

IFUT welcomes government higher education funding and guidelines but cautions that issues will need to be addressed on ongoing basis.

The Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) has broadly welcomed the announcement by the Minister for Higher Education, Simon Harris, of funding supports for universities and details in the 'Guidance for Further and Higher Education for returning to on-site activity in 2020'.

IFUT General Secretary, Joan Donegan said that the announcement represents a formal recognition of the very serious impact of Covid-19 on both the finances and delivery of higher education in Ireland, "but many issues will need further attention and urgent resolution."

"The new academic year presents major challenges for both lecturers and students in colleges. There is a need to provide certainty for both lecturers and students alike as we prepare for a full academic year."

"In the guidance document the Minister clarifies that the initial response to Covid-19 involved 'a rapid move to emergency remote teaching and assessment of programmes, without impacting on the integrity of qualifications.' This work indeed involved very considerable strain and stress for both those delivering and undertaking their study.

"It will not be practical or possible to sustain such an approach for a full academic year. IFUT will continue to work at individual college level to resolve the many practical issues but the work of all concerned in this regard must be fully facilitated by government policy also.

"One of the major issues will be delivery of a full academic year of education in a shortened time frame, the exact details of which are not available yet in many cases. Academic qualifications earned during this period must stand up to full scrutiny compared to those obtained in other years and this must not be jeopardised by any continuation of 'emergency' or other ad-hoc measures, and certainly not without full consultation with the staff who will attempt to maintain the fabric of our higher education" Joan Donegan said.

"The support package of €168m for the sector is welcome, although far short of covering the losses for third-level colleges that disproportionately suffered the impact of restricted education spending over the past decade", Joan Donegan said.

"Sustainable third-level funding, as promised in the new Programme for Government, should, therefore, remain a priority focus in next October's Budget.

"In addition the ability of colleges to deliver a robust education service is being threatened by lay-offs in every college of many temporary, short-term and contract staff due to increased financial pressures."

"It is unacceptable that the most vulnerable and precarious staff in our education delivery are losing their jobs. It is also a fact that the underfunding of the past decade has led universities to develop a precarious employment model, to the extent that the departure of these staff now threatens the viability of many courses in a way that may not be immediately clear but may have devastating impact as the year progresses. Funding to retain these staff should be addressed by government as a matter of urgency," she said.