

IFUT ADC 2010

IFUT President's Speech April 2010

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.

Ireland is renowned as the Island of Saints and Scholars but that refers to Ireland 14 hundred years ago. Today we have little or no saints and due to the Government and its consultants we will have little or no Scholars either. The Government is ruining a successful University system.

The Irish University system has always had to struggle and was never properly funded even during the years of the Celtic Tiger era. In 1996 the Notre Dame Football team played the Navy football team in Croke Park. It was reported then that Notre Dame had just finalised a 300 million dollar deal for the TV rights for their football games. At the time, this was more than the total Government core grant to the University system.

Recall also that during the nineties the Philanthropist, Chuck Feeney, donated an estimated one billion dollars to the Irish University system. His attitude was that rather than give his tax dollars to the US Government, he would give away his money to more worthy causes. What Chuck Feeney's billion achieved in the nineties (e.g. the Helix in DCU etc.) will give one some idea of the value of a billion which seems to be devalued today in the billions that have been donated by the Government to the banks. Even so, a devaluated billion would now be very welcomed by the Universities.

In spite of underfunding, the Irish University system is a successful university system. According to the Irish Independent at the end of last month (John Walsh 26th March) an EU study reported that

- Irish graduates are the most highly employable in Europe;

- Irish universities have the highest graduation rate in Europe;
 - Ireland has the highest percentage of graduates in Europe;
 - Universities in Ireland, Finland and Sweden are given the highest 'excellence' rating by academics in other EU countries.

The EU study indicated that Ireland is at the top of the 'efficiency' league table and the Independent quoted Professor Jim Browne, president of NUI Galway, who said the study was a clear vindication of the efficiency of the Irish university system.

The Heads of the Irish Universities regularly report that the Irish University system is about half the cost per student as an equivalent UK University, for example, Queens Belfast, never mind the likes of Oxford or Cambridge.

It is a testament to the Irish University system that it can achieve so much on so little.

Unlike the banks and other such institutions the Universities are not and were not profligate. On the contrary they are generally well organised and have not been involved in scandals that have plagued institutions such as the banks. Yet public money is available for those who squandered billions. Twenty two billion euro of taxpayer's money is donated to the Anglo Irish Bank, more billions is donated to the other banks and multi billions to NAMA but there is no money to invest in the public service or to invest in the Education sector in particular. Is it the case that the incompetent get rewarded while the competent are punished?

Embargo

The Universities are being ruined by the Government Embargo and Moratorium.

Posts in Universities remain vacant as the Government refuses to allow the filling of vacancies. As a result departments are struggling to maintain their courses. In the rare case, the Government has had to relent and allow an academic post to be refilled but then only on a contract basis. Is the

strategy to make all academic posts contract posts so as to avoid tenured posts?

The promotions systems in the Universities has been put in abeyance and staff who hear the good news that they have been promoted then hear the bad news that they will not be paid their new salary.

For staff who take on extra responsibilities, like being Head of Department, the allowances have been withdrawn. Who would want to take on extra responsibilities in this situation?

Cuts in the Core Grant

The Universities will be ruined by the latest cuts in the core grant. Not that Trinity College is singled out as all universities are affected by the cut in their core grant but Trinity College is about to lose 27 million out of their core grant of 105 million. How is this 27 million cut to be managed. Cutting the salaries of staff has already been done and so that is a saving. Bring in more students! TCD intends to augment the current 10,000 undergraduate students with 3,000 more. Some new blood lecturing posts will be allowed, about 20 I am told i.e. 1 new academic staff member per 150 students and all these new posts will be on contract. This number of new staff is nowhere near what will be required. There is no mention of additional support staff.

Let me tell you about the parable of the donkey. The story goes about a donkey owner on the beach. The owner considers a magnificent scheme for saving money. He decides to put the donkey on half rations for a week. On half rations the donkey operates fine, it seems. After the week and having saved lots of money the owner decides that he can save even more if he puts the donkey on even less rations. The donkey begins to slow and to encourage the performance of the donkey the owner resorts to the stick. Time goes on as the owner continues this cost saving approach. Then the donkey dies.

That is how the Government is treating the Universities

Research

It is clear from the EU study mentioned above that the Irish University system is successful in graduating students with highly regarded qualifications and so the Universities have great success in teaching.

The University have also great success in research. Due to a great influx in funding for research through the likes of the SFI, the universities have very successful research. Even when research money was rare, the Universities managed to do highly regarded research.

In the early nineties according to a reliable source who worked then in the Department of Finance, the Department was very reluctant to fund University research even though the Universities were constantly lobbying for research funding. At that time the Department of Finance considered that funding University research would only be a subsidy to big companies and if the companies wanted the Universities to do research for them, then the companies should pay for it themselves. That attitude should be put in place now by adding a small levy to the corporate tax. This levy could be ring-fenced for education since some of the corporations are very concerned about our underfunded education system.

The only research the Dept. of Finance is interested in is research that would give rise to a commercial return and this mostly relates to Science and Engineering research. While initially the Dept of Finance was reluctant to fund University research, in the late nineties the Dept changed its mind and in 2000 the Government set up Science Foundation Ireland (SFI).

Did this sudden burst of research money save the Universities from their underfunding? While the research funding was very welcomed by the Universities it brought its own problems. Initially, SFI refused to pay the social costs of the professional researchers and so it was left to the Universities to pay for the social costs such as holiday pay, maternity leave, pension contributions etc. Since the SFI funding was ring-fenced for research the Universities were left to pay millions for the social costs. In effect, the Universities were subsidising SFI. Eventually the Government was persuaded to force SFI to pay the social costs.

The Universities employ hundreds of professional researchers mostly on contracts funded by SFI and these professional researchers are generally the lower paid in the academic world. Like all public service workers they suffer the 7% pension levy which does not go to their pensions, if they have any. They also suffer the recent 7% public service cut in salary.

Universities carry out all kinds of research; research that is socially useful, research that investigates the fundamental properties of nature, research in mathematics, research into our history, languages, culture, education and even economics. Also pursued is research that is commercially relevant. Only the commercially relevant research is funded by funding bodies like SFI, other university research is funded by the University or by philanthropists etc.

Much of University research is opportunity driven rather than mission driven. I am quoting here from Professor Edsgar Dijkstra, who was a distinguished Computer Scientist at the University of Texas in Austin. He adds:

This, by the way, is why managers hate much of university research: because it is not mission-oriented, they cannot manage it.

To understand Government funding for research, Dijkstra invites us to take part in a thought experiment. Imagine, he says, if Alchemy and Chemistry co-existed and were competing for research funding. Needless to say, almost all the funding goes to Alchemists, who in their effort to make gold from cheap base metals, address the Government's highest social concern of how to make money from nothing. The Chemists are derided as none of their work contributes anything to the central problem of gold-making. When Chemistry then makes assumptions about the fundamental properties of matter that would exclude gold-making, it is accused of being counter productive, demoralising and harmful to the national interest. By the time Chemistry accurately predicts the failure of Alchemy, derision turns to hostility and accused of wasting taxpayer's money several Universities are forced to close down their Chemistry departments.

Dijkstra also had a sense for the mischievous.

He considered himself Chairman of the Board of the fictional company Mathematics Inc., that he imagined commercialised the production of mathematical theorems in the same way that software companies had commercialised the production of computer programs. Mathematics Inc. had a proof of the Riemann Hypothesis which of course was a company Trade Secret. The imaginary company demanded royalties from any mathematician who assumed the Riemann Hypothesis in their proof.

The Riemann Hypothesis has yet to be solved. Should mathematicians continue to work on such a problem when the best mathematicians so far have failed. This problem is one of the Millennium Prize Problems and so anyone who solves it gets a million dollars from the Clay Mathematics Institute. Will the solving of this problem have any commercial value? Not particularly except for the million dollars to the winner.

Academic Freedom

As mentioned Universities are involved in many various areas of research and much of that research is opportunity driven and seeks knowledge for its own sake. Should Universities have the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake?

At the International Conference convened by UNESCO in 1950, in Nice, the Universities of the World stipulated three indissociable principles for which every university should stand, namely:

- the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search for truth may lead;
- the tolerance of divergent opinion and freedom from political interference;
- the obligation as social institutions to promote, through teaching and research, the principles of freedom and justice, of human dignity and solidarity, and to develop mutually material and moral aid on an international level. ”

At the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (2009), section #37 of the Communiqué states

“For the quality and integrity of higher education, it is important that academic staff has opportunities for research and scholarship. Academic freedom is a fundamental value that must be protected in today’s evolving and volatile global environment.”

The Irish Government has signed up to this UNESCO Communiqué.

These internationally-recognised principles of academic freedom are recognised in The Universities Act, 1997.

“a member of the academic staff of a university shall have the freedom, within the law, in his or her teaching, research and any other activities either in or outside the university, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions and shall not be disadvantaged, or subject to less favourable treatment by the university, for the exercise of that freedom.”

The Universities Act also recognises the Autonomy of Universities. The Government should properly support the Universities in their research and teaching and not interfere or try and control what the Universities do. Let the Universities get on with the job they are good at.

Benchmarking and Croke Park Proposals

Last year in the context of the economic crisis, the then IFUT President Joe Brady, referred to ‘sharing the pain’. He said:

“I can see the necessity to ‘share’ the problem but it really galls me that those who now invite me to share the pain did not invite me to share the gain, nor would they ever do so in the future. Remember Benchmarking I and Benchmarking II? We hope to get out of this pit in the not too distant future but I wonder if future gains will be shared on the same basis as the pain?”

Recall in Benchmarking 1, that academics in general received the lowest award, of 3%. In Benchmarking II, the award was lower still, 0%.

Academics gained little from Benchmarking. While Benchmarking was marketed as an attempt to equalise public and private pay, one of its main goals was the breaking of relativities. The relativity of academics to posts in the Civil Service was broken and since then the pay scales of the Civil Servants have gone ahead of academics.

Let me try and tell you how Benchmarking worked.

I was involved in organising the Job Evaluation Exercise in TCD on both Benchmarking occasions. The Job Evaluation Exercise, dreamed up by the Government consultants, applied to all 300,000 public service workers and a sample number of staff from each category of work were asked to fill in the same form. The form involved answering about 20 questions, for example; education qualifications, responsibilities, health and safety etc. I could not see how the form could differentiate all the possible categories in the Public Service. I asked the senior civil servant involved how this Job Evaluation Exercise worked in determining the Benchmarking awards. To take an example, a sample lecturer fills in the form. The Consultants involved in the Job Evaluation Exercise would give the filled in answers an overall score, let us say 42. Then the Consultants looked up their private workers categories to look for a category that had the score of 42. It did not matter if the private and public categories were comparable. We have no idea what category in the private sector was compared to the category of lecturer. All that mattered was the score of 42. This just does not make sense.

Consider as well all the time since then that was wasted in filling in the Action Plans forms for both the Sustaining Progress Agreement and the Towards 2016 agreement.

Even after the unions filled in all the Action Plan forms for Towards 2016, the Government decided to pull out of Towards 2016 and refused to pay the 3.5% increment due in 2008. Worse was to come in the following Budgets. Through the tax levies and the Public Service cuts of the so called Pension Levy and the recent direct pay cut, the salary of a public service worker has been reduced by 20%. As one's pay could be regarded as a

right like a private property right, the only way the Government could cut Public Service pay was to change the law of the land and that is what the Government did.

Was there a Public Service Strike because of this? There was but just for one day on 24th November last. This strike day was unique for IFUT as it was the first time they went out on strike for about 30 years. IFUT with the other ICTU unions completely closed Trinity for the day, another unique happening.

Could things get worse? Indeed they did. The unions are now asked to sign up to the Croke Park Proposals. These proposals have been referred to as revolutionary proposals; counter revolutionary is more to the point. If these proposals are imposed then they will set back the hard won rights and conditions of public service workers by years. These proposals are not about savings in the University system but to control and interfere. The Government is more concerned about creating University Inc. and to sell education for profit. There is no profit in pursuing knowledge for its own sake and rights like academic freedom are obstacles to a free market in education.

The IFUT Executive has unanimously rejected the Croke Park proposals and recommends to members to reject them as well in a ballot.

IFUT is affiliated to ICTU and also is part of the Public Service Committee. There is the possibility that the members of other public service unions will accept the Croke Park proposals. Fair enough, but that does not mean that should IFUT members reject the proposals they will then be obliged to accept them just because other unions have accepted the proposals.

In 2003, the biennial conference of ICTU passed the following motion:

“This conference respects the integrity of each union or group of unions in both the negotiation of the conditions of service of their members and the decision-making process in relation to any such negotiation. This conference directs the Executive Council to respect these principles in any future negotiations towards any proposed national agreements, and to

utilise approaches such as the local bargaining clause in the PCW in order to implement such principles.”

This is ICTU policy. This implies that it is only IFUT, as a union, that determines the pay and conditions of its members.

Consider the following from the Croke Park Proposals in the section: ‘University and other Higher Education Institutes’.

“A comprehensive review and revision of employment contracts to identify and remove any impediments to the development of an optimum teaching, learning and research environment. This review and revision to be completed in advance of the start of the 2010/11 academic year.”

The contract that a worker has is between them and their employer. It is acknowledged that one’s union can help set up a contract for a category of staff but in the end it is the member who signs the contract. In this context and the fact that academics have the right to academic freedom and tenure would such a comprehensive review and revision improve the contract of members, I think not. IFUT should not agree to any review or revision of the contracts of its members.

Consider another clause from the same section:

“Co-operation with redeployment/re-organisation/rationalisation arising from the review of Higher Education strategy and changing economic and social circumstances.”

This review of Higher Education strategy has yet to be done and so how could anyone expect members to co-operate with the unknown. Let us see the review first and then we will consider our response.

In regard to the Croke Park clause:

‘Co-operation with the introduction of work load management and full economic costing [FEC] models and with the compilation of associated data to support these’

IFUT has already a policy on this. It advises members not to co-operate with Work Load or FEC models that are not negotiated and agreed with the union.

As mentioned the IFUT Executive recommends rejection of the Croke Park proposals and I urge members of IFUT to do likewise.

Finally,

I mentioned at the beginning that we have little or no saints, but IFUT has an angel in Phyllis Russell who runs the IFUT Head Office.

As a union negotiator our General Secretary, Mike Jennings, may not be considered an angel by human resources personnel but to us he is our defender, defending the union both at a national level and at a local level in defending the rights of individual members.

The union is run by the Executive, Council and all the branch secretaries who unselfishly give their time and support to the union; without them we would not have a union.

After 3 years as President and one year as outgoing president, Joe Brady is stepping down. I thank Joe for his great support and commitment throughout the year. He will continue to be the conscience of the union and as one knows we do follow our conscience.

Thank You.