

## Defend the University – Dublin 25 November 2013

### ADDRESS BY JENS VRAA-JENSEN TO THE LAUNCH OF THE CAMPAIGN ON 25 NOVEMBER 2013

Thank you very much to IFUT for the invitation to this launch of the campaign on Defending the universities in Ireland, which is organised in collaboration between IFUT and SIPTU.

It is very timely to launch the campaign now, and it is of extreme importance to defend the universities in both Ireland and the rest of the world from being reduced to service providers to the immediate interests and goals of private industry and the government.

The mission of universities should be a balance between collaboration with the entire society around it and continuously work to develop a deeper understanding of the world we are living in. Only by focusing on this mission will universities be able to create the basis for new developments and inventions in society in general and businesses in particular. To be able to fulfil this mission, universities need the autonomy and the academics need academic freedom to challenge the established truth in their search for deeper and more developed understanding of nature and the societies we have created throughout the world.

The education of future generations is not only for the immediate needs of a still faster changing labour market, but must also be for the development of critical thinking, intellectual capacity-building and a long term understanding and ability to think of new ways and solutions to problems we don't even know the existence of today. Such an understanding and ability to create new solutions can only be developed in a close relationship between education and research. So maintaining the connection between teaching and research in higher education in general and universities in particular is essential.

The campaign is not standing alone here in Ireland. The campaign was highly welcomed at the meeting last week of the European Higher Education and Research Standing Committee, colleagues in the researchers union in Norway have a similar campaign running and we are also planning a campaign like this in Denmark.

This is just illustrating that it is a European and in fact also a global phenomenon that universities are being pushed in a more and more instrumentalist direction where education and research is being considered only as a tool for regaining the competitiveness of the European economies.

As citizens of modern democracies we must react against this reduction of the mission of universities, and we must all do our best to raise the awareness of the risks to the entire society if the long-term perspectives of the mission of universities are being eroded – or eliminated.

We must respect that it is the nature of research that results can't always prove their relevance in an annual assessment. Scientific history is full of evidence that it can take

decades before the relevance of some research is realised – and sometimes it never happens.

A journalist asked me a few days ago whether European societies, while many of them still facing economic difficulties, could afford to invest in “blue-sky research”. My answer was that as we are in a knowledge economy, we can’t afford not to invest in research and higher education. And humanities, Social Science, Theology etc. are as important to a modern society as Engineering, Technology and Science. Intercultural understanding, communication in different languages etc. is of the highest importance in a globalised world.

And talking about the global nature of education and research, the Irish campaign is also very well connected to a campaign of Education International which started on World Teachers Day - October 5<sup>th</sup> and will run for a year. This global campaign – supported by the UN – is named “Unite for Quality Education.”

At the end of the day, quality is what this is all about. High quality in higher education can’t be maintained and further developed if universities are downgraded to service providers.

This is NOT about defending an old-fashion privilege for an elite in the society. The modern knowledge society depends on people who know something, and that is graduates from higher education. But their knowledge is only useful to society in general if they are equipped with an intellectual and critical mind-set, which is not simply reduced merely to serve the short term profit interests in the private sector.

The success of the universities depends of course on the abilities of the people who work in them. High quality in teaching and research can’t be obtained without a high competence in teaching and research of the academic staff, and thus requires attractive working conditions and sufficient public funding.

The governing structures should build on engagement of the academic community in collegial decision making bodies which can give preference to the advance of academic matters rather than simple bottom line thinking.

The campaign which is launched today is at the end of the day not only about universities, but it is about the future and survival of our societies. Allow me to quote a short sentence from recommendation 1762 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe from 2006, where the following is stated:

*4.3. History has proven that violations of academic freedom and university autonomy have always resulted in intellectual relapse, and consequently in social and economic stagnation;*

Defend the University is addressing the core issue of this statement, and the success of the campaign is vital for the future of our societies – I wish you all the luck and a successful campaign!