

Irish Federation of University Teachers,
11 Merrion Square,
Dublin 2.

Thursday, 14 August 2008.

Funding the Universities

A chara,

Minister Bat O'Keeffe is right to raise the issue of how universities spend the public's money. Without doubt, universities should get value for money and spending decisions should be taken in an open and transparent manner. This union has questioned the wisdom of some recent spending decisions and it is good to see that the Minister now appears to agree with us. There is so little money in the sector that it is important that it is well spent.

The Minister is also right to raise the issue of the presence of lecturers in the classroom. Students have the right to be taught by academics - these are the people with the training, the reputation and the enthusiasm for their subjects. Education is a core function of any academic and it is the intimate connection between research and education that makes universities into the powerhouses of learning that fuel both the knowledge society and the knowledge economy. However, a lot of the meaningless bureaucracy that has diverted academics from their core functions has had its genesis in his own Department and in the Higher Education Authority.

It is good, therefore, that the Minister intends to look at these issues and we would look forward to working with him.

It would not be correct, however, to allow any suggestion to take hold that the funding crisis within the universities is of their own making, arising from bad spending policies. This could easily be used to justify the persistent and perennial cutting of core funding to the universities: a practice which sees funding per student fall in real terms each year.

Questioning how universities spend the money they get is appropriate but please let us not fall into the trap of thinking that this absolves the State from an appropriate funding mechanism for third level. The central and basic message has to be that universities do not get enough money to undertake their core mission. We do not need any more reports to make that point. There is no need for further reviews. What is needed is a simple, straightforward reversal of the cuts in parallel with the development of a sustainable funding model, with appropriate spending oversight, for the future.

Yours etc,

Dr Joe Brady,
President.