

New study calls for sustained investment and restoration of staffing levels at third level

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A major new study involving almost 1,200 academics calls for ‘significantly increased and sustained levels of investment’ and increased staffing levels to meet continued growth in student numbers. Almost three-quarters of respondents feel their working conditions are deteriorating.

The Report ‘*Creating a Supportive Working Environment for Academics in Higher Education*’ by Marie Clarke, Aidan Kenny and Andrew Loxley, will be published Monday, June 22nd. It was commissioned by the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) and the Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) and involved consultations throughout Irish third-level institutions.

The Report points out that funding to the third-level education decreased by a massive 29% from 2007 to 2014. Institutes of Technology lost 29%, universities 26% and other colleges 24%.

Staff numbers declined by 4,500 from 2008 to 2013. At the same time student numbers at third-level surged by over 31,000 (16%) from 2008 to 2014.

Among other key findings are:

- 72% of academics believe that their working conditions have deteriorated
- 55% of respondents believe that management does not support the teaching aspects of their role
- Two thirds of respondents (67%) believe the availability of research funding is inadequate.
- Over half of respondents indicated an increased pressure to raise external research funding, with over two thirds considering the availability of such funding inadequate.
- 64% did not view themselves as participants in the decision making processes of their institutions and 67% views internal communications as ‘inadequate.’

The report calls on higher education institutions to “make specific and public commitments to the teaching role of academics,” proposes “appropriate supports” for research and advocates promoting “a culture of academic collegiality supported by ... consultation” at college management level.

Launching the Report, **John Walshe, Education Consultant and former Adviser to Minister Ruairi Quinn, TD**, said that higher education experienced the biggest percentage increase in student enrolments but also the biggest percentage decrease in teaching numbers over the past decade. “Between 2008 and 2013 the number of primary school teachers rose by 3%, while second level teacher numbers dropped by 2% but at third level the reduction was

17% according to official figures. It begs the question – why has higher education suffered so severely relative to other parts of the public service?” he asked.

IFUT General Secretary, Mike Jennings commented that one of the more shocking findings of the report was the belief among 72% of respondents that their working conditions had deteriorated. “This is due in main part to the continuing surge in student numbers combined with the slashing of teacher numbers and third-level Budgets over the past decade.

The lack of administrative support combined with ever longer hours at work and pressures on research time adds to the sense of despair among many third level teaching staff.

“The undermining of research evident in the findings of the Report must also be addressed. On the one hand the government emphasises the vital role that research and development must play in the recovery of our economy and society. On the other, it is evident that research is being demoted and under-supported and lacks the policies and procedures to facilitate academics the actual time to engage in research activities,” he said.

TUI General Secretary, John MacGabhann said that austerity measures continue to undermine the working conditions of Irish academics. “Between 2007 and 2014, the higher education sector sustained funding cuts of 29% or over €385m. Over a similar period, student numbers rose by 16% (31,640) while staff numbers fell by 4,500. These measures have had a severely damaging effect on both the working conditions of academic staff and the quality of the educational experience for students.

“The ‘flex hours’ in Institutes of Technology have contributed greatly to work-related stress in the sector. These are two additional hours lecturing given per week by institute lecturers for the duration of the Haddington Road Agreement, the purpose being to cater for additional student throughput.

“The delivery of these two hours of lecturing requires a multiple of these hours to include subject/curriculum development, research, preparation work and the development of assessment of examinations material. As a result, lecturing hours and the associated hours of work in the institutes are far in excess of established international norms and are unsustainable. These additional hours should be abolished as a matter of urgency.

“Clearly, the Irish higher education sector requires significantly increased and sustained levels of investment to meet growing student demand. Staffing levels must be enhanced to take account of the growth in student population.

“It is also extremely worrying that over half of respondents indicated institutional pressure to raise external research funding. There should be no reliance on this to support essential activities,” John MacGabhann said.

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