

IFUT ADC 2011

IFUT President's Speech April 2011

Fraternal Delegates, Guests, Delegates, Colleagues and Friends, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to the Annual Delegate Conference of the Irish Federation of University Teachers. I would like to specially welcome our guest speakers, Professor Ulrich Teichler from the University of Kassel in Germany and Dr. Renée Prendergast from the University College Union (UCU), Queens University Belfast. In particular, I would also like to welcome Joan Donegan, the new Assistant General Secretary designate of IFUT.

Introduction

Education is an investment for the community, from pre-school to university and to life long learning. Education is an investment in knowledge. Societies advance via knowledge. In the early 60's the then Governor of California 'Pat' Brown and the President of the University California, Clark Kerr, implemented the California Master Plan for Higher Education. The aim was to guarantee access to third level education to all. This plan dramatically increased the numbers going to universities and state colleges and hence there was an enormous expansion of the higher education sector in California during the 60's and since then. The California higher education system is given credit for the great social and economic development of California that brought about, through the educated workforce, the successful industries such as pharmaceuticals, high technology, aero-space not to mention the military industry.

A more recent case of the value of higher education is the economic recovery of Finland after their financial meltdown in the early 1990s. During the meltdown Finland continued to invest heavily in higher education as the Finnish Government considered that education was the way to recovery. As a particular example, in 1990 the students at the University of Turku had not that much interest in studying electronic engineering and while the closure of the electronic engineering department was threatened the University decided to preserve it. Luckily it did as within a year or so Finland experienced the rise of Nokia and since then there is no shortage of students doing electronic related courses. Today Finland invests over 7% of GDP every year in education. Ireland invests 4.6%.

Ireland is also an example of a country that has had a dramatic expansion in its education system. Free secondary education was introduced in 1967 and free third level education in 1995. In 1980 about 15,000 started third-level, in 2009 there were about 42,500 new third-level entrants.

As a particular example, in 1990 there were 6,500 students in Trinity College including postgraduates, today there are over 16,500. The participant rate of students going onto third level is now 65%.

Universities are a success

It is rarely acknowledged by Government officials how successful and efficient the Irish University system is. While it was the case that Irish Universities operated at half the cost per student of comparable U.K. Universities, the Irish University sector is now giving even better value due to the cutbacks in wages and the recent increase in students entering University. Over the last two years due to the public service pay cuts, the pension levy (another pay cut), other levies and the recent universal social charge, the salary of academics has been cut by about 25%.

These pay cuts are a big savings in the paybill of Universities and hence a big saving in the overall cost of running the Universities. There are other savings. Over the last two years, the Universities have cut staff numbers by 6%. Due to the Employment Control Framework (ECF) these staff were not replaced. This 6% does not include the staff who retired early under the Incentivised Scheme for Early Retirement (ISER). Like the ECF, the staff that retired under the ISER could not be replaced. There is now a drastically reduced number of academic staff in the Universities and most departments are struggling to overcome the reduced level of staff and some departments are near closure. Due to the ECF ban on promotions, many international academics who came to Ireland are now returning to their home country. There is no future for them in Ireland.

Also can be mentioned is that the public sector workers were never given the promised 3.5% due under the Towards 2016 agreement. Going back further to Benchmarking, the rank and file academics got the lowest pay rise under Benchmarking. The real gain for the Government then was the breaking of the long establish relativity of University staff with the Civil Service who then got better Benchmarking awards as well as better increases since then. The Universities are now definitely more efficient and give better value.

If one measures University performance by the number of students then the rise in student numbers over the last ten years has lead to a dramatically increased performance. The student number increase is not just undergraduate student numbers but also there has been a huge increase in postgraduate student numbers. Only 4 or so years ago, the grand plan was to double the number of Ph.Ds by 2010. Over the last year or so there has been another increase in student numbers. The recent increase in students going to University is due to the recession. As there are no job prospects for school leavers they are deciding to continue their education in third level. Being able to provide cheap higher education is not necessarily something to boast about as the quality of education is now under threat. The efficiency and quality of of the Irish Higher Education sector is acknowledged by the EU in a recent ECOFIN report.

- In terms of graduations the ECOFIN observes that Ireland has a good performance both in the number of graduates per 1000 inhabitants and per member of academic staff.
- Recruiters regard the Universities in Ireland as providing highly employable graduates.
- Considering their size, Finland, Ireland, and Sweden are the countries with more universities pointed out by peers as being excellent.

Research Profile

Ireland has had success not only in the number and quality of its graduates but it now has a successful research profile with many post doctorate students coming to Ireland to do research. In the early nineties, the Government considered that it was not their role to fund research. At that time Irish Universities got involved in European funded research and from its successes in obtaining European research grants they eventually persuaded the Government to publicly fund research. In 2000, Science Foundation Ireland was created and since then it has contributed resources to fund science and engineering research in Ireland. It is unfortunate that Arts and Humanities research was not similarly funded. This is not unique to Ireland. The Arts and Humanities are having difficult times in other countries as in Universities driven by the markets, there is not enough profit from research in the Arts and Humanities.

Hundreds of highly qualified researchers were recruited into the sciences and engineering. Ireland now ranks 8th out of 28 OECD countries in terms of research and this is more commendable considering that major public funding of research only began with SFI in 2000.

Not that one should take heed of University rankings but many do and the Irish Universities have done remarkably well in the last few years; two Irish Universities have risen to be ranked in the top hundred with one being in the top 50. Considering the thousands of universities that are in the world this is viewed as a remarkable success. The Irish University sector performs well if given the resources. It is clear that the University sector has been a general success, unlike some other sectors such as the banks.

Damage to Universities

The University system is in for a change, in this case it is a change for the worse. The Government is about to damage a successful University system. What is more perverse is that at the same time the Government is damaging the University system, the Government is spending billions rescuing the incompetent banks. It is not the fault of the University system that the banks were reckless and some brave academics warned the Government of the reckless behaviour of the banks, yet the University system like the rest of normal society, who were blameless, ends up paying dearly for the banks rescue. Not only will our next generation be financially worse off with the burden of paying off the bank and other debts and worse off in living standards but they will also be left without the advances that education can bring.

What damage is been done to the University system?

The core grant to the Universities has been cut which has resulted in cuts in staff numbers and cuts in non-pay costs. The non pay cost cuts include cuts in student services along with such facilities as libraries and information systems.

Research Funding cuts.

While some SFI funding is maintained much of that is already committed and future research funding will be drastically reduced. The career structure for a university post doctorate researcher was never that good. Initially SFI did not pay the social costs such as pension contribution, holiday pay, maternity leave etc, associated with employment. Most researchers are on fixed-term contracts with a small number on Contracts of Indefinite Duration (CID). Many of these CID's have proved not to be indefinite and researchers on CID's are now being made redundant with little prospect of redeployment and if let go without proper redundancy payments. The huge investment in research over the last 10 years or so is now about to be wasted. All the experience gained is to be lost. Hundreds of researchers have no option but to go abroad or in many cases return back to their home countries.

Who should fund university research? The public already funds research in funding the salary of academics whose job includes doing research. The public also funds large scale research projects mostly via the SFI. All publicly funded research should be publicly available and mostly it is. Anyone who wishes to make use of publicly funded research should be facilitated in doing so. Any contributions to university research from the private sector are welcomed but with the understanding that the research is publicly available. This is not always understood by some multi-nationals and in effect they use Universities to outsource their expensive research. While the universities get contributions for doing the research it is often not adequate and so the Universities end up subsidising external research projects. It is difficult for Universities to demand proper funding from their corporate partners as due to underfunding by the Government they need any funding they can get.

Employment Control Framework

To add to the cuts in staff numbers there is the extra imposition of the Employment Control Framework (ECF). If there was ever a policy that was not thought through this is one.

Referring to the ECF, Ferdinand Von Prondzynski, former President of DCU, in his blog (14 March 2011) quotes Brian Hayes, former Fine Gael spokesperson on Education:

“I know many colleges will have international students coming into courses next year, and these will be paying full fees and will increasingly represent a larger part of the student body. With the proposed Stalinist approach to recruitment universities would not be able to staff the programmes taken by these students. ”

The Universities have lost staff through retirements and staff leaving to go elsewhere. The ECF does not allow these staff to be replaced. But there are exceptions if the Universities plead enough to the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Staff that are deemed critical may be replaced with permission from the HEA and then only on a fixed term contract. If refused then academic departments have to resort to using part-time or whatever staff they can find to fill in temporarily. Many departments cannot find qualified staff and so are left to do without. In ECF mark 2, research staff are also included in the moratorium on hiring staff. Even though a research project has received the funding, it now needs permission from the HEA to hire the research staff even though the research project funding does not come through the HEA. Also an extra 20% is levied to contribute to the cost of pensions which has already been paid for via the pension levies which the research staff have to pay. Some ‘big science’ funded research projects have collapsed due to the delay and bureaucracy in getting the appropriate research staff.

The new ECF will also put a halt to the non-exchequer funding of academic posts. Some Universities have managed to acquire private funding to hire some new academic posts. Again even though the funding does not come through the HEA, the Universities need permission from the HEA to hire the new staff. Not only that but the new academic staff have to be hired at the bottom of the academic scale no matter their previous experience and qualification.

There is now a new ECF as the original ran its course on December 2010. On the last day of the last Government the Minister of Finance signed the new ECF and then left the new Government to deal with it. The Assistant Secretary at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation, was not too happy with such a hasty decision by the then Minister of Finance. According to Irish Times Education correspondent Seán Flynn, the Assistant Secretary said the new ECF will “penalise” research activity and it was signed without considering the full implications. Sean Flynn quotes from the Assistant Secretary’s memo in reference to the new ECF

“how it could be put together without any input from a department [Enterprise] that invests €250 million per annum in higher education research and innovation;
how it could be issued without ever having been presented to or discussed by Government, where we or our Minister might have seen it;
how it could be titled in the circulating e-mail as approved by Minister on 10 March [the first day in office of the new Government] when it appears to have been the last unilateral act of an outgoing Minister post an election defeat;
how it could be structured so as to penalise enterprise-relevant research activity funded by this department through the combination of 30 per cent overhead + 20 per cent further pension levy + normal pension levy and for pensions that may never arise;
how it could be considered unilaterally agreed when it would take out €27 million per annum of research activity funded by this department and this was never quantified in terms of numbers of

existing researchers that would have to be decommitted, research centres closed down and these implications put before Government;
how the impact of unilaterally increasing the costs to enterprise engaging with institutions was never factored in and considered; much needs to be learned about how to conduct our affairs.”
Whatever the problems there are in hiring new academic or research staff under the ECF, it is a lot simpler in the case of administrative and support staff. No pleading or begging to the HEA is necessary as under the ECF it is not allowed to replace administrative and support staff and so Universities have to do without. If a critical specialist in Information System services goes off to work with Google then the University has to do without them.

‘Croke Park Deal’ issues

The ECF is not the only problem for academic staff. Under the Public Service Agreement aka as the Croke Park Deal the Government is now attempting to change the contract of academic staff. The Irish University Association (IUA) (the heads of Irish Universities) are on board with this even though they were not involved in the Croke Park negotiations. The IUA has no statutory role at all in the education system.

In a recent statement the IUA stated that they “are unambiguously committed to academic freedom of thought and enquiry.”

If the IUA are so committed to Academic Freedom then the Presidents of the other Colleges could follow the example of Trinity College and put before their governing body the Academic Freedom document that was submitted by the IFUT branch in TCD to the Board of Trinity and agreed by the Board. This document mentions some of the threats to Academic Freedom, it mentions:

- Strategic planning, particularly relating to research.
- Measurement of performance in research, including allocation of resources based on meeting targets for research productivity.
- Changes in university governance from a collegiate model
- State control through funding mechanisms.
- Fixed-term contracts

For more information about this Academic Freedom document see the IFUT website (www.ifut.ie).

The IUA also state

“that the freedoms which are contained in Section 14 of the Universities Act are to be exercised in the context of the framework of rights and obligations contained in the contract [of academics]”

Prof. Steve Hedley from the UCC Law School considers an interpretation

“that academic contracts are to be read as limiting the guarantee in the Universities Act – in other words, that academic freedom should only exist to the extent that each academic’s contract allows for it. This is extremely worrying. Academic freedom is, in large part, freedom from university management – and so is not worth much if it can be removed by a simple clause in an employment contract, drafted by that same university management.”

The IUA do not seem to trust their own academics and wish to micro manage them by getting them to fill in all kinds of forms to justify their existence. The IUA instead should speak out and defend their staff and the University system.

Education is not for Profit

The mission of a University system is not to make money and even worse than treating students as customers is to treat them as commodities that can be bought and sold. The students that are to be bought and sold are the lucrative overseas students that are worth international fees to the Universities. Agencies are given financial incentives to find and send students to the West for a University education. The Medical Schools have great experience in attracting enough overseas students to help subsidise their own costs. Other Schools are now trying to follow suit but it is not as easy to attract the students that are qualified. How prepared are these students for a University education in Ireland? Before they leave the overseas student should have a proficiency in English as well as the proper qualifications for the course they apply to. This is not always possible. To help in this dilemma UCD and TCD have created a Foundation year for such overseas students that is to be run by a for-profit education agency. The Foundation year is a kind of a finishing school that can cater for some of the prospective students that are need of help with English and with the subject requirements for the non-medical type degrees they are applying for. The agency that runs the Foundation year is paid international fees by the students and the great advantage they have is that if a student passes their end of year exams they get automatic entry to either UCD or TCD. This end of year exam is not the Leaving Cert or A-Levels but of the agency's own creation vetted by UCD and TCD. Due to the money involved there is a great incentive to have the Foundation year students pass the end of year exam. There is an incentive for the Universities as well as if the student enters they also get the international fee. But there are risks in Universities relying on these Foundation year agencies. They may not be financially stable and they go broke or they just find a more profitable location elsewhere and leave. From the experiences in the UK and elsewhere, there can be concerns about the quality of what is actually taught as well as concerns about the conditions of the staff who work with the agencies. A requirement for these agencies is that all their staff should be allowed to join a union. Would IFUT be that union?

Now that I have mentioned for-profit education, should market forces determine what is taught? Should student choice dictate what courses should be offered?

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a quote from Gregory Petsko, Professor of Biochemistry and Chemistry at Brandeis University who wrote in a recent edition of Nature

“There is the growing mantra of student choice, which increasingly dictates what programmes are offered, expanded and supported. The thinking here is that students are consumers, and market forces will lead to efficiencies in education, just as they do in, say, finance. If the past two years have taught us anything, it's that markets aren't always efficient. In fact they can be manipulated, driven by emotional frenzy and subject to fads. Besides, there are things that simply shouldn't be left to the brutality of the invisible hand. Education is one. Moreover, the idea that student choice is a good thing is wrong, whether one believes in markets or not. Students have neither the wisdom nor the experience to know what they need to know. Left to themselves, they frequently choose subjects based on the fashion of the moment (which in the United States is currently economics, although at one time it was sociology) or on what they think will equip them best for a job. That the best and most valuable education combines breadth with depth is something that most students do not yet understand. We need less student choice, not more. We need more prescribed curricula, not less.”

Finally,

You have the IFUT Annual Report in your documents and this report gives an indication of the work done by the General Secretary, Mike Jennings, throughout the year. He could not have done this work without the dedicated support of Phyllis Russell, the voice of IFUT if anyone phones Head Office. The Annual Report does not at all do justice to the work and dedication of the IFUT Head Office. Not detailed in the annual report is all the personal cases that IFUT Head Office has to deal with and all the queries members ask of IFUT. I would especially like to thank Mike and Phyllis for a job well done and all their support throughout the year. The Annual Report mentions that this is the year of the Croke Park Deal. There is no need for a Croke Park deal in IFUT Head Office.

IFUT is run by the Executive, Council and all the branch secretaries who unselfishly give their time to work and support the union; without them we would not have a union. I wish to thank them for their support of IFUT throughout the year.

After today, I will be the outgoing President of IFUT. The new President of IFUT is Marie Clarke from the School of Education in UCD. IFUT is particularly fortunate in having Marie as President as she will bring to IFUT her great expertise in Education matters.