



**Cónaidhm Éireannach na Múinteoirí Ollscoile
Irish Federation of University Teachers**

MEDIA RELEASE

**IFUT's initial commentary on the National Strategy for
Irish Higher Education ("*The Hunt Report*")**

10 January 2011

The Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) welcomes the unequivocal call in the National Strategy for Irish Higher Education ("*The Hunt Report*") for a substantial increase in funding for Higher Education.

IFUT is very pleased to see throughout the Report repeated acknowledgements of the current quality and high international reputation of Irish higher education.

According to IFUT General Secretary, Mike Jennings, "the statement in the Report that Irish higher education enjoys first place internationally for graduate employability and is placed second of 28 countries surveyed for graduate quality is particularly noteworthy".

The Report's commitment to Quality Assurance is also welcome. IFUT has worked at national and international levels to promote the highest standards of QA. It is often overlooked that European QA standards demand that institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.

The Report says quite starkly that "the current system is delivering above-average outcomes at below-average funding levels". Yet, despite these welcome statements and the inclusion of a number of very welcome recommendations, IFUT's overall assessment of the Report is that it is disappointing, often confused and, in general, a missed opportunity.

The Report lacks a sense of authority and credibility. It often reads like a document compiled by people who do not understand the Irish higher education system and how it works. This is almost an inevitable result of the narrow base of the Strategy Group's

membership. Incredibly, its 15 members did not include even one representative of academic staff. This weakness was compounded by the Group's failure to seek any realistic engagement with staff working in the Higher Education system.

The sense in the Report that its authors are out of touch with how Higher Education works, combined with the vagueness of many of its recommendations, leads one to believe that most of it will probably never be implemented. Indeed, the Hunt Report is unlikely to have much influence on the future development of Higher Education in Ireland.

In fairness to all concerned, IFUT feels compelled to list some of the Report's positive and negative aspects.

On the positive side:

- We note the clear declaration of the need for a huge injection of additional funds;
- We applaud the calls for a doubling of HE capacity over the next 20 years (it has already doubled over the last twenty years);
- We are very pleased that the Strategy Group states clearly that "Academic Freedom is central to Higher Education";
- We agree that "Teaching and research should enjoy parity of esteem";
- We also agree that there is an urgent need for "a clear career path for researchers" in Irish Universities.

However, the Report appears to be confused and internally contradictory in a number of areas:

- It says clearly that there should be no new universities, yet subsequently details at length how a Technological University would come about;
- It calls for Teaching and Research to be aligned and combined, yet it suggests that some Higher Education Institutions should be Research-focused and others Teaching-focused;
- It acknowledges that Ireland's "large number of Higher Education Institutions have facilitated widespread access to Higher Education" and that "many of the leading Higher Education Institutions worldwide are relatively small institutions". Yet it calls for the incorporation of (unnamed) smaller HEIs into larger units. No reasons are given, other than an apparent belief that "big is good, small is bad".

On the tuition fee issue, the Report is also somewhat incoherent. In calling for individual students to pay fees they recognise that this is not realistic for many and so they suggest a loan scheme - which they think a separate task force should design. Yet, in a country

where banks do not lend even to productive businesses, they do not say who will provide these loans. If it is to be the state, where is the saving?

The Report's authors also implicitly acknowledge that fees will affect student participation levels because they admit that "in situations where there are identified skills shortages", the state may need to pay the fees directly.

Finally, in calling for Universities to make changes based on anonymous student feedback systems (whose format is not made clear), the Report pays no regard to recent controversies regarding the dangers of grade inflation and how this could be triggered by encouraging teachers to pursue popularity rather than respect.

The Report is uninspiring. It lacks authority. It singularly lacks any specific indicators of how any of its recommendations might be implemented against the opposition of vested interests. With a change of government in prospect, it seems that Colin Hunt and his team may well have created one of our all-time most expensive dust accumulators.

- ENDS -

For further information on this media release, please contact:

Mike Jennings,
General Secretary,
Irish Federation of University Teachers,
11 Merrion Square,
Dublin 2.
Tel: (01) 661 0910
(087) 677 6747
E-mail: GeneralSecretary@ifut.ie

John Gallagher,
John Gallagher Consulting.
Tel: (087) 936 9888