

Urgent engagement and consultation by government needed to avoid higher education chaos in Autumn, says IFUT

“Students and staff alike are being left in ongoing limbo”

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Immediate consultations and engagement by the Department of Education with students, staff and higher education institutions is needed to avoid escalating uncertainty and the threat of enrolment chaos next Autumn, the Irish Federation of University teachers (IFUT) has stated.

Joan Donegan, General Secretary of IFUT, said that a clear process of consultation and briefing with colleges, staff and students should now be urgently established by government.

“Students and staff alike are being left in ongoing limbo. We need clear and detailed discussion on a roadmap from government on issues like:

- when and how colleges will be allowed to reopen
- how national restrictions will affect or inhibit class based teaching
- government funding guarantees to ensure staffing levels and colleges remain viable.

“Over 40,000 students hoping to enter third-level and up to 200,000 students already in the system have currently no idea on when and under what conditions colleges will reopen. A process of consultation is urgently required. There is an increasing risk that many students will opt out of or defer college, especially when added to the impact of job losses and financial uncertainty for their families.”

Joan Donegan said that, within colleges, government silence to date means absence of clarity on:

- The status of thousands of casually employed and part-time contract staff
- How government decisions will affect class based activity or force extension of current “always-on” online teaching and learning
- whether research will be included in emergency funding for the economy causing uncertainty for thousands of researchers and postgraduate students
- Whether higher education will receive emergency supports as part of any package for the economy generally for huge income losses from the collapse of research income, foreign student intake and other non-exchequer funding.

Joan Donegan said that a detailed analysis published by the ESRI at the start of Covid-19 warned of the need for “clarity and certainty about timelines” in dealing with the impact of the pandemic.

“IFUT is committed to working with the Department of Education, universities, students and all other stakeholders to find and agree solutions to the issues now facing thousands of staff and tens of thousands of young people. The process of discussion and clarification needs to occur without further delay,” Joan Donegan said.

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