

AN ERA OF AUSTERITY? IRISH UNIVERSITIES AND THE INDEPENDENT STATE, 1932-45

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The policy of the newly independent Irish state towards university education during the interwar period and the second world war amounted to little more than benign neglect. Higher education was peripheral to the worldview of policymakers preoccupied with state formation, assertion of national sovereignty and economic nationalism. This was not simply due to fiscal constraints or even a failure of imagination by political and administrative elites. The parsimonious financing regime reflected the peripheral status of university education in political and official discourse and the absence of a public debate on the place of universities in society. A traditional societal and cultural context militated against investment in higher education, which was identified with academic education for the professions and high-status white-collar occupations. It was no accident that higher education remained both underdeveloped and university dominated well into the middle of twentieth century. A powerful administrative elite was overtly hostile to public funding of higher education, regarding spending on the universities as a luxury benefiting only a small minority, many of whom were likely to be lost to Ireland through emigration. University education featured hardly at all in a dominant national discourse marked by integralist Catholicism, laissez-faire economics and social conservatism.

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