

International threat to Irish education standards, warns expert

May 9th, 2014

A new trade agreement being negotiated between the EU and the United States poses significant risks to quality and equity in Ireland's higher education system, an international trade expert claimed in Dublin today (Sat May 10th, 2014).

David Robinson, Canadian based senior consultant to Education International, the global federation of teachers' associations and unions, told delegates at the Annual Conference of the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) will intensify the pressures of privatisation and commercialisation.

"By subjecting higher education to the commercial rules of trade agreements for the first time, TTIP would explicitly put at risk a host of regulations and rules necessary to ensure quality and equity.

"The for-profit education sector in the United States, reeling from controversies about poor quality and poor student outcomes, is now seeking unfettered access to the European and Irish market.

A two year investigation and 2012 US Congressional Report on for-profit colleges in the US highlighted :

- a 64% dropout rate
- over 22% of revenues spent on marketing, 19.4% taken in profits and just 17% devoted to instruction
- high graduate unemployment rates
- 'substandard academic offerings, high tuition and executive compensation, low student retention rates and the issuance of credentials of questionable value.'

"If education is covered by the TTIP, Irish authorities would be powerless to protect students from these predatory providers entering Ireland or to defend and maintain quality of education."

"Ireland should strongly push the European Commission to demand an explicit exclusion of education from the TTIP," David Robinson said.

"The EU Foreign Affairs Council of Ministers has already excluded the audiovisual sector from TTIP based on the public interest goal of preserving and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity within the EU. The same reasoning would justify an exemption for education from the TTIP."

Education remains one of the least-affected sectors in trade agreements because of long-held, legitimate concerns that legally-binding trade rules would restrict the ability of governments and designated authorities to ensure access to quality education.

“Private and for-profit education companies have increasingly argued for inclusion of education in trade agreements like the TTIP. The conservative Cato Institute is urging the United States and other countries to pursue liberalisation of trade in higher education in particular, to ‘reduce the role of government and lead to significant growth in the presence of for-profit companies.’

“The government and education sector in Ireland should be alert to, and resist this increasing pressure for commercialized education,” David Robinson said.

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David Robinson Biog:

David Robinson is the Executive Director Elect of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), representing more than 68,000 academic and general staff in over 120 universities and colleges in Canada. David will take up the position on July 1 next after serving 15 years as the Association's Associate Executive Director for research, communications and international relations.

Prior to joining CAUT, David was the senior economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Canada's leading progressive think-tank. He has lectured at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia and Carleton University in Ottawa. He has authored a number of articles, reviews, and reports on higher education and research policy, vocational education and training and international trade and investment agreements.

He also serves as the senior advisor on higher education, copyright and international trade issues to Education International, the global union federation representing more than 30 million teachers and education workers in 171 countries and territories. He is a member of the Board of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and is President of OpenMedia.ca.

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