

# Nation building, Gaelicisation and the National University of Ireland, 1908-45

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## Abstract

Nation building both before and after the creation of the independent Irish State influenced the foundation and evolution of the National University of Ireland, which was positioned as crucial to the achievement of Catholic and nationalist objectives early in the twentieth century. This study illustrates the frequently significant tensions between Catholic and cultural nationalist narratives early in the lifetime of the university and the extent to which competing narratives around language, religion, and autonomous academic governance influenced the subsequent evolution of the NUI. University leaders adopted pragmatic, incremental responses to political and popular pressure for Gaelicisation under the Irish Free State, acting to safeguard institutional autonomy and the interests of the university while adapting to political and official demands. This unsentimental, pragmatic institutional response to Gaelicisation ultimately provoked significant conflict with cultural nationalist organisations, not least because the academic elite within the NUI successfully resisted the more transformative demands of the cultural nationalist movement.

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## Introduction

Nation building even before the foundation of the self-governing Irish state in 1922 was integral to the creation of the federal National University of Ireland (NUI) in 1908-09 as an institution designed to express Irish nationalist aspirations and serve as a vehicle for the ambitions of an increasingly influential Catholic middle class. The new university from the outset was the focus of determined efforts by cultural nationalists to revive the Irish language and mould the development of the university as a nationalist institution, giving essential support for a far-reaching Gaelicisation of Irish society and culture. The creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 gave a compelling official imprimatur to Gaelicisation, as Tom Walsh (2024, p. 125) notes, 'The quest to revive the language, traditions and culture of Ireland became central to nation building and to assert a distinct Irish identity, which was seen as central to the very legitimacy of the fledgling Free State.' Yet wide divergences between political leaders, academics, and Irish language activists emerged over the extent to which the university should be transformed to facilitate the national imperative of reviving the Irish language. While the academic elites within the NUI had their own differences in relation to the place of Irish language, academic leaders usually displayed a pragmatic and selective engagement with the

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national crusade for Gaelicisation, which infuriated passionate advocates of language revival and ultimately led to significant conflict between the leadership of the National University and the cultural nationalist movement.

This paper explores the influence of cultural nationalism on the National University of Ireland in the period from its foundation through the first generation of the independent Irish state. The study illustrates the frequently significant tensions between Catholic and cultural nationalist narratives early in the lifetime of the NUI and the extent to which competing imperatives around language, religion, and autonomous academic governance influenced the evolution of the NUI between 1908 and 1945. The foundation of the Irish Free State created strong political pressures on academic elites to transform the university in support of the national mission of language revival. While the colleges of the NUI evolved their own distinctive responses to the crusade for Gaelicisation within the new Irish state, academic elites consistently resisted external pressures to influence academic appointments and proved effective in limiting the influence of cultural nationalism on the internal workings of the university.

### Solving the 'Irish University Question'

University education in early twentieth-century Ireland was a battleground defined by wider political and religious forces. Ireland was a divided society due to the legacy of colonisation and penal legislation since the Tudor period and the more recent polarisation between nationalist and unionist movements competing to determine its constitutional and socio-political status (Coolahan, 2017, Harford, 2008). The Ascendancy, the traditional Anglican ruling class originally favoured by the British state, saw a gradual erosion of its privileged position in the late nineteenth century, due to popular mobilisation by interrelated movements for land reform and constitutional nationalism, leading to reforms by both Liberal and Conservative governments. The struggle for home rule became a burning issue of contention in British politics, as the Liberal Party under Gladstone sought to embrace home rule, while Conservative leaders both fiercely resisted the undermining of the union and adopted 'constructive unionism' in seeking to defuse popular support for nationalist demands. In this context British political elites were usually fundamentally divided over the constitutional and political destiny of Ireland, but sometimes willing to collaborate on practical reforms, such as the Irish universities legislation in 1908, which inaugurated the National University of Ireland (Walsh, 2018).

Important ideological debates about the modern university emerged in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland, but their influence on the future form of Irish university education was more rhetorical than practical. John Henry Newman first enunciated a famous vision of liberal, academic university education in Dublin, through a series of lectures in 1852 entitled *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (Newman, 1852), which were delivered at the invitation of Paul Cullen, newly appointed archbishop and the leading exponent in Ireland of ultramontane Catholicism (Rigney, 1995). Newman offered an eloquent but contested vision of the university as 'a place of teaching universal knowledge', conceptualising the academy as a locus for intellectual formation and cultivation of knowledge for its own sake, in a direct challenge to influential secular and utilitarian ideas underpinning new forms of scientific, vocational and technical education (Newman, 1852, ix). While the Catholic bishops welcomed Newman's critique of secular higher education, Cullen and his

successors gave primacy not to the promotion of 'universal knowledge' but to the struggle for a distinctive Catholic university, which would be under ecclesiastical control or at the very least pervaded by Catholic cultural and religious values. While Newman became the first rector of the Catholic University in 1854, his term lasted barely four years, due mainly to fundamental differences with Cullen (Rigney, 1995). Newman's influence on most Irish Catholic lay and religious leaders would prove limited and superficial, not least due to the distinctive interplay between Irish Catholicism and nationalist aspirations. The fledgling Catholic University lacked a royal charter or any state support and was reconstituted by the bishops from 1882 as a loose constellation of colleges, of which the most significant was University College Dublin (UCD), administered by the Jesuits on behalf of the Irish hierarchy between 1883 and 1909 (Morrissey, 1983).

The creation of the National University of Ireland marked the resolution of the politically fraught 'Irish university question' which had defied various reform initiatives by British governments in an atmosphere of political and religious conflict (Harford, 2008). The all-Ireland Royal University was dissolved to facilitate two distinct universities, North and South: Queen's College, Belfast was reconstituted as a university in its own right and the National University of Ireland (NUI) was established as a federal institution, encompassing UCD, which began life as the Catholic university led by Newman in 1854, and the state sponsored Queen's Colleges in Cork and Galway (Walsh, 2022). The NUI was formally non-denominational but designed to offer higher education in a Catholic demographic and cultural setting (Harford, 2008). This solution, devised by the Liberal chief secretary, Augustine Birrell, in collaboration with Dr William Walsh, the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, met the long-term demand for a university which was acceptable to the bishops and leading lay Catholics, while protecting established institutions such as Trinity College Dublin (Walsh, 2022). The first NUI Senate was dominated by upper-middle-class Catholic professionals and included leaders of the Catholic church in Ireland, notably Walsh, Dr John Healy, archbishop of Tuam, and William Delany S.J., outgoing president of UCD. The establishment of the new university was widely perceived as a significant milestone in a struggle for equality for Catholics in higher education: it was understood alike by Birrell, the Catholic bishops who largely supported the NUI and unionist critics of the legislation, that the university would be permeated by Catholic values and would offer higher education to the increasingly influential Catholic middle class in an atmosphere and ethos which was acceptable to the bishops (Walsh, 2022). Walsh's unanimous selection as the first Chancellor of NUI highlighted wide acceptance of the predominantly Catholic identity of the new university (NUI Senate, 18 December 1908).

The emergence of the NUI redefined the form and structure of higher education in Ireland and created an embryonic but enduring university 'system' which persisted into the late twentieth century (Walsh, 2018). The title of the new university, which was successfully championed by William Walsh, reflected its 'national' credentials (Palles to Walsh, 1 December 1908, NUI 13 DDA), contrasting with the unionist orientation of Trinity College Dublin in the pre-independence period (Irish, 2015). The form of the new university was widely accepted by nationalist political elites in the new Irish Free State from 1922, not least because the NUI enjoyed the crucial imprimatur of the Catholic bishops. Yet the explicit identification of the NUI as a national institution that served Irish nationalist aspirations did not prevent sharp divisions among the leaders of the newly minted university on the extent to which they should embrace cultural and political nationalism and the balance that they might strike between religious interests, the Gaelic language, and autonomous university governance.

### Cultural Nationalism and the Triumph of 'Essential Irish'

The influence of cultural nationalism in the early 1900s proved particularly contentious within the NUI, and the place of the Gaelic language in the university emerged as an early point of conflict. The Coiste Gnótha (executive committee) of Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League) adopted six resolutions in May 1908, seeking university chairs in Irish and degrees in Celtic studies in each college; guarantees that new professors should be 'capable of imparting instruction through Irish' after a specified date and a requirement that Irish be made an essential subject for matriculation (Gaelic League, Dublin Diocesan Archive 375/1, 1908). While not all the executive committee's demands were controversial, their campaign for 'essential Irish' as a condition for entry triggered immediate conflict within the newly established university, and this dispute was fought out between different factions of the overwhelmingly Catholic and nationalist elite, which dominated the new university. The campaign for 'essential Irish' was championed within the Senate by Douglas Hyde, the founding president of Conradh na Gaeilge, and Eoin MacNeill, newly appointed professor of early Irish history in UCD (Maune & Edwards, 2013). Hyde presented a motion to the Senate on 27 July 1909 requiring that 'suitable proficiency in the Irish language and in the history of Ireland be required for all candidates for entrance...' (NUI Senate, 27 July 1909, 18). William Delany, originally a strong supporter of Conradh na Gaeilge, took the lead in opposing 'essential Irish' as 'injurious to religion,' because it would exclude Catholic students lacking a sufficient level in Irish (Morrissey, 1983). Two of the three university presidents were also opposed, and Bertram Windle, the president of University College Cork (UCC), was particularly critical of Conradh na Gaeilge:

...I am wholly opposed to compulsory Irish at matriculation and mean to fight that project for all I am worth. It would be bad for the University and utterly useless – if it's foolish promoters could only see beyond their noses – for the language movement (Windle to Walsh, 21 December 1908).

Windle not only condemned Conradh na Gaeilge's efforts to influence university policies but even accused the campaigners for compulsory Irish of undermining the NUI in favour of Trinity College and Queen's University Belfast, levelling the potent allegation that the NUI's essential mission to offer higher education to Catholics would be threatened:

I must say that I think all this trickery on the part of the Gaelic League is more than disgusting. They look upon the unfortunate University in no other light than as a thing which may be used to forward their narrow & selfish ends & to accomplish them they are ready to wreck the whole Higher Education of Catholics by driving boys & girls wholesale into Trinity & Belfast (Windle to Walsh, 15 July 1909, DDA NUI 7).

Windle, for good measure, expressed donnish indignation at the timing of the proposal when many academics were away - 'it was an abominable thing to bring on this motion during vacation time' (Windle to Walsh, 18 July 1909, DDA NUI 10). Windle expressed the anger of an influential academic elite, particularly well represented in the former Queen's colleges in Cork and Galway, who resisted the repositioning of the university to serve cultural nationalist objectives. Yet despite complaints by Windle about the selfish exploitation of the university for political ends, the debate was not primarily about academic freedom as opposed to external dictation. Significantly, the critics of 'essential Irish' did not base their objections on Newman's ideal of the university as a locus of 'universal knowledge' but mainly rested their case on a

perceived undermining of the *raison d'être* of the NUI as a Catholic institution, raising the dreaded spectre of losing Catholic students to Queen's or worst of all, the new university's closest rival, Trinity College.

Yet the NUI could not insulate itself from the popular reach of the cultural nationalist movement. While the campaign for 'essential Irish' commanded support within the Senate and governing body of UCD, popular mobilisation in favour of cultural nationalist objectives proved crucial. *Conradh na Gaeilge* and its allies mounted a highly effective public campaign, featuring public meetings in various regions of the country and resolutions to the Senate from local authorities (NUI Senate, 28 January 1909). The advocates of 'essential Irish' commanded the big battalions, in the form of the overwhelming support of county and borough councils, whose support was necessary for the establishment of university scholarship schemes: as early as January 1909 the new Senate received petitions in favour of making Irish compulsory from 13 county councils and 86 rural district councils or Poor Law Boards (NUI Senate, 28 January 1909). A deputation of local representatives from the General Council of Irish county councils lobbied the Senate in favour of compulsory Irish in November 1909 and again in June 1910 (NUI Senate, 11 November 1909). One of their representatives, Cllr M.A. Ennis of Wexford, left no room for ambiguity when he informed the Senate that 'the minimum concession with regard to the status of Irish in the National University which in our opinion would justify this Council in striking a rate in aid of education therein' was that Irish would be made an essential subject for matriculation (General Council of County Councils DDA NUI 2/23, 1909, 6).

Advocates of 'essential Irish' had no hesitation in portraying their opponents as anti-national, with Delany being particularly singled out for attack (Morrissey, 1983). Some supporters of language revival, such as Mary Hayden, a trailblazing activist who was the first woman appointed to the NUI Senate and became professor of modern history in UCD from 1911 (Ferriter, 2009), believed that many bishops and priests 'would be glad to ruin the Gaelic League', due to their jealousy of its growing influence in Irish society (Harford, 2020, 807-818). Walsh was sceptical of the campaign for 'essential Irish' and sharply rebuked Patrick O'Daly, general secretary of *Conradh na Gaeilge*, in December 1908, for the tactics employed by its activists:

...I cannot help feeling that the language movement is much more likely to be damaged than helped forward by the methods now being employed for the advancement of its interests. I refer most especially to the opprobrious language which we find applied to those...who do not see their way to taking the course now being put forward in apparently the official programme of the League (Walsh to O'Daly, DDA 375/1, December 1908).

But the Chancellor did not take a public stand, avoiding a clash with the majority of nationalist public opinion on such a divisive issue. The campaign for 'essential Irish' gained momentum despite the opposition of almost all the senior members of the Senate, including Healy, Delany, and the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Christopher Nixon. Hyde argued that 'essential Irish' would confirm the 'national' character of the university, offer necessary guidance in framing academic curricula, and guarantee public support for the new institution. Hyde's motion was initially ruled out of order by the Chancellor, on the basis that the Senate could not make a regulation regarding examinations without a report from the General Board of Studies, which had yet to be constituted pending the formal dissolution of the Royal University, but this proved a temporary reprieve for opponents of 'essential Irish' (NUI Senate, 27 July 1909).

The debate within the academic committees of the NUI was complex and acrimonious, as some members of the Senate sought a compromise which fell short of full acceptance of 'essential Irish'. The General Board of Studies proposed an 'open' scheme at matriculation for 1911-12, without any compulsory subjects, which was Windle's favoured option, combined with a subsequent university course in Irish and Irish history, but this halfway house proved unacceptable to the governing body of UCD (Windle to Walsh DDA NUI 1/4, 26 May 1910; NUI Senate, 5 May 1910). Instead, the Senate adopted an alternative scheme for 1911-12 favoured by UCD, which imposed mathematics and either Latin or Greek as compulsory subjects, as well as requiring students who did not pass Irish at matriculation to undertake a compulsory university course in Irish language, literature, and history (NUI Senate, 5 May 1910). This was never more than an interim solution and undermined opposition to 'essential Irish'. The academic council of UCC protested at the decision, and Windle claimed that the shelving of the open scheme removed 'the only logical alternative to compulsory Irish' (Windle to Walsh DDA NUI 1/4, 26 May 1910; NUI Senate, 23 June 1910, 114). The Senate, responding to sustained external pressure, as well as lobbying by some of its own members, gave its definitive verdict on 23 June 1910. Hyde's resolution in favour of introducing Irish as an essential subject at matriculation from 1913 was carried by 21 votes to 12. Among those voting in favour were, ironically, Bertram Windle and other UCC members of the Senate, while the leading clerical representatives, Healy and Delany, remained the most prominent dissenters (NUI Senate, 23 June 1910).

McCartney suggests that compulsory Irish at matriculation was imposed by overtly nationalist UCD representatives on the federal university, over the opposition of the Cork and Galway members (McCartney, 1999), taking up a complaint voiced at the time by Windle. But while the UCD governing body was in favour of 'essential Irish', the outcome of the debate on university matriculation was not primarily due to the superior clout of its largest college. The advocates of cultural nationalism won a decisive victory because they were successful in mobilising a popular national movement, particularly in bringing democratic pressure to bear, which ultimately overcame elite opposition within the Senate (Walsh, 2018). The sometimes arcane institutional manoeuvring within the Senate occurred in the context of sustained external pressure by local authorities whose financial support was crucial to the success of the university. Despite the accusations levelled at opponents of 'essential Irish', most were constitutional nationalists who had sympathy for the revival of the Irish language but assigned a higher priority to the mission of the new university in securing higher education for the Catholic middle class and protecting its institutional interests vis-à-vis its metropolitan counterpart, Trinity College. The conflict highlighted an ideological division between an established Catholic elite who had been instrumental in the establishment of the NUI and a new generation of assertive political and cultural nationalists who would take the most prominent role in the university over the following generation. The influence of the cultural nationalist movement overcame elite reservations among university leaders and Catholic prelates that the promotion of Irish might compromise the cherished mission of the NUI as a vehicle for the educational aspirations of the Catholic middle class.

### **Gaelicisation and Higher Education in the Irish Free State**

The foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 provoked a bitter political division between different strands of the nationalist movement, and the legitimacy of the new state established by the Anglo-Irish Treaty was violently contested by its republican opponents (Lee, 1988). Yet

both the Cumann na nGaedhael government led by W.T. Cosgrave and Fianna Fáil, which emerged as the main opposition party under Eamon de Valera before taking power in 1932, shared a patriotic commitment to the creation of a Gaelic-speaking Ireland. Nation building in the 1920s placed the national schools at the heart of national identity formation, identified unambiguously with the restoration of the Irish language and a historic Gaelic civilisation (T. Walsh, 2024). The newly created Irish state conformed to a wider pattern of nation building identified by Tröhler (2025, 7) where educational institutions, particularly the public school, were positioned by the nation state as central to 'day-to-day reproduction of the nation'. The new Free State government enshrined Gaelicisation of schools as a key policy imperative, not least because the public education system was integral to institutionalising the aspirations of the nationalist movement in Ireland.

Yet the national mission for Gaelicisation coexisted, often uneasily, with the essential fiscal and social conservatism of all post-independence Irish governments up to the late 1940s. Successive governments also displayed considerable caution in navigating church-state relations in education, not least because the Catholic church was the most powerful institution in primary and secondary education for the first generation of the independent state (Coolahan, 2017, Walsh, 2009, 2018). Gaelicisation functioned as a central policy paradigm in the first generation of the new state and exerted a significant, albeit intermittent, influence on the government's engagement with the universities, especially the National University of Ireland. But the national mission for revival of the Irish language, which transformed the national school curriculum and initial teacher education (T. Walsh, 2024), proved more peripheral to higher education and ultimately inspired more sustained resistance within the universities. Ministers promoted Gaelicisation with varying degrees of zeal but had no intention of undertaking any far-reaching reform or restructuring of university education, not least because the form of university education approved in 1908 carried an ecclesiastical seal of approval and no government of the Free State contemplated a fundamental re-appraisal of a university settlement approved by the Catholic bishops. Yet notable divergences of opinion emerged within the parameters of this institutional consensus, between the newly dominant nationalist political elite, cultural nationalist organisations, and academic leaders who usually shared nationalist ideals, over the positioning of the universities in the national mission for Gaelicisation.

Political demands for the university to embrace Gaelicisation had the most overt influence on the mission of the University College Galway (UCG), provoking bouts of conflict punctuated by negotiations in the 1920s. The college authorities were pragmatic in responding to political pressure, accommodating significant changes in academic policy to support the Irish language, while rejecting more extreme political demands, advanced particularly by Ernest Blythe, the Free State Minister for Finance. Blythe, a fervent cultural nationalist, was the most uncompromising advocate of language revival through education among the Free State ministers. Eoin MacNeill, who became the first Minister for Education (1922-25) in the Cumann na nGaedhael government, was open to negotiations with the college authorities, in which the Irish language took centre stage. MacNeill approved a college-departmental conference to consider how UCG could be transformed to undertake 'special work of national importance' in reviving Irish (Mac Mathúna, 2008, 71). This conference produced a report in April 1926, which envisaged a range of incremental measures to promote Irish in the college, including creation of four new lectureships involving teaching through the medium of Irish, establishment of a training college for primary teachers and filling of vacancies in professorial posts 'as far as possible' by candidates able to lecture through Irish (Walsh, 2018, p. 38).

Yet Blythe demanded a more far-reaching commitment to Gaelicisation. Blythe questioned the sincerity of the college authorities in advancing Gaelicisation in a Dáil debate on 9 June 1926 and warned that UCG's survival could not be guaranteed if it failed to accept its designated place in the movement for language revival:

If Galway is not going to do special work, then frankly as far as I am concerned I do not think it would be a wise course - it might be politically the only possible course to maintain it - to maintain it as a sort of toy college unless it does special work. On the other hand, if it does special work, and if the people concerned will give their minds to devising a scheme and the best method for doing this special work that the college can do, I do not think they will find the Government so difficult to deal with (Dáil Debates, 9 June 1926, 718).

Blythe's verbal onslaught was designed to pressure the college authorities into transforming UCG into an Irish-speaking institution, but his barely veiled contempt for academic sensibilities triggered a sharp conflict between college authorities and the Free State government.

The president of the college, Alexander Anderson, accused Blythe of being 'the victim of educational hallucinations' in a public letter on 11 June 1926, while the governing body issued a protest against 'the derisive and insulting language used by the Minister for Finance about Galway College' (Anderson, 11 June 1926, NAI TSCH/3/S2409; John Hynes, 26 June 1926, NAI TSCH/3/S2409; Walsh, 2018, 39). A major show of strength was orchestrated by local political, business and ecclesiastical elites, with a 'monster meeting' in Galway town hall on 25 June attended by TDs, councillors, business representatives and three local bishops, which approved resolutions defending the college, while almost all shops and business in the city centre closed for two hours to protest against Blythe's 'aspersions...on University College Galway' (*Irish Times*, 26 June 1926). Yet the college authorities also held out the prospect of significant progress for Irish if agreement could be reached. The effective mobilisation of local public opinion strengthened the position of the college leadership. Other ministers, including John Marcus O'Sullivan, MacNeill's successor as Minister for Education (1926-32), and Paddy Hogan, the Agriculture Minister who represented Galway in the Dáil, took a more conciliatory line than Blythe, and the Department of Education played a pivotal role in the negotiations with the college (Walsh, 2018). A settlement was reached by the governing body with the Ministers for Finance and Education on 15 October 1926, which involved an expanded commitment to Gaelicisation by UCG, in return for guarantees of financial viability. The 'memorandum of agreements' included the appointment of three new lecturers teaching through Irish (in the eclectic combination of mathematics, history and commerce); a special scholarship scheme for native Irish speakers and a commitment by the college to make 'every effort' to fill future academic vacancies with candidates who would be 'able to impart instruction through the medium of Irish' (Department of Education, 15 October 1926, NAI TSCH/3/S2409; Walsh, 2018, 41). This commitment was soon enshrined in legislation approved by the Oireachtas, through Section 3 of the University College Galway Act, 1929, which required the NUI Senate and governing body of UCG in filling vacancies to 'appoint to such office or situation a person who is competent to discharge the duties thereof through the medium of the Irish language: provided a person so competent and also suitable in all other respects is to be found...' (Oireachtas Eireann, University College Galway Bill 1929, 3). The

ministers, for their part, agreed to an increase of 35% in the college's recurrent grant, once-off repayment of its debt, and a longer-term commitment to increase the annual salaries of professors to a minimum of either £650 or £700 (Department of Education, 15 October 1926, NAI TSCH/3/S2409).

The Department of Education initially asserted its right under the 'memorandum of agreements' to approve the three new lecturers, reflecting lingering reservations on the official side about the college's willingness to find candidates with the appropriate level of Irish. But the department proved willing to accept the appointment of any candidate on a shortlist with the required qualifications, allowing all three posts to be filled by October 1928 (Mac Mathúna, 2008). Within three years, the government secured the passage through the Oireachtas of legislation which gave effect to the agreement, confirming the increased grant to UCG on a statutory basis and giving legal backing to the commitment on filling academic vacancies. Although leading members of Fianna Fáil criticised the University College Galway, Bill, for being too timid in mandating the embrace of Gaelicisation, the legislation approved in December 1929 reflected a compromise between ministers and the college authorities on the position of the Irish language. Ironically, Blythe, whose harsh critique had enraged the governing body three years earlier, hailed the emergence of 'a definitely new spirit in University College, Galway,...' (Dáil Debates, vol. 32, no.2, col.298, 24 October 1929). The Finance Minister rejected calls from opposition TDs to impose further conditions on UCG or remove any proviso relating to competence for appointment from Section 3 of the legislation. The college leaders had made a strategic calculation to adopt teaching through Irish as a core objective of the institution, which delivered financial stability and a guarantee of long-term (though rarely generous) support from the Irish State (Walsh, 2018).

The settlement in 1926 proved enduring, making teaching through Irish integral to the institutional mission of the college and setting a legal underpinning for the place of Irish in UCG, which was left untouched by successive governments. The agreement paved the way for a notable increase in student enrolments in UCG, as the proportion of Galway students presenting for NUI examinations more than doubled between 1921 and 1932, while 158 Irish-speaking students were attending lectures through Irish by 1930-31 (Mac Mathúna, 79). Although the influence of Section 3 on academic appointments proved controversial in subsequent decades, the government showed no desire to intervene in the internal workings of the college or enforce any rationalisation of faculties once the legislation was approved. The authorities in UCG charted their own path in adapting to the dominant national mission of Gaelicisation, securing greater financial stability while retaining institutional autonomy.

The intervention by ministers in the future direction of UCG in the mid to late 1920s was the most significant initiative to advance Gaelicisation in higher education under the Irish Free State. Most ministers proved more cautious than Blythe either in confronting university institutions or offering financial resources to transform the place of Irish, reflecting the low profile of university education in political debate up to the 1950s (Coolahan, 2017). No comparable pressure was placed on the other university colleges in the first generation of the Irish state. The ideological conservatism of ministers who were slow to disturb established institutions and their strong aversion to conflict with the Catholic church militated against assertive political intervention in the universities. Such entrenched conservatism was reinforced by financial constraints imposed by the Department of Finance, which successfully obstructed any major capital investment in university education from 1930 to the late 1940s and was equally reluctant to increase recurrent grants to the university colleges (Walsh, 2018).

Increased financial support to the NUI in the Free State was conceded only in return for a specific *quid pro quo* from a university college, sometimes involving a more fulsome embrace of Gaelicisation. Political and official pressure for Gaelicisation remained a significant factor in relations between successive governments and the NUI for the first generation of the Irish state, but did not lead to any far-reaching policy departures after the 1920s.

The crusade for Gaelicisation exerted a considerable but uneven influence on academic policies and practices in the NUI, particularly in the first decade of the independent state. The agreement between government ministers and the authorities in 1926 had a significant long-term impact on UCC's academic policies, practice, and appointments (Mac Mathúna, 2008). The other two colleges took more incremental initiatives to promote Irish. The governing body of UCC decided in the 1930s that only Irish speakers should be appointed to the senior leadership posts, including president, registrar, secretary, or librarian, in a move designed to attract greater government funding and, as Murphy suggests, also to head off external criticisms of the college (Murphy, 1995). The leadership of UCD agreed to expand the Irish department and established new courses in oral Irish for students, following negotiations with the new Fianna Fáil government in 1933-34 (Walsh, 2018).

The election of Eamon de Valera as Taoiseach following the triumph of his Fianna Fáil party in a general election in 1932 did not lead to any major intensification of Gaelicisation in university education.<sup>2</sup> This was due in part to the new Taoiseach's close connections with the NUI and friendship with several university presidents, including Denis Coffey, long-serving president of UCD (1909-40), and Alfred O'Rahilly, registrar and later president of UCC (1945-54). Moreover, de Valera served as Chancellor of the NUI for over half a century from 1921 until his death in 1975. De Valera, unlike his predecessor, William Walsh, treated the position of Chancellor as a formal, ceremonial office, presiding over the Senate, but rarely intervening to influence its decisions or to shape academic policies (Walsh, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Yet some Fianna Fáil ministers criticised the NUI for failing to play its part in the revival of Irish. Tomás Derrig, the Minister for Education between 1932 and 1948, was the most outspoken critic of the universities, telling the Dáil on 9 March 1934 that 'If the universities do not solve the problem of progressively Gaelicising themselves, we shall have to seriously reconsider our whole attitude to them' (*Irish Times*, 17 March 1934). Derrig was particularly targeting Trinity College, and he acknowledged, somewhat grudgingly, that UCG was beginning to play its part in the revival of Irish, but also claimed that the NUI still lagged far behind the secondary schools (Ibid.). Yet despite the trenchant rhetoric of Derrig, de Valera's role as Chancellor and long-term connections with senior academic leaders served to minimise intervention in the NUI by the new government, even in favour of intensifying Gaelicisation.

A combination of political conservatism and economic stagnation militated against major initiatives in university education between 1932 and 1945. The only policy initiative by de Valera's government to advance Gaelicisation in the NUI was modest, involving approval of an additional grant of €3,000 annually to expand the Irish department in UCD (Walsh, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> Eamon de Valera was the dominant political leader in post independence Ireland, serving as Taoiseach (1932-48, 1951-54 and 1957-59) and President of Ireland (1959-73).

<sup>3</sup> The main exception to this pattern was that de Valera usually voted in appointments of professorial chairs by the Senate.

This plan was initiated by Denis Coffey in negotiations with Blythe and supported by de Valera on his election in 1932, but was delayed by opposition from Derrig, who argued that the college was deficient in its approach to Irish and should be required to intensify its efforts if an increased grant was to be provided: 'I do not think it right, considering the condition of Irish in this College presently, for the state to provide the new grant until the whole matter is examined carefully' (Derrig to de Valera, 12 May 1932). Despite Derrig's intransigence, the additional grant was approved by the government and the Oireachtas in 1934. Yet even then, the full grant was never allocated due to rigorous conditions attached to it, although two new academic posts were approved (Public Accounts Committee 1952-53, 1955). The episode highlighted the pragmatism of university leaders in leveraging support for the Irish language to overcome stringent financial constraints, but also the reality that even where financial improvements were offered to underpin Gaelicisation, these were often modest and highly qualified by official constraints. In this instance, political intervention to support the Irish language in University College Dublin was half-hearted and largely ineffectual.

### Nationalist Critiques and Academic Resistance

If political intervention to advance the cause of Gaelicisation was intermittent and sometimes ineffectual, the place of Irish in the NUI remained a bone of contention for the cultural nationalist movement. The NUI's 'national' tradition, adoption of compulsory matriculation requirements at entry from 1913, and incremental initiatives to promote Irish did not shield the university from fierce criticism by Conradh na Gaeilge and other external critics (Walsh, 2018). Conradh na Gaeilge's criticisms of the NUI Senate over the university's contribution to the urgent mission of language revival came to the fore as early as the mid-1920s. The university authorities adopted an incremental and selective approach to demands to enhance the position of Irish. The NUI board of studies responded cautiously to representations by Conradh na Gaeilge for a compulsory examination in Irish for all first year students and delivery of lectures through Irish in all courses, agreeing only to seek the views of academic councils in each college on the proposed first year examination and noting that 'it was not possible at present that Lectures should be given in Irish in the various subjects of the Faculties.' (NUI Senate, 14 March 1924, 224-5). This response provoked an angry broadside from the executive committee of Conradh na Gaeilge to the NUI Senate in April 1924:

Since it is Irish money the University is spending, it is our strong opinion that the Senate should give better fair play to the language of the country; and we find fault with them on account of the injustice they are doing...it is not right for the National University to give a Degree to a student in any branch of learning unless he has a good knowledge of Irish (NUI Senate, 25 April 1924, 238).

Despite this shot across their bows, the Senate decided three months later that the issue of a compulsory examination in Irish across all faculties should be decided by each College for itself (NUI Senate, 9 July 1924, 349). Significantly, some former supporters of the language revival movement within the university increasingly rejected its demands. Agnes O'Farrelly, a lecturer in modern Irish in UCD from 1909 and a pioneering activist for women's participation during the debates around the formation of the NUI (Coleman, 2009), warned in December 1924 at a meeting of graduates against the adoption of 'extreme and ill-considered resolutions and methods', remarking pointedly that 'The Irish language is suffering from its friends as well as from its enemies' (Irish Times, 10 December 1924).

Further tensions between the Senate and Irish language activists emerged over academic and senior institutional appointments. When Arthur Conway was appointed by the Senate as president of UCD in 1940 and the Senate declined to adopt a rule that the president of UCD should be fluent in the national language, Conradh na Gaeilge denounced 'the insult offered to Irish' and even urged local authorities not to offer scholarships to UCD until the governing body 'was willing and ready to give justice to the language of the country' (Irish Times, 24 July 1940). The cultural nationalist movement was seeking to adopt the same tactics that had enjoyed such striking success a generation earlier in securing 'essential Irish', but on this occasion, the campaign fizzled out without securing the support of major city councils in Cork and Dublin (Walsh, 2018).

The university encompassed a diversity of perspectives in relation to Gaelicisation. Fr Timothy Corcoran, S.J., professor of education in UCD, was the intellectual architect of the government policy of reviving Irish through the schools, and his conviction that Irish could be restored in a single generation, largely through education, was perhaps the single most formative influence on state policy from the 1920s (T. Walsh, 2024). Yet UCD also accommodated more critical voices on the language revival policy, including Prof. Michael Tierney, a classicist and exponent of Catholic social thought who later became president of UCD (1947-64). Tierney supported compulsory teaching of Irish in schools but was an advocate of bilingualism who criticised the vaulting ambition of politicians and activists to create an Irish-speaking country through 'bureaucratic action' as unrealistic and undesirable (Martin, 2011). The university authorities were also far from monolithic in their response to demands for Gaelicisation. Academic councils in Cork and Dublin expressed diametrically opposed viewpoints on a first-year Irish examination in 1924, with UCD rejecting a compulsory examination, which explained the Senate's ambivalent position (NUI Senate, 25 April 1924, 247-8). A bitter split emerged at the top level in UCC in 1936 when a significant minority on the governing body objected to the appointment of Frances Vaughan as professor of education, as she had no Irish: Vaughan's appointment went ahead due to the support of Prof Patrick Merriman, the president of UCC (Murphy, 247). This dispute occurred in the context of a long-term rivalry between Merriman and the influential registrar, Alfred O'Rahilly, who later succeeded him as president. Yet the disagreement highlighted the acute sensitivity attached to the role of schools of education in the crusade for Gaelicisation, due to their important role in the pre-service preparation of secondary teachers, and foreshadowed a much more significant conflict early in the following decade.

While the response of the academic elite within the NUI to Gaelicisation was never monolithic, the ambitious agenda of Irish language activists met with increasingly strong resistance among a majority of senior academics represented on the NUI Senate and governing bodies in the early 1940s. The most striking clash between the cultural nationalist movement and the NUI Senate arose over an appointment to the chair of education in University College Dublin - a particularly sensitive appointment, as the longtime occupant of the chair was none other than T.J. Corcoran. The academic council recommended W.J. Williams, an experienced assistant lecturer in the school of education who was not an Irish speaker, for appointment by the Senate in 1943. While Williams secured the support of the governing body of UCD, his proposed appointment provoked outrage from Conradh na Gaeilge and other, more militant advocates of Gaelicisation. The executive committee of Conradh na Gaeilge quickly protested against the recommendation and submitted a resolution to Dublin Corporation, 'viewing with dismay' the report that the governing body had appointed as Professor of Education 'a person who

does not have a competent knowledge of Irish' (Irish Times, 26 February 1943). They issued an appeal for support to de Valera, Minister Derrig, the Catholic bishops, all TDs, and the heads of religious orders and communities, while the Irish Times reported that 'a personal letter is to be sent to each member of the Senate of the National University (Irish Times, 1 March 1943). Conradh na Gaeilge also took the lead in organising a vociferous public campaign which sought to pressure the Senate to block Williams' appointment. A protest meeting was held in the Mansion House (the home of the Lord Mayor of Dublin) on 5 March 1943, where a resolution was passed seeking the rejection of the recommendation by the NUI Senate. Diarmuid Mac Fhionnlaioich, president of Conradh na Gaeilge, rejected any suggestion that the organisation was attempting to curtail academic autonomy within the NUI: '...they were not asking for state control of the universities, but this injustice should be removed in the interests of the students and of education in general' (Irish Times, 6 March 1943). Several speakers denounced the governing body's actions as 'shameful, treacherous and anti-Irish' (Irish Times, 6 March 1943). Glúin na Bua, a militant offshoot of the language revival movement led by the writer Proinsias Mac an Bheatha, announced their intention to hold a protest march to the gates of UCD (Breathnach & Ní Mhurchú, undated; Irish Times, 6 March 1943).

The campaign against Williams' appointment provoked a stormy debate at the Convocation of the NUI, representing graduates of the university, on 9 March. A resolution proposed by Tomás Ó Floinn, an inspector (and later assistant secretary) of the Department of Education, recommending to the Senate that teaching in all subjects in the university should be offered through Irish, was carried by a substantial majority, but the resolution advanced by Conradh na Gaeilge demanding that the professor of education should be qualified to lecture in Irish proved more divisive (Irish Times, 9 March 1943). Desmond Bell, a critic of the language revival movement, complained that '...outside bodies had taken it upon themselves to dictate to the staff and the graduates on the matter. The motion was another example, he said, of the culture of the second rate in Ireland.' More explosively, Bell urged that Convocation should accept the governing body's decision rather than 'support the views of a body who, when holding a street-corner meeting, could not express themselves in Irish' (Irish Times, 10 March 1943). Following a three-hour debate, Convocation passed the resolution by a narrow margin of 101 to 94.

Generally, opponents of the cultural nationalist campaign did not seek to frame the debate publicly in fundamental terms revolving around liberal or humanist ideals of university education drawn from Newman, instead focusing more narrowly on the legal autonomy of the university and the perceived irrationality of its critics. Williams' nomination enjoyed significant support among students in UCD. The college's main debating society, the Literary and Historical Society, passed a motion which reflected the views of many academics as well as its student membership: 'That this House, ...having no limited interests, resents the attempt of the Gaelic League to interfere in University affairs' (NUI Senate, 11 March 1943, 141). The dispute provoked violent clashes between UCD students and activists from Glúin na Bua in Dublin city centre. Glúin na Bua organised a protest on 10 March where speakers levelled accusations at the governing body of 'attempting to kill the Irish language revival' and then about 70 activists marched to the gates of UCD in Earlsfort Terrace, 'with one of them periodically sounding a call on a bugle' (Irish Times, 11 March 1943). The protest was confronted by a significantly larger group of UCD students who had no hesitation in backing up their convictions with direct action, as the Irish Times recorded with barely concealed satisfaction:

Protesters against the appointment marched to the College after a meeting in O'Connell street, and were met by about a thousand students who turned a hose on them from a top window of the College, then rushed them and captured their banners after a series of fights, in which the banners were used as weapons...The banners afterwards were burned on the steps of the College. Fighting groups at one time were scattered all over Earlsfort Terrace and a small body of Civic Guards was unable to prevent the protesters from being roughly handled (Irish Times, 11 March 1943).

The Irish Times, edited by R.M. Smyllie, was far from being an unbiased observer of the proceedings: traditionally the voice of the Protestant minority and supportive of Trinity College, the newspaper's editorial strongly criticised the 'agitators' who had challenged the decision of the governing body (Irish Times, 10 March 1943). There was a strong element of hyperbole in the report of a thousand students challenging the protesters, an unlikely total when UCD's total enrolment was only 3037 in 1944-45 (*Report of the Interdepartmental Committee to the Minister for Finance*, 31 January 1947). The scene outside UCD was reminiscent on a larger scale of riotous behaviour often seen in mid-century university rag weeks, but the reality of student opposition to the cultural nationalist campaign was undeniable.

The public campaign against Williams' appointment had no impact on the Senate and may well have been counterproductive. When the Senate met in private session on 11 March, its members approved the governing body's recommendations on a decisive vote of 23 to 7 (NUI Senate, 11 March 1943). As Chancellor, de Valera presided over the meeting and voted for the only other qualified candidate, Fr. Fergal McGrath SJ, but despite some wishful thinking by Irish language activists that he might resign as Chancellor to provoke a new election, he made no move to challenge the Senate's decision (McCartney, 1983). Conradh na Gaeilge responded with an uncompromising denunciation of the NUI authorities, asserting that for thirty years they had maintained the university as an anti-national institution, 'contrary to the will of the people of Ireland, on whose moneys you subsist; and contrary to the wishes of a substantial majority of your own students' (Irish Times, 22 March 1943). This striking indictment had little practical effect, merely highlighting that discontent had boiled over among cultural nationalist organisations at the incremental, cautious, and pragmatic response of the NUI to Gaelicisation since the mid-1920s.

The Senate's decision was a notable defeat for the cultural nationalist lobby and an unequivocal assertion of institutional autonomy by the academic elite of the NUI. The Senate was successful in resisting external pressures that could plausibly be perceived as threatening the autonomy of its constituent colleges. The outcome contrasted sharply with the success of the cultural nationalist movement in winning the debate for 'essential Irish' at matriculation a generation earlier. On this occasion, the language revival movement failed to mobilise popular and political support to overcome resistance within the Senate, while the academic elite was more unified in opposing such direct intervention in academic appointments. Although college presidents and senior academics were often willing to accommodate official demands to give greater prominence to Irish, they strongly defended academic control over professorial appointments against external campaigns by cultural nationalist organisations. Ultimately, the academic elite within the NUI engaged in a selective, pragmatic way with the crusade for Gaelicisation, and their resistance to the more transformative demands of the cultural nationalist movement effectively limited the scope and implications of Gaelicisation on university education.

## Conclusion

Nation building, both before and after the creation of the independent Irish State, sought with varying degrees of success to transform the purpose and mission of universities to fulfil cultural, linguistic, and religious objectives, exemplified by the struggle for Gaelicisation of university education. Conradh na Gaeilge successfully mobilised a popular campaign to reshape the matriculation standards of the newly established National University of Ireland and secure the introduction of ‘compulsory Irish’ despite significant academic and ecclesiastical opposition. The conflict underlined sharp tensions between the two overarching missions, which drove the formation of the NUI – providing university education for the Catholic middle class and creating a ‘national’ institution reflecting Irish nationalist aspirations. The creation of the Irish Free State, which adopted Gaelicisation as a defining narrative central to the formation of national identity (T. Walsh, 2024), reinforced political demands for the university to play a central part in facilitating the revival of the Irish language. Yet college leaders and academic representatives on the NUI Senate engaged with Gaelicisation in a pragmatic, selective way, accepting new initiatives that benefited their colleges or acting strategically to mitigate pressure for more significant changes. Sometimes this pragmatic engagement led university leaders to transform institutional policies and practices to give greater prominence to Irish, as the governing body of UCG did in the mid to late 1920s. But more frequently, university leaders and senior academics acted to limit the influence of Gaelicisation and resisted external influence over academic appointments. The enduring power of the Catholic church and the caution of political elites in navigating church-state relations shaped the context for the often fraught interaction between Irish language activists and university leaders: the reluctance of most politicians to challenge the autonomy of a university which bore an ecclesiastical stamp of approval almost certainly facilitated effective resistance to more radical demands for Gaelicisation. Ultimately, the unsentimental, pragmatic institutional response to Gaelicisation provoked significant conflict with the cultural nationalist movement, which erupted spectacularly in 1943 with the successful resistance of the Senate to pressure from Irish language organisations over the chair of education in UCD. Despite their own institutional and regional differences, the academic elite within the NUI proved resilient in resisting the more significant demands of the cultural nationalist movement in the early decades of the Irish state.

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