

In defence of academic salaries

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Thu, Nov 26, 2009

SALARIES IN the public sector are under scrutiny as the budget looms. I regularly read criticisms of the “high salaries” paid to university lecturers and professors, pointing out that they are significantly better-paid than academics elsewhere in Europe. A piece along these lines, written by Darragh McCullough, appeared in *The Farmers Journal* on August 15th.

Lecturers (the most junior academic grade) in Irish universities are paid a salary range of €35,541-€83,344 (17 increments). McCullough compared the salary scales of senior lecturers and professors at the universities of Rotterdam, Leeds and Cork, which are judged to be of equal standing. (It should be pointed out that academic salaries at UCC are identical to academic salaries in the other Irish universities). The following are the salary ranges (starting salary-finishing salary) for senior lecturers at Rotterdam, Leeds and UCC respectively: €44,589-€69,361; €53,017-€67,160; €68,197-€101,714. The figures for professors: €68,440-€120,329; €63,307-€85,075; €117,276- €158,644. Finally, Irish associate professors are paid €99,097-€116,386.

Although Irish university academics are paid more than their EU counterparts, a significant fraction of the difference can be justified by the greater cost of living in Ireland. The latest CSO figures show that, since 1998, Ireland has become considerably more expensive, and since 2002 our price levels for final consumption by private households have been about 25 per cent above the EU average.

While cost of living largely justifies the difference between Irish salaries and Rotterdam salaries, it doesn't fully account for the difference between Ireland and the UK. However, I think the pertinent question here is – why are UK salaries so low? The top of the salary scale for a UK professor is €85,000, far too low considering the qualifications required, the hard work and productivity, and the long years required to climb to the top of the academic ladder as a professor. And only a small minority (9 per cent) of academics make it to the top.

Irish salaries at professor level are undoubtedly comfortable. Professors benefited from an 8 per cent increase early in 2009 (also given to senior civil servants, judges and so on), an increase not given to more junior academic grades. But there is nothing extraordinary about salaries along the long academic ladder that ascends to professor. Lecturer salaries start at €35,541. Lecturers are usually about 30 years old when they begin their careers, having already taken a primary degree, a PhD and postdoctoral training, and only a small minority reach the top. In the famous Benchmarking 1 exercise, most university academics got an increase of 3 per cent, just about the lowest award made to any sector. This raised the equivalent scales in the institute of technology sector over the university sector for the first time.

McCullough's article doesn't mention that if you compare the income of just about any category of employee in Ireland with their EU counterparts you find that the Irish person is paid more. Our Taoiseach, Ministers, TDs, senior civil servants, medical doctors, dentists, pharmacists, nurses, teachers, police, and so on, are all paid more than many of their EU counterparts. Our minimum wage, unemployment benefits and general social welfare payments are much higher in Ireland than in most EU countries. So, it is no surprise that university lecturers in Ireland are paid somewhat more than their EU counterparts.

However, if you compare Irish academic salaries with the incomes of many other professionals in Ireland, you get a different picture. For example, a professor is paid only a fraction of what a medical consultant earns, or a successful lawyer or banker or financial consultant or business person.

Negative comments are frequently made about how hard university academics work. Such arguments are usually based on undergraduate lecture contact hours. This is only part of the work of a university academic. As well as giving undergraduate lectures, academics must also train PhD students and supervise their research, supervise senior undergraduate research projects, supervise research assistants and technicians, write applications for research grants, manage research and teaching laboratories, sit on university committees, undertake departmental administrative duties, deliver public lectures, and more. All the lecturers I know work at least a 50-hour week and take only a few weeks' annual leave. University academics are worth the money they are paid. Well, most of them are. I have a list.

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