

January Blog

Higher Education - Don't mention the money!

At last! The government's policy for higher education is becoming crystal clear. "Let's talk about anything but money."

In January alone we had two major announcements on the future of third-level, but no funding to back them up.

Two Budgets under this present government have done nothing to acknowledge the elephantine crisis in our universities. Instead we have been offered what might best be termed bull-in-a-china-shop alternative 'priorities.'

Last July, as our universities prepared for a new academic year amid a dire funding crisis, Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, decided to highlight governance matters at some universities, saying he would appoint investigators to examine "issues of concern" in higher education institutions.

A case of watching the cents and let the euros look after themselves!

Since then the Minister has announced detailed plans to penalise universities that fall short on accounts and management.

Mismanagement must indeed be addressed seriously - and there are indeed issues for some universities to address. But skewing priorities in this way is like insisting that a drowning man straighten his tie before he goes underwater. It's hardly holistic or life-saving.

Expecting the car to run on empty seems to have become a further sub-policy.

We have been told that STEM courses are to be given priority at third-level. All universities must comply.

The 'STEM Education Policy Statement 2017 - 2026', published on November 27th last, opens with the statement that "We have set ourselves the ambition that Ireland will become the best education and training service in Europe." The accompanying press release refers to making "Ireland a leader in the provision of STEM education."

All very brave and ambitious. But where's the money?

The 'Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020,' announced in mid-January proposes to give institutions increased money for upping the number of STEM courses, but with penalties for those that don't.

A bit like robbing Peter to pay Paul, but with no hint anywhere of extra overall funding.

Undergraduate students pursuing non-STEM courses will still be required to cough up €3,000 a year. But an unspecified portion of their contribution is likely be siphoned off to STEM areas, perhaps not even in their own university. This suggests dire implications for

staff numbers, over-crowding and threats to tutorials and mentoring in other areas, including very high intake courses such as Arts and Humanities.

Back in October 2017 a long-term funding solution was promised in time for the Minister for Education to bring a plan to Cabinet for Budget 2018. That didn't happen. Indeed the Oireachtas Committee Report that was meant to bring it about continues to drift in cyber draft.

Even more tellingly, the Report of the specially commissioned Expert Group on Future Funding of Higher Education, published in July 2016, continues to be ignored.

Let's recall the warning in the Foreword to that Report by the Expert Group's Chair, Peter Cassels: "The funding system is simply not fit for purpose...these pressures are now seriously threatening quality within the system and the ability of our sons and daughters to gain the knowledge and develop the capabilities that will enable us to realise our national goals."

In 'response' two Budgets since that Report's publication have flat-lined on third-level funding. Instead, the Minister for Education fiddles with detail while Rome burns.

Last week An Taoiseach got some flak for suggesting that young couples not expect the state's support to help them get on the property ladder.

"Sometimes people go abroad for a period, or they get money from their parents," he opined.

He may well have got the idea for this 'Live horse and you will get grass' analysis by following the procrastinations and prevarications of his own Minister for Education.