

University research and researchers in crisis, say IFUT President

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The incoming government must address the crisis in research and among researchers in third-level colleges, Michael Delargey, President of the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT), stated at the organisation's Annual Conference in Dublin (Saturday, May 7th, 2016).

Mr Delargey said that researchers represent a vast coterie of staff that are increasingly ignored and demoted by education planners and administrators.

“In 2015 there were 5,156 researchers in Irish Universities. This compares to 4,298 academics and 4,861 support staff.”

He said that:

- The vast majority of researchers (4,068) are employed on exploitative temporary contracts.
- Researchers have continuously been excluded from national pay agreements
- Universities operate a training element to a research ‘career’ to escape the obligations of the Fixed Time Workers Act
- Many researchers teach, supervise, apply for funding, do academic administration, mark examinations, publish and carry out research yet they are denied access to appropriate academic pay scales.
- The Expert Group on Fixed-Term and Part-Time Employment for Lecturers was debarred from including researchers as part of its terms of reference on the insistence of the Department of Education and Skills.
- A dispute concerning researcher status and pay has been on-going without resolution in Tyndall National Institute in Cork for the last eight years.

Mr Delargey said that preservation of what is termed ‘blue skies’ research is vital to future economic development

“Blue skies research, by its nature, may not have immediate application. It is dismissed as inefficient in the ‘quick-buck’ mentality of much neo-liberal thinking on education. Unfortunately this thinking has insinuated itself into much of the policy of university administrations and government during the past decade.

“Elsewhere a different view is taken. Last month I attended an event in the University of Bologna. The Vice President for Research stated that universities should spend funding on basic, blue skies research to create a competitive edge in ten years’ time. Our Irish universities should heed the advice.”

Mr Delargey proposed the immediate initiation of a social dialogue on higher education to address the issue of research and researchers - as part of tackling the overall demise in funding and resultant crisis in the third-level sector.

He said that such a dialogue should focus on “two key elements:

- Higher education institutions need to focus immediately on the creation of supportive working and studying environments.
- The incoming government must increase higher education spending, reverse the employment control framework to employ additional academic staff and researchers and move towards the OECD staff student ratio of 16:1 in place of the current 20:1 ratio.”

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