

We Need to Talk About Higher Education

Writing in today's Irish Times, member of the Expert Review Group on Future Funding of Higher Education Joe O'Connor calls for the immediate publication of the Group's report.

The following statement is supported by the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), SIPTU, IMPACT, the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) and the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT).

It is now over three months since the Expert Review Group on Future Funding of Higher Education signed off on its final report, a period which has seen a General Election campaign take place as well as protracted negotiations on Government formation, however Higher Education has remained largely absent from political discourse.

It is time for the contents of this hugely significant report to be put in the public and political domain, to ensure the resourcing of our Higher Education system can be considered not only by the incoming Government and new Minister, but so that a fully-informed public debate on something which is fundamental to the future development of the country can finally be enabled.

The context to this report is well-documented. Huge increases in demand for Higher Education, coupled with very significant reductions in state funding has caused a dramatic fall in funding per student.

The report is explicit in the quantum of funding that will be required in order to meet significant demographic demand pressures, provide investment which will maintain and enhance quality, and ease the burden on struggling students and families. It is however common knowledge that this is in excess of €1 billion at a minimum.

There are those of us who believe this should be met predominantly from public funding, but recognise that the context is one of considerable competing demands and priorities for public funds.

The alternative proposition is an additional imposition of student fees facilitated by an income contingent loan scheme, at a time when Ireland already has the 2nd-highest level of student fees and the 3rd-highest level of personal and household debt in the EU.

Some myths need to be debunked. We absolutely do not have 'free fees' - If you do not qualify for the maintenance grant, we have one of the most expensive third-level systems in the OECD. And student loans are already a necessity for many, with the Irish League of Credit Unions study last year finding that 59% of parents are getting into debt on average of over €5,000 through private borrowing to cover the spiralling costs of going to college.

What is therefore clear to anyone familiar with the Higher Education system in Ireland is that plodding on with the status quo is not a viable or desirable option.

Regardless of your view on these significant choices which face us as to how we finance our Higher Education system, it is in the public interest that this should be considered as a matter of urgency by a new Cabinet at the earliest possible juncture, and that a full parliamentary debate on the implications of this hugely significant report is facilitated.

This is far too important a decision to be taken behind closed doors, without a public and political debate on how Higher Education should be funded which is informed by the contents of the report.

And it is far too important an issue to avoid taking a decision on any longer.

If we are truly serious about building a republic of equals, then we must ensure nobody is deprived of access to Higher Education due to their personal circumstances or financial means.

If we are truly serious about building the knowledge economy that we spend a lot of time talking about, then we must ensure that our Higher Education sector, which has been starved of funding in recent years, is adequately resourced to deliver a truly world-class system.

There was a healthy degree of scepticism when the Expert Review Group was formed that it existed to kick the can down the road for a couple of years. Now that the Group's work is complete, I and the undersigned cannot continue to watch from the side-lines with a clear conscience while the future funding of our Higher Education system remains barely an afterthought.

Joe O'Connor

Kevin Donoghue, President of the Union of Students in Ireland said:

"We have danced around the issue of higher education funding for too long, and political parties and Governments are running out of excuses. The 32nd Dáil need to take steps to ensure that there is proper public funding available for the sector without any financial barriers to participants."

John King, SIPTU Divisional Organiser said:

"It is now essential that this report is published immediately to enable the debate to take place amongst all of the stakeholders, so as to ensure that this critical issue of funding the Higher Education sector can be considered.

This is necessary not only to ensure that the needs of a growing and developing economy are catered for, but also to ensure that there is equality of access for all students into Higher Education, and not a situation that is burdensome on students and their families or in many cases places Higher Education out of reach."

Gina O'Brien, Chair of IMPACT's Education Division said:

"The Institutes of Technology have been subject to cuts in funding for the past number of years and this practice cannot continue any longer. The lack of funding has impacted on the delivery of services to students and will inevitably effect the quality of education delivery and supports to students.

The most vulnerable of students are those struggling to remain in college because they require additional supports. The status quo cannot be maintained because each year the number of CAO applications increases due to the fact that the student population is increasing."

The Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) strongly criticised the ignoring of education in the various discussions on forming a government since the general election, saying a new report published by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) suggests that education funding cuts here are a local rather than European phenomenon.

Mike Jennings, General Secretary of IFUT said:

"The report "The state of funding in education, teachers' working conditions, social dialogue and trade union rights in Western European countries (2016)", points to "*a persistent negative investment trend since 2010*" and warns that this is not due to '*cuts spread across Europe*' but is '*mainly found in the same group of countries,*' including Ireland. The report refers to '*slightly increased*' education funding in a number of European countries as we come out of recession,' but Ireland is not listed among them," he said.

Dr Aidan Kenny, Assistant General Secretary of the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) stated:

"During the austerity years, funding for Higher Education was cut by up to 35%, student numbers increased by 20% and academic staff numbers reduced by 10%. The current student to teaching staff ratio is 23:1, well above the OECD average of 16:1. The quality of provision of teaching and research is at crisis point.

A recent QQI report notes quality has only been maintained by the commitment and good will of academic staff. The reality of funding cuts is apparent in Dundalk IT, Galway Mayo IT which are considering closing programmes and reducing staffing levels in order to meet the unrealistic budgetary targets set by the Higher Education Authority. The policy of cutting deeper in a time of increased demand does not make common sense.

There is an urgent need to have an investment strategy for Higher Education. Higher Education as a public good needs to be resourced to enhance quality and cater for the increased demand. To achieve an investment model there is a need to engage in open public dialogue on the purpose and function of higher education in a knowledge economy and equitable society. The publication of the Expert Group's report will enable the start of this conversation."

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