

Response to Education Strategy Document and Education section (chapter 10) of the Programme for Government, 2016

The Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) represents lecturers and researchers in five of the seven universities in the State, and currently represents academic staff in Teacher Education Colleges in Dublin and Limerick. We also number senior grades of university librarians and some senior university administrators among our membership. In responding to the Statement of Strategy, IFUT responds in the first instance from the point of view of a trade union representing and defending the core rights, the pay and conditions, of its members. As one of the four dedicated education unions, we also make some general comments regarding the likely effects of the implementation of the proposed education strategy on the education system more broadly.

The Funding Crisis in our Universities

IFUT's first reaction on reading the Statement of Strategy in conjunction with the Programme for Government is one of deep disappointment. The funding crisis (and we do not use the term lightly or as a cliché) in Higher Education is simply not addressed. Indeed, the university sub-sector within the Higher Education sector receives scant attention. Higher Education has seen a phenomenal rate of growth in the past thirty years. Clancy (2015, pp. 10-12) notes that enrolments in HE in Ireland increased by 86% between 1989 and 1999 and by a further 21% between 1999 and 2009. This is in line with global trends. The worldwide GER (gross enrolment rate) was 12.3% in 1980 and 32.2 % in 2012. Between 2008 and 2014, enrolments in the seven universities in Ireland showed a consistent year-on-year increase from 78577 in 2008 to 93023 full-time students in 2014. (overall 18% increase). (HEA 2014, cited in Clark et al. 2015)

Growth in HE in Ireland post 2008 took place against a background of economic recession and consequent cut in State funding. The decline in State funding for universities in Ireland has been well-documented. Total state funding to universities has declined from €722,825, 131 in 2007 to €522,214,959 in 2014. (overall 28% decrease) (HEA, cited by Clarke, Kenny and Loxley (2015).

It is not surprising, therefore that increasing student numbers together with decreased funding has resulted in decreased numbers of academic staff and higher student staff ratios. Clancy (2015) reports that student: staff ratios in Irish universities increased from 19.4: 1 in 2007 to 23.0: 1 in 2011. The consequences of this development are considered further below. Clancy further notes that student to academic staff ratios were worse in 2011 than those described in the report of the Commission on Higher Education (1967). [the ratio was then 18: 1, and the Commission recommended that ratio should be reduced to 12: 1 by 1975]. The reduction in academic staff numbers has been seriously exacerbated by the introduction of the ECF (Employment Control Framework) in 2009. Clancy suggests that it is not yet possible to assess the full effect of this measure.

Consequences of the Funding Crisis

That increased and increasingly diverse (see below) student enrolment impacts on the working conditions of a declining population of academics is patently obvious. The impact on students has been minimised which is testament to the dedication and hard work of university lecturers. Clark, Kenny and Loxley suggest however that:

It is very reasonable to question how higher education institutions are managing to continue offering a quality service under the unsustainable burden of budget cuts, staffing cuts and increased student demand. (p. 51)

It could be argued that IFUT members have been “irresponsibly responsible” in accepting the severity of the cuts to HE funding, together with the pay and pension cuts, the worsening of conditions imposed by the Haddington Road and Lansdown Road Agreements and the moratorium on promotions. Clark et al. (2015, p. 106) document the increased stress experienced by Irish academics at a time when the HE sector experienced a 29% reduction in funding in parallel with a 14% increase in university enrolments. 72% of Irish academics experienced a decline in their working conditions between 2007 and 2014. A major contributor to this decline in working conditions has been the rise of casualization in university employment. Clancy (2015, pp. 134-135) notes that in 2011 the number of university staff on research-only contracts was 4,172, not far short of the number of core academic staff (4,701). Researchers have been excluded from any improvement in security or conditions resulting from the Haddington Road Agreement (Cush, 2016) and this injustice must be addressed without delay. As a first step, accurate information must be compiled on the extent of casualization in the universities. Mackaskill (5 June 2016, THES) reports that stress, much of it resulting from increased workload and especially increased administration is causing academics in the UK to become ill or to leave the profession. It is important to recognise that such consequences are inevitable in Ireland also.

Recent court judgements have drawn attention to the position of women academics in Irish universities. Clancy (2015, p.137) notes that women, now constituting 43% of the academic workforce, constitute 49% of the lecturer grade but only 19% of the professorial grade. Addressing inequalities must be a priority.

It is essential for the morale of academic staff, for enhanced opportunities for students and for the universities themselves that these cuts are reversed as a priority.

IFUT considers it essential that universities continue to be publicly funded and that growing privatisation is resisted. Colleges run on a for-profit basis cannot prioritise equality of access or the public service mission of universities. (Hiltzik, 2016, writing in the LA Times)

Tackling Disadvantage

We welcome the commitment in the Programme to the implementation of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015). The funding implications of the plan must however be taken into account and IFUT insists that the current funding crisis must not be allowed to hamper progress towards equity or to impose extra burdens on individuals and families already struggling to access HE. Clancy (2015, p. 77) notes that Ireland has made significant progress in respect of socio-economic inequalities in HE and is now in the top third of European countries in this respect. He cites the work of Raftery and Hout (1993) and the Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) hypothesis which suggests that inequalities between classes can only change when demand from the professional classes is saturated. Clancy suggests that this has now happened and (although not in all areas of study) and notes the importance of growth in the sector in bringing this about.

We reiterate that Irish Higher Education, which has shown phenomenal growth has made important (but necessarily incomplete, given the level of resourcing) strides towards equity, as well as making significant contributions to Irish society and our economy. The current funding crisis cannot be allowed to undermine this progress and we look forward to engaging in meaningful dialogue in search of viable solutions.