector managers and their shareholders to recognise and preserve this particular enabler, because of the distinct and prominent advantages flexibility, autonomy, and trust offers their organisations.

Public sector managers, however, are largely dependent on their primary stakeholder, the government and its various agencies, to sanction key decisions and, therefore, cannot as readily respond to opportunities and challenges. Decisions ranging from day-to-day operational decisions, to high level strategic decisions are increasingly complicated or impaired by government sanctions and policies. Where public sector managers were

previously able to assign employees to key tasks, or to employ individuals to lead key strategic research projects, they are now constrained under government policies such as the ECF, and the Croke Park Agreements. These policies have, as a consequence, considerably impinged managers' ability to lead and direct their institutions optimally.

The findings highlight that the current levels of flexibility, autonomy and trust bestowed by the government are debilitating and unequitable both for public senior managers and for the performance of Ireland's HE institutions. Managers cannot easily manage and direct resources and finances to strategically important projects because they have insufficient flexibility and autonomy in their operating environments. Complex, challenging priorities such as research and engagement are, therefore, more difficult to efficiently accomplish. Moreover, an environment characterised by insufficient flexibility, autonomy and trust disenfranchises an organisation from fulfilling the key performance criteria and expectations that the government, and the public, maintain for Ireland's HE system. The findings suggest that organisations would significantly benefit from discussing and exploring satisfactory levels of autonomy which both satisfy stakeholder requirements, and, endow managers to perform their roles.

The findings also identify motivated and committed employees as a key enabler for managers' and their organisations. The findings suggest that where organisations have committed and motivated employees, managers can direct the energy, expertise, and enthusiasm of employees towards attaining the more challenging and ambitious priorities. If an organisation's employees, however, are not optimally motivated, managers are less empowered to pursue highly challenging priorities because they are missing an intrinsic and highly valuable resource. Organisations characterised by highly motivated and committed employees encounter less resistance throughout the strategic priority process, and are significantly more equipped to overcome obstacles and, consequently, accomplish their priorities.

Ireland's existing HE landscape has considerably heightened the necessity for employees to be strongly committed to their organisations' visions and to perform the necessary duties and roles to contribute to this vision. The existence and prioritisation of highly motivated and committed employees is perceived, by managers, as a partial solution to alleviating the symptoms generated by the factors exerting the strongest influence on their organisations. Highly motivated employees can ease the challenges created by funding cuts, for example,

because these employees *go the extra mile* for their organisations. Instrumental for managers to generate and maintain motivated and committed employees is the freedom and flexibility to introduce performance based incentives and reward programmes. Additional enablers such as increased funding, comprehensive HE policy, and flexibility, autonomy, and trust from the key stakeholders would fundamentally support managers to generate and maintain motivated and committed employees. At present, Ireland's HE managers are too reliant on the goodwill and voluntary engagement of employees to attain their organisations' priorities. Moreover, if employees' contracts were more comprehensive and reflective of a HE organisation's performance requirements, securing the commitment of employees to ambitious strategic projects would be considerably more realistic.

It is imperative that Ireland's public and private higher education managers are empowered and actively directed, by their key stakeholders and HE policy advisors, to optimally manage and coordinate their organisations' employees. This particular finding, therefore, highlights the necessity for academic contracts to be restructured, in particular, to support managers in securing employee commitment, and, to most effectively direct and exploit employees' skills and experiences. Higher education policy designed to address the persistent challenges that public sector managers encounter, in relation to stimulating and maintaining highly motivated and committed employees, would considerably enhance the performance of Ireland's HEIs and contribute to building a stronger HE system. As a consequence, an organisational climate would be fostered, to stimulate a more positive and reaffirming environment for both managers and employees respectively, to attain ambitious strategic priorities.

A further enabler to emerge from this research relates to managers' expertise and training in the discipline of strategic planning. For Irish HE institutions to strengthen the strategic priority process, and make the accomplishment of ambitious priorities considerably more manageable, senior managers must improve upon their strategic planning skills. The findings illustrate that, currently, managers across Ireland's HE institutions largely adopt a prescriptive, uniform, and undifferentiating approach to strategic planning. The strategic priorities of public and private sector institutions lack inspiration, creativity, and individuality and, as a result, the strategic priorities are difficult to distinguish from one institution to another. Generic, prescriptive strategic planning is occurring, in part, because of an insufficient emphasis on strategic planning training and development among senior managers. As discussed previously in Chapter Two, the purpose of strategic planning is to ascertain how best to utilise key resources and strengths to position an organisation to

optimally perform in the future. Moreover, the responsibility for developing and implementing highly effective strategic plans and priorities is primarily assigned to senior managers.

It is evident from the findings, however, that many of Ireland's HE managers are not sufficiently developing strategic plans, and emphasising ambitious strategic priorities, that are reflective of their organisations' core strengths and capabilities. Strategic priorities, such as retention and financial sustainability, for example, do not emphasise or build upon the strategic competencies that many managers and their institutions have cultivated, or reflect the demands of various industries in their region. Many of Ireland's managers need to be more determined and confident in relation to thoroughly assessing, and subsequently prioritising, areas of high potential within their organisations, and understand how they can facilitate the attainment of high potential priorities. This research, however, also recognises that significant constraints are placed upon public and private sector organisations and, for these reasons, managers perceive that they have to prioritise objectives, such as financial sustainability.

As illustrated previously in the model, the major influencing factors are encouraging managers, particularly in the public sector, to respond by demonstrating alignment with government strategies and policies. The government introduced their first HE strategy in 2011 and the IoT sector, in particular, are uncompromisingly adopting the government's first HE strategy. The government's publication of various strategy documents has significantly impinged upon a public sector manager's and institution's creative approach to strategic planning because it specifically outlines the objectives, which the government believe, Irish institutions should be pursuing. This study, therefore, highlights that expert strategic planning skills would permit managers to demonstrate some independence from the government's strategy, and subsequently, the strategies of their fellow institutions. Expert strategic planning skills, for example, would assist managers to continue to comply with government recommendations, while also maintaining an important element of individuality to pursue strategically important and distinctive priorities for their organisations.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that increased government involvement in HE, and the continually turbulent economic environment has, effectively, restricted managers from successfully exploiting the skills and expertise that they have developed and acquired within their organisations. Managers, therefore, need to recognise the value of their

experience, and reengage with their acquired skillsets and expertise to instinctively lead and direct their institutions. Regular and expert strategic planning training and development would equip HE managers with the skills necessary to develop appropriate, distinctive, and progressive strategic plans for their organisations. The findings further suggest that understanding and reinforcing the principles and best practice of HE strategic planning would assist managers in addressing this issue.

A further enabler to emerge from this research as necessary to attain ambitious strategic priorities is in relation to HE policy and the style of leadership demonstrated by the government. The Irish government's current style of leadership and direction does not support managers to respond to the internal difficulties that arise within their organisations, or to adopt a more determined and positive approach to their strategic priorities. The government have increased their role in managing and governing Irish HE but, correspondingly, have not provided managers and HE organisations with the guidance and direction necessary to attain their priorities. The framework proposes, therefore, that strong leadership and direction from the government is necessary to encourage a more positive and self-assured response among HE managers, particularly to empower managers to pursue and attain ambitious strategic priorities.

Strong government leadership is required to assist institutions to achieve challenging priorities in, for example, research and e-learning. Previously, the Irish government proposed that, critical to becoming internationally competitive, is the development of innovative forms of delivery, including e-learning. Governmental reports and strategies have also highlighted the instrumental role that research will play in both the development of Ireland's HE system, and Ireland's economic and social development. This study, however, indicates that managers are encountering significant challenges and conflicts in implementing and progressing priorities, such as e-learning and research. Attaining priorities in the disciplines of e-learning and research require substantial funding, resources, expertise, and guidance. Resources are currently considerably overextended, therefore, if the government require Irish institutions to advance their e-learning and research capabilities, the government needs to simultaneously provide managers with comprehensive implementation guidance.

A significant gap exists, therefore, whereby the government introduces new policies or recommendations but do not provide comprehensive leadership or guidelines for managers to comply with, and realise the government's recommendations. To enhance the

implementation and successful adoption of new governmental policies and strategies, the government needs to provide managers with accompanying guidance, bandwidth, and support. Additionally, the restoration and conservation of alternative enablers such as flexibility, autonomy, and trust, and, increased levels of funding would fundamentally contribute to the attainment of ambitious priorities, such as e-learning and research.

Additionally, when introducing new HE policies and directives the government neglect to highlight the potential consequences, and subsequently, provide strategic guidance in relation to how to address consequences, generated as a result of new HE policies. Public sector respondents perceive that HE policy in recent years is considerably reactive, with insufficient consideration given to the how the various policies will be received, interpreted, and realised in Ireland's HE institutions. Comprehensive higher education governance and strategy policies, therefore, are required for the government to accomplish their ambitious objectives, and simultaneously, to minimise disruption within HE institutions.

The final enabler that the findings propose as necessary for managers to pursue and attain ambitious strategic priorities is increased funding and appropriate funding models. Ireland's funding model is no longer appropriate considering the volume of students enrolled in HE, and the wide range of expectations now placed on higher education institutions. Addressing Ireland's existing HE funding model would enable HE institutions to more effectively pursue and achieve ambitious strategic priorities. Managers are placing an emphasis on cost-cutting and foregoing ambitious objectives because they are strongly influenced by the lower levels of funding that managers' institutions now receive. Moreover, because the existing funding levels require managers to ardently manage costs and resources, this study suggests that managers have less time for strategic thinking, and to comprehensively assess how to best lead and direct their organisations.

Increased funding levels, therefore, are important for Irish institutions not only to ensure that institutions pursue distinctive, ambitious priorities, but also, to award managers the capacity and discretion to plan and direct their institutions to a high standard. Increased funding levels would also empower managers to address internal difficulties such as employee morale, and poor physical environments because managers could direct funds to enhance their organisations' physical infrastructures and premises for employees and students.

In the public sector, the reduced funding levels are indiscriminate and, therefore, affect all aspects of a HEI regardless of the past human and financial investment an institution has

directed to a particular discipline. Having to delay or abandon strategically important projects because of reduced funding negatively impacts the attainment of ambitious strategic priorities. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that public sector managers would more effectively cope with the reduced levels of funding if they had more flexibility and discretion, from the government, in relation to how their organisations' funds are directed and spent.

The lower levels of funding have, in particular, affected Ireland's university sector. University sector managers perceive that their organisations are competitively constrained and can no longer compete at the same level as their international counterparts. The decline in funding in recent years has meant that particular universities have regressed in disciplines or projects at which they previously excelled. The existing funding levels, therefore, are damaging for the international reputation and performance of Ireland's universities.

In the private sector, as a result of the reduced levels of funding, private sector managers are significantly limited in relation to the priorities that they can pursue. The private HE sector is characterised by higher financial risk and, as result, there is less room for error with the investment of limited funds. Private sector managers, therefore, require increased levels of funding in order to evaluate and invest in projects and priorities that have a high reward potential, but, may take longer to provide a return on investment.

Overall, this study recommends that if Ireland's higher education institutions prioritised the development of the five enablers proposed, managers would be significantly more adept at attaining their organisations' ambitious priorities, regardless of the negative influence of the major factors. Managers cannot prevent or control the particular factors exerting the greatest influence on their organisations, and the subsequent internal implications caused by the influencing factors. Through the creation and preservation of enablers, however, higher education stakeholders can obtain control of their environments, and effectively equip their organisations with the conditions and instruments necessary to pursue and attain ambitious and distinguishing strategic priorities. Improved, attainable, and ambitious HE strategic plans and priorities would serve to develop a competitive and sustainable HE system, as well as a robust economy.

The findings of this study reveal several recommendations for further future research. The following section will outline the potential areas and recommendations for future research.

## 5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

The findings provide a contribution from 49 public and private higher education senior managers on the factors that influence the selection, implementation and accomplishment of strategic priorities. This study, therefore, addresses the dearth of empirical research on what objectives Ireland's public and private sector higher education managers are prioritising, and what factors are influencing managers' decisions to select and implement these strategic priorities. Stemming from this study, however, are a number of areas for further research, which will be outlined below.

First, it is recommended that this study be implemented in public and private HE institutions in other countries. The findings of this study indicate that managers' responses significantly affect the success of the strategic priorities and that managers' responses could be positively enhanced if particular enablers existed in their environments. Further research, therefore, is required to understand if managers' responses, and consequently the presence of enablers, bear a similar significance in the operating environments of HEIs outside of Ireland. It would also be interesting to assess the particular enablers in existence in overseas institutions, which fundamentally support managers' to attain their priorities and to highlight enablers that could potentially be strengthened. Replicating this study in public and private institutions overseas would further substantiate the requirement for enablers in managers' environments, and provide greater insights into the relationship between enablers and ambitious strategic priorities. Implementing this study in other countries would also generate useful comparative data.

The findings of this study present a snapshot of the strategic planning process in the current higher education landscape. To further explore the impact and value of stimulating and preserving enablers to enhance the strategic priorities, it is recommended that further research is conducted in a significantly different or positive HE climate. Ireland's challenging economic climate is a dominant force currently influencing managers' priorities, which, as a result, necessitates the existence of the particular enablers outlined in figure 5.2, to implement and accomplish ambitious strategic priorities. There is, therefore, a strong cause and effect relationship between the major factors influencing managers' priorities, and managers' resulting strategic priorities. It is recommended, therefore, that this study be carried out in a markedly different economic climate to and establish what enablers are necessary to facilitate

the pursuit and attainment of ambitious strategic priorities, in distinctly different operating climates.

A further recommendation for future research concerns the experiences and perceptions of HE employees in relation to their organisations' strategic plans. This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of senior managers. It would be valuable, therefore, to garner the perspectives of HE employees on the factors influencing their organisations' strategic priorities, and what they believe hinders or delays the attainment of their organisations' strategic priorities. It would also be interesting to examine employees' insights in relation to addressing internal difficulties arising as a consequence of the major influencing factors. Designing and conducting a study aimed at obtaining employee insights should provide a new perspective on attaining priorities in the current HE landscape and, in particular, new perspectives on the enablers that HEIs need to accomplish their priorities in the current climate. Interviewing a similar sample size of HE employees, from the same public and private HE institutions as managers in this study, would generate valuable data to advance the findings of this study. A number of recommendations, based on the findings of this research, can also be made for practice. The following section outlines these recommendations.

## 5.5 Recommendations for Practice

Higher education organisations in Ireland, at present, are not developing strategic plans that give due consideration to the factors affecting the attainment of their priorities. It can be recommended, therefore, from the current study, that the process of strategic planning evolve to be considerably more integrated, multi-dimensional, and comprehensive. Organisations need to enhance the strategic planning process, and in addition to outlining priorities, the strategic plan must assess the potential influencing factors, and, identify the enablers necessary to ensure the priorities are attained. The process of strategic planning in HE organisations, therefore, should incorporate the following:

- Potential factors in an organisation's immediate environment which could delay or obstruct the accomplishment of strategic priorities
- The particular enablers necessary to ensure ambitious strategic priorities can be pursued and attained

Incorporating these two aspects into the HE strategic planning process, should significantly assist organisations to engage in impactful and successful strategic planning.

It is recommended that organisations identify the factors, in their environments, which have the greatest potential to delay or obstruct identified priorities. The findings from this research illustrate that the factors exerting the greatest influence on managers' priorities persistently and uncompromisingly interfere with the attainment of priorities. Ireland's turbulent economic environment, for example, has contributed to lower HE funding levels which challenges managers to progress and attain their selected priorities, particularly the more complex priorities, such as e-learning. Moreover, many of Ireland's HE organisations do not appear to have sufficient preparations in place to address arising issues, or to prevent them from occurring. Organisations, therefore, should engage in a process of scenario planning to map out or attempt to predict potential developments or changes to their environments, which could affect the attainment of their priorities. Through the adoption of scenario planning, essentially outlining the various potential scenarios that could arise in the future, managers could effectively prepare for, and subsequently overcome, arising obstacles. It is recommended, therefore, that higher education institutions more effectively scan their immediate and wider environments to identify and analyse factors that could potentially inhibit the attainment of their priorities.

It is evident from the research findings that the creation and preservation of specific enablers is instrumental for effective and progressive strategic planning. To implement and accomplish strategic plans, particularly during challenging economic periods, which are both attainable and ambitious, organisations need to examine the existence of enablers in their environments. Organisations and their managers need to identify the enablers or conditions that would support the pursuit and attainment of ambitious strategic priorities. It can be recommended, therefore, from the findings of this study that enablers become an intrinsic and accepted aspect of HE strategic planning to, ultimately, ensure that strategic plans are meaningful and achievable. The discipline or practice of HE strategic planning would be fundamentally strengthened if strategic planning recognised and emphasised the existence of key enablers.

It is further recommended that managers identify and rate the existence and strength of the enablers in their environments. In doing so, managers could identify aspects that will support and progress the strategic priorities, and also areas which could potentially undermine the attainment of their chosen priorities. Through the identification, rating and mapping of required enablers, managers would have a comprehensive understanding of their

environments and, in particular, the aspects of their environments which require strengthening and preservation.

The evolvement and enhancement of the strategic priority process is highly dependent on the role played by higher education managers. The findings indicate that managers' responses considerably affect the attainment of priorities. The model diagrammatically illustrates that managers respond to the challenges, presented by factors strongly influencing their organisations, by prioritising cost-cutting and foregoing ambitious priorities. Arguably, engaging in such responses will not enhance or positively advance the strategic priority process. It is recommended, therefore, from the findings of this study, that managers identify negative responses, which they engage in, which are or could be unconducive for progressive strategic planning. If managers are more cognisant of the responses and response patterns that they engage in, they are more effectively positioned to identify the particular conditions that they, and their organisations, require to attain their priorities. Managers, for example, who recognise that they are responding to factors influencing their organisations, by rigorously prioritising cost-cutting can identify the requirement for enablers, such as greater levels of funding, or increased flexibility from their stakeholders.

A further recommendation to arise from the findings of this study relates to employee involvement and contribution in HE strategic planning. It is evident from the research findings that employee involvement and contribution in the strategic plan is important for attaining strategic priorities. The private sector is significantly more empowered to increase and secure the involvement and contribution of employees because, unlike public sector organisations, they can incentivise employees and address arising morale issues. Despite this, however, the findings suggest that private sector organisations are not effectively utilising employees in the strategic plan. In relation to the public sector, the inability for public sector managers to incentivise high performing employees, and to address persistent morale challenges, contributes to the issue of inadequate employee involvement in strategic planning. All three sectors in Ireland's HE system, therefore, have not effectively formalised and secured the contribution of employees to the discipline of strategic planning within their organisations. Currently, strategic planning in Irish HEIs is predominantly a function of senior managers.

It is recommended, therefore, that public and private sector HE organisations across Ireland identify the means by which they can increase employee involvement in the strategic

planning process. The findings suggest that involving employees in the development and implementation of the plan significantly enhances an employees' ability to connect with, and invest in, their organisation's strategic plan. In a particularly challenging and volatile environment, moreover, the importance of employee contribution is amplified, therefore, it is strategically important for organisations to meaningfully involve employees in the strategic plan, at all stages. It is recommended that HE institutions identify leaders throughout their organisations to inform and progress the strategic plan, and to disseminate the key messages of the plan to their colleagues. To reinforce the contribution of employees to the strategic plan, it is also recommended that senior managers assemble strategic planning teams throughout their organisations in order to direct particular strategic projects, and to generate ideas among employees. Brainstorming to establish potential strategic priorities, and the means by which to overcome arising strategic planning challenges, would also positively contribute to employee morale and motivation levels within HE organisations.

Although the findings suggest that employee involvement and contribution throughout the strategic priority process needs to improve, the findings also suggest that the process of strategic planning has, in part, improved in Irish institutions. The findings suggest that HE organisations' strategic plans are considerably more visible within organisations, and more succinct than previous strategic plans. Organisations, therefore, need to build upon this positive finding, and ensure that their employees identify with their strategic plans, and understand the primary objectives of the plans. It is recommended, therefore, that organisations formalise and embed employee contribution, individually and through the creation of teams, in the strategic planning process, to fundamentally strengthen strategic planning in Irish HE.

Higher education managers also have a role to play in enhancing and strengthening employee contribution throughout the strategic planning process. Senior managers work closely with their organisations' employees and, therefore, are familiar with employees' skillsets, experiences, and workload. It is recommended, therefore, that senior managers more effectively leverage the skillsets and attributes of employees to progress the strategic priorities. Senior managers need to establish processes and systems with the intention of more effectively securing the commitment and enthusiasm of employees to their organisation's strategic plan. Establishing strategic planning as an opportunity for continued professional development within the institute, arguably, could contribute to significantly increasing employee involvement, and to cultivating a high-level of strategic planning skills

and expertise among employees. Managers, essentially, need to play a stronger role in creating an environment and organisational culture whereby employees are actively, and productively, involved throughout the entire strategic planning process.

In addition to highlighting some recommendations for practice, this study also presents some key policy recommendations for HE in Ireland. The following section outlines the pertinent recommendations for policy to emerge from this study.

## 5.6 Recommendations for Policy

The findings of this research demonstrate that HE policy, in recent years, created with the intention of reforming Ireland's HE sector, and reducing HE expenditure, has instigated several negative developments within in Irish HEIs, most notably, the public sector.

It is recommended, therefore, that HE policy-makers thoroughly examine the implications that their most recent policies have created in Irish HEIs. In recent years, policies such as The Croke Park Agreements and the ECF have considerably impinged upon public sector managers' levels of flexibility, autonomy, and trust, and as a consequence, have created several pertinent internal challenges for public sector institutions. Higher education policy in Ireland needs to provide managers with the capacity to build and create institutions which are capable of bolstering and stimulating Ireland's economic and social development. Higher education policy-makers, therefore, need to revisit aspects of policy that, in particular, infringe on managers' autonomy, and consequently, managers' ability to make strategically important decisions for their organisations. The growth and prosperity of Ireland's economic and social development is integrally linked to the performance of Ireland's HEIs – it is, therefore, imperative for HE policy to support managers to make strategically important decisions for their organisations.

Moreover, HE policy must reflect the ambitions and vision that the government have communicated for Ireland's HE system. It is insufficient for reports and recommendations to outline the government's vision and ambitions for the direction of Ireland's HE system, if HE policy does not facilitate managers to contribute to, and thereby realise, this vision. Currently, HE policy is overly-focused on generating savings and synergies. Policy which, in particular, empowers organisations and managers to address internal challenges, such as low employee morale, the current academic contract, and increased workloads would significantly assist managers to achieve their priorities, and contribute to the government's vision for Ireland's HE system.

Finally, while government policy, designed to reduce expenditure in Irish HE is reasonable, considering Ireland's particular economic circumstance in recent years, the findings recommend that policy-makers ease the financial constraints on Irish HEIs, particularly as Ireland's economy is indicating positive signs of growth. Policy aimed at easing austerity measures would encourage a less zealous focus on operational activities within HEIs and, instead, permit managers to focus on progressive, and considerably more challenging, priorities. It is recommended, therefore, that higher education policy apply less emphasis on austerity-centred policy, and focus on policy which provides a comprehensive pathway for developing a sustainable, competitive, and effective HE system.

A number of recommendations have been made for future research, practice, and policy. There were also several limitations to this study which need to be considered. The following section details these limitations.

## 5.7 Limitations of the Study

Although the findings of this research have contributed to the existing knowledge on the factors influencing the strategic priorities of senior managers in Ireland's public and private higher education institutions, there are some limitations to this study which should be taken into consideration. Considering that this research juxtaposes the experiences of public and private sector higher education managers, a limitation existed in identifying and accessing individuals that held the equivalent or similar levels of seniority and responsibility across both sectors. There are several different management structures across Ireland's higher education system, and within each sector, a variety of senior management positions also exist. In the institute of technology sector, for example, the most senior academic manager, of relevance for this study, held one of two titles: Head of Faculty or Head of School. In the university sector, relevant academic senior managers typically held the title Dean of College.

It was more challenging to identify the appropriate individuals to interview in the private higher education sector, as their respective organisational structures were less visible and publicly available. Only two of the individuals interviewed in the private sector held the same title and those managers were from the same organisation. In one instance, a private college's president was identified as the most appropriate to interview because he met the researcher's interview criteria. This limitation was, however, discussed at the outset of this research and it was decided that, because of the nature of higher education institutions the

titles, roles, and responsibilities of senior managers are likely to vary, therefore, an allowance for such variations was made.

The second limitation relates to securing two interviewees per higher education institution in the relevant faculties or colleges. The researcher attempted to interview two senior managers in each of Ireland's QQI accredited higher education institutions. This, however, was not always possible due to the workload of senior managers and the unique management structures of some institutions. In the private sector, for example, it was at times more appropriate to interview just one person because there were no other individuals who matched the researcher's interview criteria.

A further limitation of the research relates to the outcomes of the findings, which are predominantly positioned within the public HE sector. Although the key aim of this research was to understand what factors influence the strategic priorities of Ireland's public and private sector managers, the primary findings to emerge from this study have perhaps more relevance for public sector managers, and for key stakeholders concerned with public sector higher education.

Finally, the existing literature on strategic planning and priorities in Ireland's higher education institutions is very sparse. It was difficult to find academic papers and literature on strategic planning in Ireland, and even more difficult to source extant literature on Ireland's private higher education sector. The lack of available literature made it challenging to provide a detailed account of developments and challenges in Ireland's higher education system, but it also highlighted a substantial gap in the literature to validate the current study. These limitations were outlined earlier and where gaps in the literature existed, the researcher overcame this challenge by presenting a global perspective on the factors that are influencing higher education systems.

## 5.8 Overall Contribution to Knowledge

A number of contributions materialised from the primary findings of this research, which have relevance for academia, policy, and practice. The findings contribute to a number of disciplines but are predominantly positioned within the field of higher education. From the empirical research conducted, a framework for the pursuit and attainment of ambitious strategic priorities was developed. The framework, positioned within the field of Irish HE strategic planning, constitutes a key theoretical contribution to knowledge to emerge from the

findings of this research. The framework can be utilised and applied by researchers in their own HE contexts and systems around the world, and in different economic climates.

First, the research captures an existing representation of strategic planning in Ireland's higher education institutions, therefore, advancing the existing body of social science literature on strategic planning in Ireland's higher education institutions. All public and private HEIs have strategic plans, however, the practice of strategic planning is strongly relied upon by senior managers to, in particular, most efficiently manage scarce funding and resources. Additionally, the overarching strategic priorities of Ireland's public and private sector managers are very similar, particularly because of the influence of the challenging domestic environment, and increased government involvement in Irish HE. This finding makes a theoretical contribution to HE strategic planning literature

The identified categorisation of HE influencing factors by senior managers, in order of their perceived importance, is a further theoretical contribution to knowledge to emerge from this study. Existing HE literature outlines the prevalence and influence of factors, such as globalisation, massification, and commercialisation within HE systems and institutions around the world. The findings of this study, however, demonstrate that a challenging domestic environment significantly diminishes the potential impact of global HE factors, which managers essentially perceive as less essential for their organisations' immediate existence. While factors, such as massification, technology, globalisation, and commercialisation are obviously present in Irish HE organisations, the primary factors that direct and influence managers' priorities are developments in the domestic environment. Managers believe that their organisations are competitively disadvantaged because they cannot keep pace with global trends, at the required and same levels as their competitors. From this perspective, because the influence of the domestic environment is particularly strong, Irish HEIs are partially isolated from trends and developments occurring, as suggested in the existing relevant literature, at a significant rate in HE systems around the world. This research, therefore, adds to the existing body of academic knowledge on HE strategic planning and, in particular, the development, and subsequent impact of, trends and developments occurring in managers' immediate and wider environments.

The findings, moreover, have implications for several HE stakeholders in Ireland, most notably, the HEA, which are leading and implementing significant reform in Irish higher education. Ireland's institutions need to be supported by HE policy to allow them to be

meaningfully influenced by progressive and important HE factors, such as technology, internationalisation, and competition. This finding makes a significant contribution, therefore, to HE policy in Ireland. To support the development of competitive HE institutions, the easing of austerity policies, a re-examination of the HE funding model and funding levels, and, for example, specific e-learning and internationalisation policies, therefore, are important policy considerations for those in senior leadership roles in Ireland.

The findings also present a practical contribution to knowledge with regard to developing future strategic plans. The implication is that senior managers can develop impactful strategies by placing less emphasis on operational activities and resource management, and instead, increase the emphasis on strategic and aspiring activities and projects. The research, therefore, provides a strong foundation for senior managers, and representative bodies, such as the Institutes of Technology Ireland, the Irish Universities Association, and Higher Education Colleges Association, to build support for developing a culture of distinctive, ambitious strategic planning within their sectors and institutions.

A further contribution to knowledge that this research demonstrates relates to the impact of Ireland's challenging domestic environment on the operations of higher education institutions. In particular, the negative and damaging effects of austerity and intensified government control and reform, on HE performance, were explored in great detail. From this perspective, the research is of significant relevance for several governmental bodies and departments, such as the Higher Education Authority, the Department of Education and Skills including the current Minister for Education and Skills, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Additionally, considering the important role that HE is required to fulfil in the advancement and specialisation of Ireland's economy, the findings are of relevance to the Department of Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation. The findings provide the aforementioned entities with a comprehensive body of research, to inform their future decisions and plans in relation to the development of Ireland's HE sector, and consequently, the continued growth and prosperity of Ireland, both socially and economically.

The phenomenon of strategic planning is often criticised for being ineffective, unattainable, and a management exercise. The criticisms of strategic planning, moreover, are widespread and not unique to the Irish higher education sector. Critics of strategic planning argue that many strategic plans never realise their intended outcomes, and that strategic plans are often a marketing tool, or a philosophical indulgence for organisations. In this study, however, it is

evident that higher education organisations with strong enablers in their environments are considerably more adept at accomplishing priorities. The findings of this research, in pursuit of best practice, propose a means by which to strengthen the discipline of strategic planning. This research hypothesises a pathway for the optimum implementation and accomplishment of strategic plans, particularly in Ireland's current higher education landscape. Specifically, the research indicates that the gap between outlining and implementing ambitious strategic priorities is significantly bridged by creating five particular enablers within organisations' operating environments.

This finding has significance for HE practitioners, particularly senior managers, both at faculty/college level, and at a senior leadership level who can publicise enablers, and thereby, build the support their organisations' require to deliver robust and rewarding strategic plans. Best practice within the domain of higher education, therefore, includes the recognition and creation of enablers, by key HE stakeholders, as part of the strategic planning process. The proposed enablers, for maximising the accomplishment of ambitious priorities, can also be applied to Ireland's higher education institutions in more favourable economic periods, in other countries, and in other sectors.

A further tenet of this particular finding, and a practical contribution to knowledge, relates to the role of people, or key stakeholders, throughout an HE organisation's strategic priority process. The findings suggest that the successful encompassment of enablers to the strategic priority process is critically dependent on the individual and collective roles of key stakeholders. In this chapter, four of the five enablers identified, are directly connected to the roles performed by key HE stakeholders, such as senior managers, the government, shareholders, and employees. Organisations which are particularly skilled at implementing strategic plans are facilitated by an organisational culture which supports key stakeholders to perform their roles and, therefore, optimally contribute to their organisations' strategic plans. This finding, therefore, presents an important practical contribution to knowledge, with regard to designing an operating culture to facilitate HE stakeholders, both within individual institutions and in the wider Irish HE environment. While designing an optimal culture for strategic planning is undoubtedly challenging, the research advocates the redesign of public sector academic contracts, and the easing of restrictive and austere public sector policies as an important starting point. Finally, the findings, therefore, have implications for several HE bodies, such as the HEA, educational policy-makers, and trade unions, particularly, The Teachers Union of Ireland, The Irish Federation of University Teachers, and The Services,

Industrial, Professional and Technical Union particularly. These particular interest groups, as a result of this research, now have an established base from which to engage in progressive, collaborative discussions, designed to strengthen the discipline of strategic planning in Irish institutions, and ultimately, the performance of Irish HE.

Overall, the findings advance the current literature on HE in Ireland, and Irish HE strategic planning. Specifically, the findings also make a theoretical contribution to the existing literature on HE strategic planning globally. Moreover, the research highlights particular gaps in Irish HE policy, and, makes critical suggestions for HE parties involved in the future planning and development of Irish higher education policy. Finally, the findings of this study make several practical contributions to knowledge which are of particular interest to public and private HE managers in Ireland, particularly for implementing strategic planning best practice.

## 5.9 Overall Conclusion

The importance of higher education in relation to underpinning and driving economic and social development has been widely and intensively discussed in recent decades. Higher education institutions are perceived as important catalysts for change by governments, society, and industry. In Ireland, against a significant economically challenging background, emphasis has been placed on higher education institutions to alleviate critical unemployment levels, satisfy industry demands, create an innovative society, and maintain academic excellence. Coupled with this, existing global higher education literature indicates that higher education is experiencing profound changes as a result of the development and influence of factors, such as commercialisation, globalisation, massification, competition, and technology. This research aimed to precisely uncover what are the factors influencing the strategic priorities of public and private sector senior managers in Ireland.

This research demonstrates that, in recent years, the turbulent economic environment has captured managers' attentions and focus with economic and political developments largely dictating managers' selection of priorities, and, in turn, prioritising and attaining these priorities. Importantly, this research suggests that higher education trends and developments occurring outside of Ireland have significantly less relevance for HE managers, particularly when implementing, and attempting to accomplish, their strategic plans and priorities. This research, therefore, is in contrast to the existing relevant HE literature, which maintains that

global HE factors are significantly influencing the operations and directions of HEIs and HE systems around the world.

Through the development of a framework, this research emphasises five enablers, which assist managers to attain their organisations' ambitious priorities, namely: flexibility, autonomy, and trust from the primary stakeholder; motivated and committed employees; expert strategic planning skills; strong government leadership and comprehensive HE policy and; increased funding and appropriate funding models. Specifically, this research demonstrates that strategic priorities are significantly more attainable if they are comprehensively supported and facilitated by key stakeholders in managers' environments.

This research, and, in particular, the model, which emerged from the research, has important implications for Ireland's HE sector, as it illuminates a number of salient issues in relation to factors which contribute to suboptimal strategic planning. As a result of this research and the developed model and framework, therefore, higher education managers and their organisations should be better equipped to engage in impactful strategic planning.

The Irish government, through agencies such as the HEA, advocate the creation and development of a HE system synonymous with 'strength and excellence'. In practice, however, this research reveals that the Irish HE system is falling short of achieving this vision. Moreover, the Irish HE system faces extensive challenges in achieving this vision in the immediate future, particularly considering managers' anxieties in relation to upholding intrinsic aspects of their organisations. Developing a high performing HE system is largely impeded by government actions and decisions, in recent years. Public sector managers are inhibited by issues which, paradoxically, primarily stem from policies and agreements created by successive governments. This situation is further intensified for organisations, particularly in the university sector, which are competing internationally for students, funding, rankings, and staff.

A primary conclusion from this research reveals that the fundamental challenge for senior managers is that the Irish government's policies are not reflective of the contemporary demands and expectations placed upon higher education institutions. The perceived increase in government involvement in Irish HE, is largely unwelcomed by senior managers, particularly because it contributes to a superfluously complex environment, in which managers must make critical decisions. In this context, this research synthesises best practice

for developing public sector policy designed to support the discipline of strategic planning within HE.

The practice of strategic planning in Irish higher education is utilised by managers and their organisations, in part, as a resource allocation tool. This research suggests that strategic planning is predominantly approached, by managers, from the perspective of how it can assist them to distribute resources and finances to the disciplines and projects, which they perceive as, most immediate. Strategic planning in Irish HEIs, therefore, is not achieving its potential impact. If harnessed appropriately, strategic planning in Irish HEIs could be effectively leveraged to emphasise organisations' key strengths and capabilities, and to strategically position organisations in a highly competitive, internationalised future environment.

Overall, this research suggests that an economic recovery, and subsequent increase in funding, would considerably assist managers to implement impactful strategic plans. There are promising signs that the Irish economy is growing, which make it a critical and opportune time to examine and address the key impediments to successful strategic planning, identified through this study, public policy issues, in particular.

Finally, this research establishes the impetus, and an important foundation, for HE senior managers, primary stakeholders, and HE policy-makers, in particular, to engage in meaningful consultation, planning and strategizing for Irish higher education. Therefore, the potential exists to secure the development of a prosperous and sustainable Irish higher education system.

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# Appendix A

**Interview Guide**

1. Do you have a strategic plan for your organisation?
2. If yes, what are the priorities of your current plan?
3. If no, how do you arrive at your strategy?
4. What steps are taken to ensure you address the priorities for your organisation?
5. What difficulties do you encounter when addressing these priorities?
6. Do you believe your organisation has set the correct priorities?
7. What are the key drivers of your strategic priorities?
8. What role does the internal environment play in the formation and pursuit of your organisation's key strategic priorities?
9. On the other hand, what role does the external environment play?
10. What global higher education trends or developments have an impact on your organisation's strategic plan?
11. What main strategy documents influence your organisation?
12. Specifically can you give some examples of how these documents have had an influence on your organisation's priorities?
13. How do the strategic decisions and priorities that you pursue impact the day-to-day operations of your organisation?
14. Are there any improvements as a result of pursuing your strategic objectives?
15. Can you outline the difficulties or challenges encountered while pursuing your strategic objectives?
16. How is your organisation coping in the current environment?
17. What does it take for your organisation to achieve its strategic objectives in this current environment?
18. Before finishing the interview and after all we have discussed, is there anything you would like to add?

# Appendix B

**Email Request Sent to Interview Respondents**

Dear <u>**name of identified interview respondent**</u> **,**

I am a PhD student in Cork Institute of Technology's Department of Management and Enterprise, my research is supervised by Dr Margaret Linehan and Rose Leahy.

My main area of research is higher education, and in particular, I am investigating the strategic priorities of public and private higher education institutions in Ireland. I am examining the factors that influence a higher education organisation's strategic priorities.

I am just beginning to collect my empirical data, which will take the form of in-depth interviews. I wish to interview the Head of Faculty or School (depending on the terminology used by your individual institution) for <u>**name of institution**</u> two biggest undergraduate Faculties or Colleges. In your role as Head of the <u>**name of Faculty/School/College**</u>, I believe you would make a valuable contribution to my research findings.

I will be following my institution's ethical guidelines on conducting qualitative research and all interviews will be strictly confidential. The interview should take approximately forty five minutes.

I would be grateful if we could schedule an interview. If you are willing to participate, can you please let me know a suitable time for the interview?

I can send you the interview guide in advance if you so wish.

Kind regards,

Ruth O'Donnell

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