

Funding crisis of universities being hidden behind ‘lace curtain’ mentality of government, says IFUT

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Higher education is increasingly expected to survive behind a ‘lace curtain’ of hidden poverty while the government and Department of Education promote the illusion that all is well in the sector, according to Mike Jennings, General Secretary of the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT).

Addressing the Annual Conference of IFUT in Dublin today (Saturday May 7th), he said that the truth is that funding has been decimated; resources, staff and students are stretched to an unprecedented extent and colleges are fast running out of economies and alternative strategies to compensate.

“As a consequence IFUT may have to swap lace curtains for placards, embark on strike action and close colleges in the short-term to ensure that they survive in the long-term.

“In the best tradition of a ‘lace curtain’ mentality, we are being forced to substitute margarine for butter, watering the milk, darning the socks and skipping meals.

- Public funding of Higher Education in Ireland has declined dramatically in the last number of years. In 2007/08 funding from public sources represented 76% of the total. In 2015/16 this was down to 51%. In monetary terms that a cut of over €200m.
- While funding declined, student numbers were soaring. HEA figures indicate that the numbers increased by 31,000 in the period from 2008 to 2013 and continue to increase.
- In the same period staff numbers dropped by 4,500 and the student staff ratio went from 1:18.8 to 1:24. Both figures continue to show decline since.
- Some staff are expected to cope on salaries of €5,000 per year for casual work while many hundreds of lecturers and researchers subsist on insecure, short-term contracts.”

Recent research carried out in TCD and quoted in the Times Higher Education magazine said that higher education supports 150,000 jobs in the Republic of Ireland. It found that each €1 spent in Higher Education generates €4 for the Irish economy, Mike Jennings said.

“The current “Acting Minister” for Education consistently adopted the ‘lace curtain’ strategy and ignored Higher Education. She did not even respond to our formal request for her to declare a position on precarious employment in the Sector.

“She is not invited here today. Last year when she was invited she gratuitously insulted us by refusing to attend at the last minute because we were engaged in trade union activity on behalf of our members! Let us hope that the next Minister is more ‘active’ than ‘acting’.

“It is time to pull back the lace curtains hiding the crisis in higher education. There are only so many foreign students you can tap for full cost fees! Neither is there an endless supply of philanthropists!

“Similarly, the realisation is dawning on college authorities that you cannot sell academic and research capacity to the highest private bidder and hope to maintain academic freedom and a reputation for independence.

“The Public Sector Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions is beginning to develop a strategy to ensure that public servants get the maximum reward possible for the patriotic sacrifices we have made over the past eight years. It is past time to put the butter back on the table,” Mike Jennings said.

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