

Certainty required urgently on re-opening of higher education based on health and safety clarity, says IFUT

Tues. July 28th, 2020

The Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) has said that certainty is required urgently on the re-opening process for higher education institutions for hundreds of thousands of students and families and thousands of lecturers and staff affected.

Speaking in advance of a meeting of third-level teaching unions with Higher Education Minister, Simon Harris, (Wed. July 29th, 2020), IFUT General Secretary, Joan Donegan said that, with college reopening now less than two months away, clarity on the ‘new normal’ of higher education must be provided without delay.

She said that key issues include:

- Clarification on a one metre or two metre rule for classroom attendance
- Guidance, required from NPHE, on how staff and students with health vulnerabilities, will be accommodated in any new arrangements
- Clear protocols for online class delivery, including student contact and mentoring, tutorial participation, etc.
- Timely agreement on college physical attendance and expectations for lecturers and students
- Impact of cancellation of temporary and short-term lecturing contracts on education delivery and standards
- A range of issues related to working from home arrangements, irregular hours, ‘always available’ demands, provision of appropriate equipment and overall threat to work-life balance.
- The need for next October’s Budget to reverse a decade of underfunding as a separate measure to the recent stimulus package, which itself addressed only a portion of the loss in colleges’ income due to the impact of Covid-19.

Joan Donegan said that “IFUT is working constructively and successfully with individuals college managements on many of the above issues. However, the Minister and Department of Higher Education has a specific responsibility and competence to ensure that the re-opening of higher education occurs as smoothly as possible.”

“Firstly, health and safety measures, including decisions on the 2 metre rule and protections for at risk staff and students must be urgently addressed. Secondly, variations in individual college strategies and policies must be managed to ensure

students receive an objective and realistic understanding of college life and study in the coming academic year.”

“Front-line staff, should be fully involved in all discussions and decisions at national level as well as locally. Staff cannot be expected to plan and deliver on potentially over-ambitious claims regarding course delivery on which they are not consulted.”

In the Guidance Document for re-opening last week 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.’

“It will not be possible to sustain such an ‘emergency’ mode approach for a full academic year. The ‘new normal’ must prioritise the ‘normal’ for staff and students alike, to ensure that education delivered and received under altered teaching and assessment arrangements withstands full academic and professional scrutiny,” Joan Donegan said.

“The most vulnerable and precarious staff in higher education are now having contracts terminated or not renewed due to Covid-19. Underfunding of the past decade has led universities to develop a precarious employment model, 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.”

“Minister Norma Foley this week announced the appointment of substitute teacher panels and year-long contracts at primary level to address crisis staffing needs. Additional funding to maintain higher education staffing levels should be provided by government as a matter of urgency,” she said.

ENDS

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