Today Queen’s University Belfast offers around 300 degree programmes. These are delivered by nearly 2,400 academic staff to nearly 25,000 students. Unsurprisingly, few would have predicted the scale of this endeavour 175 years ago, and nor has progress to this point always been smooth. It has been hampered by challenges faced by universities in general as well as those that arose from the particular circumstances of the region.

In 1845 an Act of Parliament paved the way for the foundation of three colleges in Cork, Galway, and Belfast. Five years later, the Queen’s University of Ireland was established by Royal Charter as the degree awarding body for these three Queen’s Colleges. The purpose of these colleges was to promote higher education and to meet the educational needs of Catholics and Presbyterians for whom the University of Dublin was inseparable from the Church of Ireland. These were explicitly non-sectarian colleges – there were to be no religious tests for students, theological education was not offered, and staff were obliged to declare they would not do anything to interfere with the religious convictions of students or to discuss contentious political questions. These so-called ‘godless colleges’ were strongly opposed by groups within the various churches in Ireland, and this had an adverse effect on the colleges in Cork and Galway.

By contrast, Belfast prospered owing to the support of Presbyterians who comprised nearly 40% of the town’s population. The early curriculum of the college was, in part, shaped by the universities of Presbyterian Scotland and its first three presidents were Presbyterian clergymen. Though Presbyterian influence was strong, there is little evidence of denominational interference in the college and Presbyterians always comprised a minority of the teaching staff. As a consequence, the non-sectarian principle became fixed amongst supporters of Queen’s College Belfast.

In 1849 the iconic Lanyon Building was completed and teaching began in November with twenty professors and 195 students. However, as the college progressed over the next decades, the provision of university buildings and student facilities did not keep pace. Part of the reason for this was the formation in 1879 of the Royal University of Ireland. This purely examining body replaced the Queen’s University of Ireland and was a response to continued opposition to the ‘godless colleges’. Whatever its merits, the Royal University was not a success. It led to a decline in student numbers in Belfast and was stoutly opposed as “a patchwork university, conceived in iniquity and brought forth in folly”.

Despite the challenges, Queen’s did not stagnate. In 1882 it became the first university college in Ireland to admit female students to classes. The college also found direction in 1889 under the leadership of its third and final President, the Revd Thomas Hamilton. He energetically pursued increased funding and established the Better Equipment Fund in 1901. Not only did this provide much needed money for extra teaching staff and buildings, it also reinforced the links between the college and the local community.

In 1908 the Irish Universities Act ended the Royal University of Ireland and provided for the formation in the south of the National University of Ireland. In the north, it created the Queen’s University of Belfast with a governing Senate that included representatives from local government and the professions. Student numbers rose in subsequent years to over 2,500 by 1949. The student body also diversified as Catholics matriculated in growing numbers and females made up a third of all students by 1915. The efforts of governments after the Second World War to increase access and funding to higher education allowed Sir Eric Ashby to begin an ambitious building programme. This produced much of the physical fabric of the university we know today, including the David Keir Building, the Ashby Building, and the Peter Froggatt Centre. This accommodation was much needed as by 1976, 5,800 students were enrolled in the university.

Since the 1950s, student numbers have increased ten-fold and the student body is much more diverse than at any time since 1845. At various points, the university has also had to contend with increasing state oversight and significant funding challenges. In response, Queen’s is now a much more complex – sometimes bewildering – organisation. It has also become even more international in orientation, yet it remains rooted in its region. Indeed, the interplay between the international and the local enhances its vital role in wider society. It is an institution that reflects the complexity of our lived experience in Northern Ireland; it invites us to interrogate that complexity in comparison to other places and asks us to consider how life could be better for all of us. The students and staff of Queen’s did not escape the tragedy of the Troubles, yet during troubled times, it was one of the few institutions where people from different backgrounds mixed together. Let us hope that in the decades to come, Queen’s University Belfast continues to be a place where people come together to seriously consider life in all its variety and complexity.

830 Words

Delivery: Approx. 5minutes 20 seconds