

Higher Education requires ‘Tier One’ category for resources and engagement

By Joan Donegan, General Secretary, Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT)

Earlier this week Cambridge University in the UK announced that all its courses will be delivered online for the next academic year. The decision followed immediately on a warning from England’s university regulator, the Office of Students, on the need for ‘absolute clarity’ for students making academic plans.

Speaking earlier this week, Prof Peter Clinch, Chair of Science Foundation Ireland, said infrastructure in Irish colleges is not yet at the level of leading US institutions for online and blended learning and that "there is a naivety about what it takes to really do good online or blended learning."

Former CEO of the Higher Education Authority, Graham Love, has stated that university life will be like a ‘live lab experiment’ for the next two years.

The impact of Covid-19 is rapidly threatening to create a lost generation of school leavers who face huge uncertainty on whether to enrol or defer higher education entry next Autumn.

Will this year’s Leaving Cert students welcome being the laboratory mice for such an experiment? Or will they opt to await greater clarity and seek to avoid being forever classified as the ‘Class of 2020’.

Will university lecturers, tutors and researchers have the resources and time to develop teaching and course presentation structures that are sufficiently robust to allow the first graduates under a new teaching regime feel they are competing on a level playing pitch?

Civil strife in many Middle Eastern countries created a lost education generation of young people there. Our battle with Covid-19 risks delivering serious multi-year damage to higher education unless the threat is immediately acknowledged and addressed.

Earlier this month EU Commissioner, Phil Hogan, warned that the impact of the pandemic for European economies and trade may not be overcome until 2024.

This month, the employers’ organisation IBEC said higher education “requires €400m to support core, programmatic funding and infrastructure needs” and needs its long-term funding model to be “put on a sustainable basis”.

The Irish Universities Association predict universities on their own will suffer an income collapse of €180m from loss of overseas students alone.

Preserving the integrity of higher education for tens of thousands of students and thousands of staff in a radically altered teaching environment must, therefore, form a core focus in central education planning and any new Programme for Government.

Higher education requires ‘tier one’ attention, alongside the economy and health, in overall efforts to revive our society.

The ability of colleges to deliver high calibre graduates following the banking crisis was essential to maintaining confidence and investment in Ireland. Our colleges are, however, greatly weakened by a decade of underfunding as they seek to confront a second body blow.

Government must restore certainty by focusing on the twin issues of resources and engagement.

The proposal in the joint Fianna Fáil - Fine Gael Framework Document, to “agree a long-term sustainable funding model for higher-level education” and “invest in research, development and innovation” is an important commitment.

But it will need to be clearly ringfenced with adequate resourcing and policy strength to be meaningful.

To take just one example, research and researcher employment faces huge challenges due to the direct impact of Covid-19 on research activity and uncertainty on future research funding.

Without a robust R&D sector in education and society, students and postgraduates will shy away from research. Significant loss of momentum to enable Ireland sustain its place in the world economy will result.

On the second issue of engagement, detailed consultation with academic planners and lecturing staff, both within universities and where appropriate, the Department of Education, must occur to the maximum extent possible.

Decisions on the extent and parameters of online course delivery, on health and safety of staff and students, social distance issues in lectures and tutorials and how staff and students can best adapt to a radically altered learning experience, all require national, in addition to local input. In some cases national decisions on health and safety will take precedence.

Indecision and delay created much of the uncertainty for this year’s Leaving Cert students. All stakeholders, including front line university teaching staff, must work jointly to provide certainty to those very same students as they contemplate the if, how and when of their higher education future in the months ahead.

Specifically Higher Education requires:

- a government rescue package in the order of €400m that responds to the calls of the universities themselves, IBEC and the long moribund recommendations of the Cassells Report
- Absolute clarity for higher-education students, driven by the Department of Education in conjunction with university academic planners and lecturing staff
- A realistic approach to the demands on academic and professional staff of online working, including the challenge of reproducing every timetabled class online. Centrally-imposed solutions will not work, flexibility is required for staff in scheduling online teaching or meetings while also caring for children or elderly relatives.

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