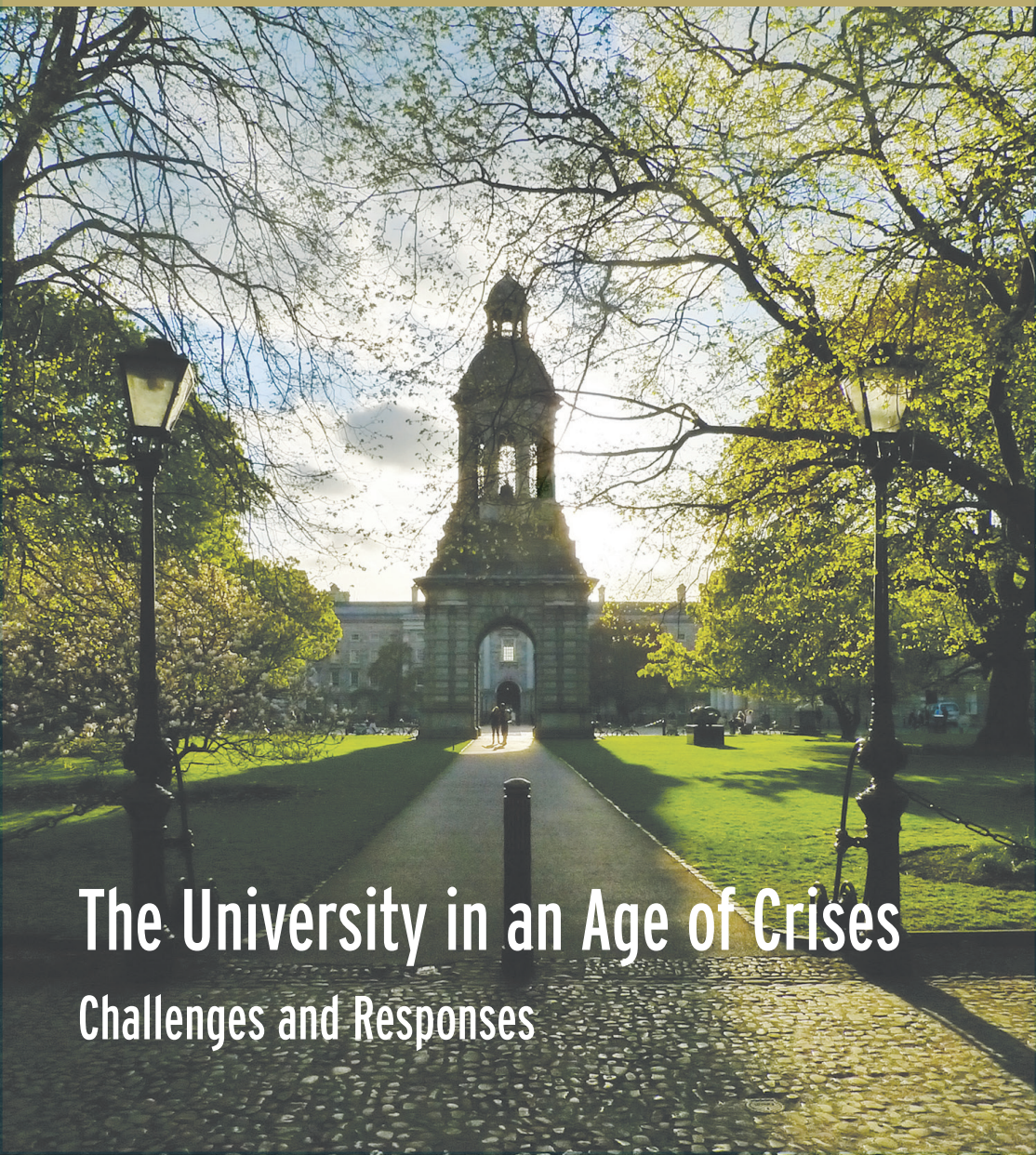


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Academic Capture: Investigating Industry Funding of Higher Education in Ireland

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Industry funding of universities in Ireland has become a normalised and incentivised feature of the Irish higher education system. The Irish government's higher education policies have actively sought to promote collaboration with industry. In response, higher education institutions have begun scaling up their efforts to attract industry funding and expand engagement with the private sector. Corporations have also been strategically increasing efforts to partner with universities, citing multiple motivations for funding universities including workforce development, research commercialisation, technological innovation, and branding opportunities. This market-oriented shift raises legitimate concerns about the role of higher education in Ireland and the integrity of academic research and teaching in service of the public good.

The role of corporations in shaping higher education has received limited attention in public debates in Ireland. While some critical analysis on the topic exists,¹ the scale of the impact of corporations on university campuses, research, and curricula has been largely overlooked or downplayed. International experience tells us, however, that powerful corporate actors play a significant role in shaping higher education agendas – both within specific institutions and by influencing national research priorities.² Against this backdrop, this article aims to shine a light on how similar processes are taking shape in the shadows of the latest wave of market-oriented restructuring in Ireland's higher education landscape.

There is a need for the academic community, policymakers, and wider society to ask serious questions – and demand serious answers – about 'academic capture' and the (re)direction of teaching and research agendas towards commercial objectives. How can the academic community or public be certain that industry funding does not inadvertently or deliberately bias research to benefit industry outcomes? How exactly does non-commercial, but nevertheless vital, areas like the social sciences and humanities fit into

Ireland's new market-oriented approach? How, and to what extent, have the advocates of market-driven restructuring of higher education considered in their reorganisation efforts the harms of corporate influence, including climate obstruction, greenwashing, and the erosion of civic education for a common good mission? The answers to these questions remain unclear, so more critical assessment and research in this area would be valuable.

In this article, we examine these under-investigated issues, highlighting how industry funding creates fertile ground for the academic capture of higher education research, teaching, and engagement in Ireland. We explore the connection between industry funding and the concept of academic capture in an international context. We then assess the current state of industry funding in Ireland, focusing on the levels of transparency in relation to corporate funding. And then we discuss several specific cases that demonstrate the risks of academic capture, including Irish universities being used to legitimise corporate greenwashing.

The global landscape of university funding and 'academic capture'

Financial challenges in higher education systems around the world make universities increasingly reliant on private funding beyond that provided by the state. For example, over the last decade the US government has cut funding for higher education by billions of dollars, driving (controversial) private donations that have created conflict over the integrity, direction, and independence of academic research in its higher education landscape. The Trump administration's recent mass federal funding cuts to higher education reflect the legacy of US universities being vulnerable to influence based on funding; financial support is used to control higher education institutions and promote research in some areas and constrain research in other areas. The financial precarity makes it difficult for higher education institutions to reject offers of industry funding. Commercialisation and industry collaboration have become normalised and mainstreamed as a central part of the global higher education landscape.

One illustrative example demonstrating the societal risks of corporate capture of universities is the scale and scope of fossil fuel industry funding of universities in many countries, including Canada, the UK, the US, and Australia. Oil and gas companies are major financial contributors to universities and have funnelled more than \$700 million into climate-related research partnerships with leading US higher education institutions from

2010–2020.³ Investigate Europe found that leading universities in the EU have accepted at least €260 million from fossil fuel and mining companies since 2016, with investment targeting higher education institutions with net zero targets and commitments to fossil fuel divestment.⁴ The scale and nature of these investments make universities susceptible to academic ‘capture’.

The term ‘capture’ is used in social science and humanities scholarship to describe the situation in which powerful minority interests, such as corporations, divert or influence the original goals of public institutions or initiatives for their own gain. In economic literature, ‘regulatory capture’ describes how governing bodies become influenced by powerful corporate interests, resulting in preferential treatment or lax regulatory scrutiny of corporate entities. According to ‘big business capture’ scholarship, corporate capture emerges, in large part, because corporations are among the most powerful, well-organised, and well-funded interest groups in the world. Building on this scholarship, the concept of ‘academic capture’ emphasises the influence that elite groups, corporations, and private sector industries can have on the production of knowledge and how the higher education sector is susceptible.

Scholarship on academic capture highlights the need to pay attention to industry funding in higher education and the various ethical dilemmas it raises for research and the common good. In a review of fossil fuel industries’ links to higher education in the US, UK, Canada and Australia, it was found that fossil fuel companies predominately fund university research on fossil fuel-friendly approaches and technologies to address the climate crisis, such as carbon capture and storage.⁵ In addition to legitimising fossil fuel-friendly technologies in public discourse and public policy, this funding also detracts attention and investment away from other research on more transformative non-fossil futures. Other research highlights how fossil fuel-funded university research tends to draw conclusions that are more favourable to the oil and gas sector’s interests and are less likely to explicitly acknowledge funding partners in recommendations and reports. An investigation of publications from fossil fuel-funded energy research centres from Rice University and Oxford University found that 90% of their eighty-four publications covered topics such as financial markets, geopolitics, and security, while less than 1% were on renewable energy.⁶ This demonstrates the impact of corporate influence over academic research agendas and the proliferation of fossil fuel-based knowledge production in universities.

These examples point to how fossil fuel corporations are implementing the same tactics used by the sugar industry in the 1950s and tobacco industry in the 1980s. The strategic investment of funds to support university-based scientists and research centres is explicitly intended to ‘enlist their support and dependence’ and enhance their own profit-seeking objectives and survival in the face of regulatory threats.⁷ A US House and Senate Committee report in 2018 revealed the explicit strategies of the supermajor oil and gas corporation BP to fund \$1.1 million in white papers at elite higher education institutions.⁸ The committee exposed how BP intentionally funded universities to ‘enhance their credibility, shape academic research programs to provide studies supportive of a prolonged life for oil and gas, leverage the resulting research to their advantage, and bolster access to policymakers’. These are real, documented cases of the power of the fossil fuel industry in academia. The fossil fuel industry’s capture of university research agendas and knowledge production allows corporations to leverage the legitimacy academia lends to their ‘green’ research to strengthen their political power and maximise continued profit-seeking.

State of play of industry funding in Ireland

Consistent with international trends, the industry funding of higher education institutions in Ireland has emerged against the backdrop of stressed university finances caused by persistent constraints of public funding. Core public funding within the higher education sector reduced by 50% between 2008 and 2019, resulting in an annual shortfall of €307 million.⁹ This long-standing funding deficit has had significant impacts on higher education institutions, including their core operations, research and staffing, which have been continuously under-resourced. One outcome of this funding gap is that universities have become increasingly marketised in their organisational and governance strategies, which reinforces the decline of public funding in the sector over time. Another outcome has been increased competition among higher education institutions as they all are pressured to seek alternative sources of revenue.

The Irish government has made deliberate policy reforms to encourage industry funding and corporate partnerships in universities. For example, industry partnerships have been foundational in creation of Ireland’s technological university (TU) landscape. TU funding often hinges on joint ventures between the so-called ‘Triple Helix’ of the state, industry,

and academic institutions. The 2022 Higher Education Authority Act also increased government oversight of how individual universities were managed, including allowing public funding to be withheld if specific performance metrics, including research income per academic staff and the number of university spin-out companies, were not achieved. These regulatory reforms of 2022 have placed additional incentives for academics to pursue commercial partnerships and seek external private sector funding.

Indeed, insufficient public funding in academia has coincided with increases in private funding. Consider that between 2007 and 2017 research income received by the private sector increased by 40% in real terms.¹⁰ The government has further intentions to double private funding by 2030.¹¹

Another challenge of industry funding is that it is not evenly distributed among disciplines or among the different higher education institutions across Ireland. In 2018, the largest proportion of industry-funded research in Ireland went to health, engineering, technology and natural sciences, at €39.6 million, compared to €400,000 of industry-funded research in the humanities. By 2020, the humanities' share of industry-funded research was reduced to half, at €200,000, while industry funding for research in health, engineering, technology and natural sciences remained dominant at €39.1 million.¹² If industry funding is to play a central role in higher education but continues to exclude disciplines that are not perceived as having commercial value, the quality and breadth of academic offerings may decline. This bias toward profit-seeking academic endeavours is a direct conflict with higher education's mission to serve the public good.

Recognising the need for exploration of the scale and scope of private funding within Irish universities, we conducted research to assess the landscape. The result of our study highlights a lack of comprehensive, publicly accessible data on industry funding within Irish higher education.¹³ We found the data to be scattered and incomplete. Where data is available, it is often assessed purely in terms of research income and excludes other aspects of industry funding, including professorships, support for PhD researchers, infrastructure, and donations. Our assessment identified an increasing trend of industry-sponsored professorships and lectureships in key public policy areas related to climate change and technology over the past five years. These trends suggest that as annual shortfalls in core funding and staffing continue, we can expect industry funding to increase within the academy.

We reviewed data from both the Higher Education Authority and

Knowledge Transfer Ireland's (KTI) Annual Knowledge Transfer Survey. These two sources provide the most comprehensive data on industry funding of universities in Ireland, but even these lack granularity on the types of industries and organisations and forms of investment. The lack of data makes it difficult to determine the motives behind the private sector funding, as well as who benefits or who is excluded from such funding. There is scarce information on the distribution of private funding across institutions, disciplines, and programmes, nor is there data regarding the geography or gender dimensions of funding. In addition, there is little to no specific information disclosed on private funding for scholarships, equipment, infrastructure, or staffing. Direct donations and contributions to endowments are often accounted for separately from industry funding for research income, so this makes the industry funding landscape even more unclear.

What is more concerning is that some within the sector refuse to acknowledge the existence of data gaps. For instance, in response to an *Irish Times* article on the role of corporate influence in higher education, a representative of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) claimed that all IUA member universities openly report their research projects:

At any one time, there are a myriad of research projects at various stages of operation. If you look at, for instance, the University of Galway's Combustion Chemistry Centre, you will see the details of the project, including the commercial partners involved in supporting it.¹⁴

This statement is misleading for a several reasons. First, while industry-funded projects may disclose their funding sources in publication, such acknowledgments are often buried in the endnotes or declarations. Expecting the general public to search through academic articles to identify funders is not meaningful transparency – this is disclosure in fine print. Second, the issue of industry funding extends well beyond individual research projects. It includes funding for academic staff, university infrastructure, scholarships and bursaries, and course programming. Third, the sector prioritises 'commercial sensitivity' over public disclosure, which allows industry funding in public research centres to remain anonymous. Consider Science Foundation Ireland's 'Guidance for an Industry Partner':

SFI is aware that some industry partners do not want the general public to be aware of their involvement with a research centre. If this is the case, the industry partner needs to inform the research

centre that the company should be marked as confidential, when reporting to SFI.¹⁵

The facilitation of anonymity in the public university system in Ireland, alongside an inadequate and fragmented public data system, makes it difficult to empirically analyse and assess the full extent and potential impacts of industry funding. Transparency and scrutiny of private funding in other areas of the public sector are widely accepted norms, particularly for political parties and elections in Ireland. As with other forms of dissemination in the public interest, such as journalism, objections around ‘commercial sensitivity’ should be scrutinised to a higher degree to ensure these are qualified objections and adequately demonstrate how the case of commercial sensitivity would outweigh the public-good benefits of its disclosure on a case-by-case basis. These should be in line with academic principles of integrity, transparency, openness, and the public-good mission, rather than weighted towards traditionally accepted industry practice. The risks of overdue influence from private and corporate funding in Irish elections are so acutely acknowledged that there are strict governance and regulations in place to ensure public transparency and to limit the amount of donations that can be made. Higher education is also part of the public sector, so university funding should be treated similarly. Our research suggests that there should be more transparency regarding private funders, and a higher level of scrutiny and governance over funding amounts is necessary.

Academic capture and greenwashing in Irish higher education institutions

Without transparency and comprehensive data, both the Irish public and academic communities within Ireland are expected to trust uncritically the scale and scope of industry funding in higher education. Yet, high-profile incidences of corporate funding paint an alarming picture of the creeping nature of academic capture in Ireland. Although Ireland is not a fossil fuel-producing country, Ireland has not been immune from fossil fuel-funding influence in academia. In 2018, for example, it was revealed that six members of Trinity College Dublin’s (TCD) Board of Trustees were involved in oil and gas companies, at a time when details of Trinity’s \$60 million in donations from fossil fuels was emerging. In addition, TCD’s institutional investments hold shares in fossil fuel companies worth over €8 million, despite the university’s 2016 commitment to divest from fossil fuels.¹⁶

Another example is University College Dublin (UCD), where between 2012 and 2017 the university accepted €2 million from Tullow Oil for a research and legacy agreement. Tullow Oil funded one professor and two lecturing posts in petroleum geoscience at UCD, while UCD agreed to deliver ‘educational courses’ to government officials and academics within countries where Tullow Oil drilled.¹⁷ This controversial funding relationship was exposed by a Freedom of Information (FOI) request on behalf of Green Party councillor Séafra Ó Faoláin. The request followed UCD’s rejection of a previous request for information on fossil fuel funding in 2017.

Behind these developments lies an ongoing relationship between UCD and Tullow Oil, where Tullow Oil’s CEO at the time, Aidan Heavy, had previously been a member of the UCD Graduate Business School’s advisory board. Tullow Oil contributed in various other ways, such as donations to the building of the UCD O’Brien Centre for Science and funding UCD geology research, including fault analysis research that ‘would have a major impact on Tullow Oil’s prospects and assets’.¹⁸ These deep links between fossil fuel companies and some of Ireland’s leading universities have not been subject to sustained investigation in the academic literature. Yet the pattern of investments and research influence, alongside questions of transparency, demonstrate academic capture in Irish higher education institutions.

These incidences are not isolated, and examples from other industries suggest a wide terrain of corporate influence within Irish academia. An important piece of investigative journalism published by DeSmog in 2024 mapped Ireland’s powerful meat and dairy lobby, classifying the network and influence as a form ‘regulatory capture’ by the agricultural industry. They cite the industry’s longstanding partnerships with Irish universities as part of its policy influence network.¹⁹

Consider also our policy paper on industry funding in Irish higher education, which identifies corporate greenwashing as a serious risk within higher education institutions. Among the examples we focus on is the recently appointed professorial CRH Chair of Climate Science at TCD. The cement and materials company, CRH, is one of the largest polluters in the country, and provided €1.7 million for a prestigious climate science position over a ten-year period.²⁰ Although TCD has stated that CRH has no influence over research activities, outputs, or teaching, the reputational gains and marketing benefits that CRH gets from being associated with this TCD climate science professorship is an explicit form of greenwashing and an intentional marketing

sponsorship. As with corporate sponsorships of any kind, this branding aims to foster a positive association with CRH in the public domain. It implies that climate science is consistent with CRH's environmentally destructive activities. This not only compromises academic independence by obscuring the ethical tension of having climate science visibly linked to a company that profits from carbon-intensive industries, but also this sponsorship does nothing to reduce CRH's real-world emissions.

Another high-profile example of greenwashing and academic capture in Ireland is the Ryanair Sustainable Aviation Research Centre at TCD. Ryanair donated €1.5 million in April 2021, with an additional €2.5 million in 2024, to fund research on sustainable aviation fuels, zero carbon propulsion systems, and noise mapping.²¹ In 2019, the company was identified as Europe's tenth most polluting business, and the corporation has since expanded their operations. Ryanair's lucrative funding partnership with TCD for sustainability research is problematic on this level alone, but compounding the issue is Ryanair's CEO, who has publicly renounced the viability of sustainable aviation fuels, suggesting that 'there isn't enough cooking oil in the world to power one day of green aviation.'²² In fact, the UK's Advertising Standards Authority has already reprimanded Ryanair for greenwashing over the company's use of insubstantial environmental claims in its advertising that intentionally confused and mislead the public. Additionally, Ryanair has invested heavily in lobbying against environmental regulations in the aviation industry, pointing to a concerning pattern of climate obstructionism, which refers to the refusal or failure to act on climate change.

Highly visible sponsorship, research influence, and conflicting corporate priorities and practices are clearly acts of greenwashing, climate obstructionism and academic capture in Ireland by some of the world's most powerful corporate actors. While some senior figures, such as the former dean of UCD's Smurfit Business School and former president of the University of Galway Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh, claim that 'no one from the business community ever made an effort to intervene in the subjects taught or in the composition of the courses,'²³ the examples we outline above suggest otherwise. We must judge the higher education sector by its actions, not just its statements. Because governance and decision-making processes within Irish universities are clearly insufficient for safeguarding against these problematic instances of academic capture, Irish universities are becoming increasingly complicit in perpetuating corporate greenwashing. To change this, a restructuring of the

funding of Ireland's higher education system is needed. Due to government national priorities, statutory authority performance metrics, and inadequate public funding, it seems clear that this restructuring cannot be done within individual higher education institutions, but a system-wide shift is needed. To preserve the public-good mission of Irish universities and prevent continued or expanded academic capture, policymakers must reassess and transform current approaches to funding higher education.

Conclusion

Academic capture is a pressing international issue that warrants further critical attention in Ireland. In this article, we reflect on the explicit dangers of corporate capture of higher education and investigate Ireland's vulnerabilities to capture within this wider context. These risks include the redirection of funding and research priorities towards projects and teaching that provide commercial value at the expense of longer-term or non-commercial research, and the real threat of obstruction, bias, and greenwashing by corporations through academic research and institutions. An overall lack of transparency and public investigation into industry funding, both internationally and in Ireland, downplays the potential severity of academic capture in public debates. This knowledge gap is situated in a policy environment that incentivises greater levels of industry funding in universities, while public funding remains constrained. Despite the dearth of data and minimal exploration of industry funding in Irish universities, multiple problematic examples of Irish academic ties with fossil fuel industries and research centre partnerships with polluting corporations that intimate greenwashing and climate obstruction are exposed. Further research into industry funding in higher education institutions is essential to critically assess and mitigate against academic capture in Ireland.

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