

SPEECH BY MIKE JENNINGS

TO SEMINAR ON MARKETISATION OF EDUCATION

IN GRESHAM HOTEL, DUBLIN ON 31 OCTOBER 2009

Firstly I would like to welcome everybody here today, but in particular, I want to welcome our two Guest Speakers, Jens Vraa Jensen from Denmark and David Robinson from Canada.

Over the past two and a half years since I became General Secretary of IFUT, both David and Jens have been extremely helpful to me in finding my feet in the international affairs of the academic trade union community. More than that, both David and Jens have become friends and it is truly a great pleasure to welcome them here to Dublin and I hope they enjoy their stay.

During the course of our efforts to try to elicit some media attention for our seminar here today, we talked to quite a number of journalists. One journalist wondered whether the event would merit much publicity due to its 'very esoteric' nature.

Well, the subject matter may or may not be esoteric, but I have no doubt whatsoever it is hugely relevant, and more than that it has a very direct and precise relevance for every academic in Ireland and indeed for everyone in Ireland who cares about the future of our higher education system, in particular that aspect of it delivered by our universities.

I have as Senator McCarthy might say 'here in my hand a document'. The document is from University College, Cork and in effect it is a collection of job descriptions for academic grades. Six times during the course of these documents it is explicitly stated that one of the requirements of the job and one of the requirements for advancement in the job would be the requirement to be, if I may use the phrase, 'funder-friendly'. In other words, to advance in an academic career an academic is required to be able to demonstrate an ability to pull in finance from private, external funders.

You have to ask yourself what in the name of goodness has the ability to attract funds got to do with academic standards? Have we really got to the stage where we are saying explicitly that funding is as important as scholarship, integrity, communication ability, diligence, conscientiousness and a desire above all else to push back the boundaries of knowledge and having pushed them back to pass on the newly discovered knowledge to future generations of students?

I should say immediately that I am not singling UCC out for particular attention here. The reality is that a similar requirement to be 'funder-friendly' is now quite common in Irish universities and the implications are indeed ominous.

I'm not sure that this is a comparison that would be welcomed by the audience here today, but I think it is fair to say that there is quite a degree of similarity between the job and role of a university academic and the job and role of a good journalist. Consider the following: the academic is charged with the responsibility of researching and thereby pushing back as I say the boundaries of knowledge. The journalist on his or her part is charged with the obligation of delving to discover facts whether those facts are popular or not. Both professions are responsible also not just for the discovery of facts and the unearthing of new knowledge, but for the dissemination of it. The academic to his or her students and the wider community and in the case of the journalist, to the world in general through the media.

Imagine then the damage that will be done to the concept of a free press if we accepted the notion that journalists could only investigate facts that the funders of the publication or the media outlet where he or she worked approved of that course of inquiry. Imagine furthermore that even if the journalist managed to discover a range of facts that he or she was precluded from informing the citizens in general of the existence of those facts until or unless he or she got permission from a private, external funder.

I've no doubt such a scenario would send shockwaves through any democratic society. How then can it be acceptable that we not only contemplate, but apparently actively foster the notion that substantial parts of our university life should be funded privately?

IFUT has recently drawn up a submission to the Strategy Group appointed by the Minister to look at higher education policy in the future. We have asked this Strategy Group to pay particular attention to the intrusion of funding as a requirement for academic advancement, and we have also drawn their attention to another very sinister development which has gone almost unnoticed, certainly unremarked on by anybody except IFUT. That is that in the current climate there is almost a one hundred per cent embargo on the appointment of staff in our universities. The only significant exception where recruitment is allowed is where the new appointment can be financed externally, in other words privately. If this is not an open invitation to come in and to privatise our universities, I don't know what is.

As a country, are we content to see vital decisions about the sort of education system which it has, the sort of research programmes we should be engaged in, and the sort of teaching that we should prioritise, are we prepared to have these decisions taken out of the hands of the people in Ireland and vested instead in the board rooms of private, indeed anonymous companies somewhere in this globalised world?

There was another stark example recently of the relevance of today's topic to us who care about higher education in Ireland today. Recently the Director of one of the private higher education colleges interviewed on Morning Ireland referred to the "unfairness" of the "competition" between his college and colleges in the State funded arena. So the implication was that because he had to charge fees, he was at a disadvantage in the money-making business of education compared to universities which did not charge fees.

The parallels within our previous history are obvious. It's not so long ago since it was ruled that competition policy did not allow our State to finance a State airline, Aer Lingus, as this would represent unfair competition.

Current competition law seems to dictate that either everybody gets a subsidy or nobody gets a subsidy. Clearly, especially in the current economic circumstances, it is highly unlikely that the State could start handing out subsidies left right and centre to education providers whose only motive is profit. Is the alternative then likely to be the discontinuation of the State funding of our State institutions.

This scenario may seem fanciful and highly unlikely, but I invite you to suspend your disbelief at least until you have heard what David Robinson has to say on the question of the sort of rules that apply once education or any other service is designated as a market and it required to play by market rules.

My purpose today in these brief opening remarks is simply to invite you to consider the huge relevance of our topic today for the future of our universities in Ireland. Thank you for your attendance. I like you look forward to hearing the contributions from our two guests. I know they will be illuminating, I know they will be challenging and all that remains for me to do is thank you for your attention to my brief remarks and to invite you now to enjoy the real substance of today represented in the contributions by Jens Vraa Jensen and David Robinson. Thank you very much.