

'THE UNIVERSITY IN THE MODERN WORLD'

**A summary of the presentation by the
Irish Federation of University Teachers
to
The Higher Education Strategy Group**

Monday, 9 November 2009

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INTRODUCTION

The Knowledge Economy v The Knowledge Society

There has been much talk in recent years about the concepts of the *knowledge economy* and *knowledge society* with the universities being seen as crucial drivers of both. Unfortunately, whether by accident or design, the two concepts have been used interchangeably as if one encompassed the other, or even that they were synonymous.

There is no doubt that the university sector can aid the knowledge economy. There is significant expertise available that can help develop the products, the patents, the knowledge that will encourage and sustain economic growth. Much effort has been devoted to this enterprise and there has been a welcome increase in formal funding for the research necessary to support this activity. However, though the increase has been substantial, our competitors are most impressively resourced, a factor of 2 is not unusual, and the need to find more money has resulted in informal transfers of funding from the other key enterprise of the university, the creation and maintenance of the knowledge society.

The knowledge society recognizes that there is value in learning. Universities develop careful and critical global citizens, people who have the skills necessary to understand the global and local issues that confront them, can obtain and weigh information and come to reasoned conclusions. These are the people who will shape the world in which we all live and make it a better place. The concept of the knowledge society also recognizes that learning is a lifelong enterprise, that it is part of the life-world of every citizen. It safeguards the heritage of previous generations, it enriches peoples' lives and it makes them more interesting.

The universities have never been adequately funded, in comparison to their international benchmarks. The productivity of Irish universities is excellent when compared to the UK, a fact rarely recognised. The knowledge society has suffered badly in recent years as a result of this funding gap. Because of the drive towards measurable economic returns from education, funding has been informally shifted from teaching and learning into activities that service the knowledge economy. This has not been done openly. On the face of it, the universities obtain significant funds to teach undergraduates and graduate students. However an audit which follows the funds and the grant in lieu of fees will show that less and less is being spent directly on students and more and more is being channelled to high level research.

University Finances

Our university system is chronically and acutely underfunded. As a country we invest half of the amount per student in the sector compared to our nearest neighbours, the UK.

The fact that the universities have coped so well despite this underfunding must not blind us to the reality that the effects of underfunding are cumulative. The situation is getting more and more critical. We cannot assume that a major collapse will not occur quite precipitously.

It is a cliché to say that investment in education is just that – an investment. Nevertheless, it is true and we have the proof of it from our recent history.

Access

As a basic principle, university education should be accessible for any of our citizens who have the capacity to benefit from it. It will always be an elitist entity but only in terms of ability. All other barriers to university education must be removed. This is not simply a matter of fees: fees are an important aspect of affordability but only one aspect of a multi-faceted set of factors that can militate against segments of our society in their access to university.

Funding

The State must continue to be the provider of the greater part of university funding. This will safeguard the academic standards of the institutions and the development of a real knowledge society. It will also ensure that the universities are responsive to the needs of the society in which they operate. It is important not to heed the siren suggestions that more private funding would benefit the universities. This is seductive, certainly, since it suggests that the State could save money while deriving the economic benefits that the State so badly needs. However, all external funding comes with conditions and the intellectual independence and the academic freedom of the universities will be fatally compromised. We have already seen instances where academics have been gagged because of the source of their funding. The muting of academic voices is hardly in the national interest.

The reliance on non-State funding is not ‘a victimless crime’ in education terms. Private funders will, quite understandably, want to influence the programmes they pay for or subsidise. We have to ask ourselves who should be setting the ambitions and parameters for our universities? Do we really want to hand over such vital decision-making to the Board Rooms of international companies?

The Strategy Group is invited to comment on two major developments under the rubric of funding which are already in place and which will accelerate hugely the control of our universities by private finances. These developments have occurred without any public debate or scrutiny whatsoever.

- Already the requirement to be ‘funder friendly’ is being inserted explicitly as a criterion for academic promotion.
- Under the terms of the current Employment Control Framework which severely restricts Appointments and Promotions, exceptions are allowed if the post is externally (privately) funded.

Fees

IFUT is opposed to the re-introduction of undergraduate fees, for reasons which include the following:

- We find the idea of education being, in effect, a purchasable commodity (if you can afford it) objectionable in principle. But such a concept also leaves the door open for education to be regarded as 'a market' with all the attendant perils, e.g. inclusion in the GATS process.
- While the level of participation from lower socio-economic groups continues to be disappointing, it is hard to see how re-imposing a significant financial charge could help.
- The historical record proves conclusively that the grant-aiding of lower income students to compensate for fees was totally inadequate and, in fact, was more mirage than reality.
- Imposing fees will be unlikely to put more money into university accounts. It will only change the source of payment away from central Government.

That said, it is a fact – which the universities should be proud of – that graduates **do** enjoy a premium in their lifelong earnings. Although this is not immediate as the years of no pay have to be compensated for. Therefore, in principle, an equitable salary-related postgraduate contribution could be worth exploring.

It should be borne in mind that not every graduate chooses employment and a life's career based merely on financial reward. This should not be penalised.

Lifelong Learning

While there are many policy documents on the matter, it is still the case that the universities have a long way to go in supporting lifelong learning, non-traditional students, mature students and others outside the normal cadre of school leavers. The continuing discrimination against part-time students, who are forced to pay fees, is a disgrace and shows the reality of the commitment to lifelong learning.

It is also true that many in the academic world do not welcome learners other than those who are academically elite. This must change and there must be serious incentives to encourage this change of behaviour.

More than that, however, there has to be recognition that these students need support while in university. They have different needs, their learning patterns and processes are different. Support in this area has been far from adequate and significant funding would be necessary to make a reality of State policy.

The HEA has set an ambitious quota for a shift way from the traditional school-leaver entrant by 2013. The ambition is to be applauded but it will never become a reality in the absence of the supports that are needed to ensure success for these students in the university environment.

Academics as Teachers

The evidence that the teaching role of academics has been undermined is incontrovertible. Academics are increasingly diverted away from the teaching of undergraduates towards the pursuit of research grants and the knowledge economy. There is no doubt that academic teaching benefits from research and we are not arguing for teaching-only academics. However, it is easy to demonstrate how the universities discourage engagement with teaching. This can be seen in the patterns of appointments, the terms of promotion schemes, the rewards and recognition systems. It is made abundantly clear to young staff that teaching is a necessary but somewhat irrelevant activity: not worthy of investment. Older staff, with a commitment to teaching, find themselves increasingly harassed for a failure to join the new world of high level research. Naturally, this view will never appear in an official document from any university. However, we work in the universities and we know.

Yet, the universities are funded on the basis of their student numbers. The degree programmes are costed on the basis of the expenditure of that money on these very programmes. This can lead to programmes being seen to be rather expensive on a per capita basis and it might be assumed that the level of service is high. The reality is that resource allocation models employed locally siphon money away from the teaching activity and reward those who have very little engagement with students, especially undergraduate students. Too many academics, especially senior ones, have no engagement of any kind with students.

We believe this to be an unacceptable use of public funds. Unless the State is prepared to say that it recognizes the diminution of the role of academic as teacher, then it must insist that teaching is undertaken to a high quality by all academics. It must insist that this be recognized as part of the normal duties of an academic and it must ensure that excellence in this area is recognized and rewarded in the same way as excellence in research. Otherwise students will continue to be short-changed and the educational experience will be diminished.

Fourth Level

We welcome the increased funding that has been provided for the research mission of the universities. It is both important for the institutions and for the State that the intellectual capabilities of academics are capitalized upon. It is also true that students benefit from being part of a dynamic and vibrant educational environment where staff are excited by their work.

The funding is nowhere near enough, however, and it has been spread too thinly. The periodic announcements of multiple millions in grants suggests otherwise until one dissects the amount in terms of timescale, institutions involved, amounts already committed and so on. Funding is actually quite slight, especially given the ambition of the State for the knowledge economy

There are too many funding mechanisms, they are bureaucratic, they reinvent the wheel over and over again in the information sought. They cannot figure out whether they want the universities to be competitors or collaborators. People spend too much time making applications, leaving too little time to do anything. Too much funding is short-term with little concern about the long term implications of decisions. As has

been said above, too much of the funding is also opaque. It is time to decide openly how much of the block grant and 'fees' payment should be devoted to research. Then we will see the true cost of both research and teaching programmes.

There is also a lack of common sense in much of what is undertaken. It is a strategic objective to increase in a dramatic manner, the number of doctoral graduates. This is across the board, across all disciplines. It can be argued that there is a need in particular areas but nobody has demonstrated any benefit from the production of highly qualified and highly specialized people in every subject area. It makes no sense whatsoever and is another example of the lack of integrated thinking that pervades so much of what goes on.

University autonomy

University autonomy is provided for under the Universities Act, 1997. It is an important right because the pursuit of knowledge and excellence must not be unduly constrained and it is also important that the duty of the university to speak the truth is not fettered. It is often assumed by commentators that this is an uncontrolled autonomy but this is not the case. The Universities have a robust quality assurance and quality improvement process, that is open and transparent, and its expenditures are subject to the oversight of the Comptroller and Auditor General. However, it is the case that not all decisions made in recent years have been wise and that the exercise of governance by governing bodies has not been what it should. Too much money has been spent on hiring 'stars' on inflated salaries where the justification of this has been slight and there has been little benefit / cost analysis. The same is true of some of the research initiatives. There has been too little oversight from the HEA despite the requirements of its own schemes and the terms of its own procedures. Governing Bodies have also not been as effective as they should, though much of the reason for this lies at the feet of the Department of Finance and not at the Governing Bodies concerned. The code of governance developed for the public service by the Department of Finance emphasizes the separation of management from governance. It has given too much autonomy to management with Governing Bodies in the dark about much of what occurs. It is clear from what has happened in other State bodies that this balance has to change and that governance has to be much more hands on.

In an attempt to regain what they see as lost control, the DES and the DF, via the HEA, now have the universities in a funding stranglehold. This is in nobody's interest and cannot be allowed to continue. It has been quite rightly pointed out that there is a glaring incompatibility between the university autonomy provisions of the 1997 Act and the current micro-management of our universities as exercised by the HEA on the instructions of the Department of Finance.

However, it is our view that new structures are not needed. The governance structures of the universities are adequate to the task of exercising proper oversight if they are allowed to function.

Rationalisation

There has been much talk about the virtue of a rationalization process within the sector. IFUT would not be against sensible proposals to diminish unnecessary competition and promote collaboration. There is already considerable collaboration between institutions,

especially at graduate level. It makes sense that this should continue and be encouraged.

It does not make sense, however, to leap to a large-scale process of rationalization of institutions. Those who promote this have little understanding of geography. This country has a low population density. Universities have to be where the people are that they are to serve both as communities of scholars and as service providers to the wider local community. Even within the city of Dublin there is a simple belief that the effect of distance can be miraculously removed and that staff and students could move easily between institutions. This is patent nonsense – this city does not work in transport terms and the idea of large scale movements of staff and students is farcical.

There may well be possibilities for sensible sharing of resources and perhaps the provision of some services centrally with the larger cities. Anything else requires the most careful consideration and detailed analysis. There is no evidence of that analysis.

The Working Life of an Academic

IFUT represents all grades of academics as well as senior administrators. We recognize that there is a perception that academics are overpaid and underworked. There is no evidence for this but this has become an article of faith for some. The actual evidence tells a different story.

It is a fact that:

- Productivity as measured by the number of students in the universities has increased dramatically – up by 30% in some cases in the current year. This on top of large increases in previous years.
- A process of dramatic change and transformation has been happening quietly and without fuss for many years. The universities are radically different places compared to five years ago.
- Academics deliver with less than 50% of the resources made available to equivalent universities in other jurisdictions, even in the UK.
- Academics are amongst the most flexible of workers – undertaking many and multiple roles which in other universities would be provided by technical and support staff.
- Academics have responded positively to the new challenges of fourth level positively. We would not put much faith in the value or virtue of league tables but movement has all been in a positive direction.

At the same time, academics have been burdened with measurement systems that are valueless but consume valuable resources. They measure what is easy to measure, not what needs to be measured. They produce meaningless 'metrics' which take on a life of their own simply because they are numbers. Yet nothing lies behind them. There is a continuing drive to measure more and this will be resisted. We are anxious to get on with our core business and not waste time with useless bureaucracy.

There is no fat within the system. Changes in the working patterns of academics have resulted in displacement of other activities. The current drive to reduce numbers,

perhaps by as much as 10%, will not result in a better system. It will simply push an already underfunded, overburdened system beyond its capacity to cope and will result in a diminution of quality.

Academic Freedom

Ireland is quite rightly praised by academics the world over for the fact that the principle of academic freedom is enshrined in our laws.

Without academic freedom universities quite simply cease to be universities.

Yet academic freedom, while often praised, is just as often misunderstood.

Academics must continue to have the freedom to engage in research and scholarly activity without interference based on political opinion or economic control.

The greatest threat to academic freedom in Ireland today is the opening up of our universities and their research activities to the control and manipulation of those who are increasingly being invited to pay the piper and who, just as frequently, insist on calling the tune.