

Irish Federation of University Teachers Annual Delegate Conference, 2014

President's Address

Colleagues

The General Secretary and Deputy General Secretary have reported on what has been an exceptionally busy, demanding and, ultimately, successful year. In this address I want to look at the activities of this union through a particular lens, that of defending the Irish university. We are employed by universities but we don't relate to them simply as employees. The university we wish to defend is a collegial structure of which we are members. This address will interrogate the role of an education trade union in defending 'in a critical way, the universities and the very idea of a university.

I believe that this is appropriate, given that, under Rule 2, the first object of the Federation is stated thus: The advancement of higher education and research. IFUT, together with SIPTU, was delighted to launch a campaign last November to defend and promote this principle. The Charter to Defend the Irish University is the basis an online campaign and lists 10 statements which has been developed by academics in SIPTU and IFUT and now has more than a thousand signatories in support of its aims. In this address I want to analyse the features of the Irish University that we want to defend, the features that, as a union, we want to oppose and the threats to the university which we perceive and against which we have worked strenuously over the past year and will continue to work in the future.

Section 1 Defend the University

A Public Good

The Charter consists of 10 statements, which I will consider here, some of them in more depth. The first of these is that the **Irish University is a public good**, not a private profit-making institution. In an online comment on the Charter, a respondent examines in a technical way the meaning of the term "public good" from the point of view of economics. He asserts that a public good is not diminished by the number of people availing of it and concludes that universities meet this criterion. Another way of looking at the term "public good" is one that is funded and supported by the State as part of the public service. According to the National Strategy for Higher Education, 85% of the funding of Irish Higher Education is from State sources. This compares with an EU average of 81%, but is well below Norway's figure of 97%. On both these criteria then, Higher Education in Ireland can be considered a public good.

Irish Higher Education has undergone a transformation that is nothing short of revolutionary. From a participation rate of just 5% in the 1960 we have arrived at one of 65% in 2011. There has been a 26% increase in participation between 2007 and 2011 and that encompasses an 85% increase in the number of PhD candidates. These figures are taken from HEA statistics and from a report on the financial health of the universities carried out by the consultancy firm Grant Thornton – hardly radical left-wing commentators. The Grant Thornton report also notes that there has been a 7% decrease in core staff since the introduction of the Employment Control Framework in 2009. They note that the operating surplus of the universities has been reduced by more than half. The funding of the universities is fundamental to their ability to be a public good in any real sense.

It is a matter of great concern, colleagues, that at a time of funding crisis in the universities, government spokespersons, including the Minister for Education, should repeatedly speak in support of a private, profit-making institution in the Higher Education area and allow it to operate in an uncontrolled fashion in direct competition with publically-funded institutions which are subject to controls and limitations.

Academic Freedom

The second object of IFUT listed under Rule 2 is “the promotion and protection of **academic freedom**”. Academic freedom is specifically mentioned in the Universities Act, 1997 which states

A member of the academic staff of a university shall have the freedom, within the law, in his or her teaching, research and any other activities either in or outside the university, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions and shall not be disadvantaged, or subject to less favourable treatment by the university, for the exercise of that freedom.

The Charter (paragraph 10) notes the necessity of stressing the importance of academic freedom over a “fear-driven consensus”. The greatest enemy of academic freedom is, I believe, casualisation. The exercise of academic freedom can require courage from even the most secure and eminent academics. For casualised academics, their right to “question received wisdom” or express “controversial or unpopular opinions” is undermined by the precarious and circumscribed nature of their status and their Union’s ability to vindicate their rights is undermined by the use of other pretexts to justify non-renewal.

Knowledge and Research

The set of principles enunciated in the Charter includes three that refer specifically to knowledge. Paragraph 2 asserts that: The strategy of a university should reflect **all dimensions of human endeavour**. It is perhaps ironic that it is those disciplines that were most valued in the (fairly recent) past that are now under threat. We were proud to support the successful campaign to defend the Classics Department in UCC. An article in last Tuesday’s Irish Times criticizes the growing practice of teaching only those aspects of subjects required in the short term by the employment market and ignoring the underlying principles which give them meaning and notes that such strategies are counter-productive, even in the medium term. In the context of the re-configuration of Initial Teacher Education we were concerned that in some instances, the amalgamation of university education departments into institutes might have the effect of separating applied fields from their foundation disciplines and are pleased to note that such proposals appear to be in abeyance. I will return to the ITE reforms later.

Paragraph 4 states that the **aim of research is to produce new knowledge**. It is noteworthy that a significant part of the research that is carried out in Ireland is done by students and staff on short term contracts. In supporting the importance of research we also want to support the importance of research workers and to draw attention to the exploitative conditions in which they often have to work.

Paragraph 3 states that: The main aim of teaching is the **dissemination of knowledge and the fostering of creativity**. A balance must be struck between students’ legitimate desire for regulation of courses and clarity of expectations and excessive bureaucracy, over-assessment and surveillance in the design and specification of courses. We are required to do “research-led” teaching and this implies that academics should have the opportunity to engage in research, to publish and to collaborate with colleagues.

A Collegial community

The university is not just about abstract ideas. It is about people, about staff and students. Paragraph 6 of the Charter states that “**Students are the lifeblood of the University**”. IFUT believes that students are active participants in education, rather than passive consumers, and is opposed to the creation of an adversarial culture in universities. Our support for traditional and foundational disciplines does not imply opposition to, or scorn for applied and newer forms of knowledge. We recognize the importance of equipping students for employment while rejecting reductive approaches which see this as our sole function. The Campaign to Defend the University has the support of USI.

Students and staff are entitled to a safe, dignified and collegial environment. One of the few positive outcomes of the current and recent economic crises has been increased cooperation among the various unions on university campuses. Many of our Branches (or ASAs) have been pro-active in developing structures for inter-union groupings on campus in order to make common cause against common threats.

A collegial work environment for academic staff should provide for a coherent and equitable career path, with negotiated and clearly defined mechanisms for progress. Too often, young researchers tread a precarious and poorly defined path from post-doctoral research to hourly paid work to short term contract. This scenario does not serve students well, nor does it make for good research.

Civic Engagement

Engagement with communities is the third arm of the universities’ mission. As the Charter states, this must mean more than linking with local business enterprise. Most IFUT branches send delegates to their local Trades Councils and play a real and tangible role in linking the campus to its communities

ICT

Paragraph 8 of the Charter states that: Information and communications technologies are a great tool for teaching and research but should not be used to impoverish the quality of education or reduce staff-student contact time. Nor, I suggest, can they substitute for staff contact time nor be used to justify increased class sizes. ICT is both a resource and a threat and presents both challenges and opportunities. It is perhaps an area where we could work with students (and learn from students), especially in the area of the responsible and creative use of social media.

Managerialism

It is the Charter’s opposition to managerialism that has come in for criticism, not least from the President of one of our universities. We strongly support the prudent management of resources and the humane and collegial organization of people. We believe that good management is essential to support the universities’ mission of teaching, research and civic engagement. We number some senior members of management among our members. What we do find problematic is when management “efficiency” becomes the mission of a university. We have a problem with the idea that the process of management is more important than that which is to be managed. This is what we mean by managerialism. Managerialism has also become the source of new and pernicious form of discourse where familiar words

take on new and specific meanings, which are grounded in ideas of efficiency as based in cost-saving and where false consensus is assumed without going through the processes of consultation and negotiation.

Section 2 What we don't defend

Colleagues, many of the features listed in the Charter to Defend the Irish University refer to aspects of the university which have been valued in the past or are under threat at present. But our defence of the university is not an exercise in nostalgia or a wish to return to some mythical "golden age". There are some features of the traditional university that we do not defend. These include:

Elitism

If Higher Education is a public good, it should benefit all sections of Irish society

The National Strategy for Higher Education demonstrates the inequalities hidden with the impressive figures for entry to Higher Education in Ireland. Within the 65% entry rate are stark socio-economic differences. The group with lowest participation rate (non-manual, lower middle income) and the second-lowest (semi-and unskilled manual) have rates of 27% and 33% respectively – less than half the national average. These represent significant and welcome improvements – in 1980, the average national rate of entry was just 20%. However, this expansion has happened in parallel with cuts in funding and staffing. Unless we can offer the same level of quality to all entrants, expanding participation will just create a different kind of elitism, resulting from comparisons within and between institutions.

Inequalities

The Deputy General Secretary has given us a clear picture of the levels of gender inequality still prevalent in our universities. The glass ceiling is still there, made of toughened glass with great insulating properties. Defending the university does not mean defending the norms and practices that give rise to inequalities and injustices. Teaching and research deal with abstract concepts and complex ideas but they are done by real people with real human lives which frequently include children, partners and parents. We do not defend a university that ignores this basic fact.

Excessive workloads

There is a strong university of open-ended work practices whereby academics are trusted to engage in work-related activities without the need for ongoing surveillance or rigid timetabling. This is a tradition that we would defend and uphold against the increasing demands of @management@ that every waking moment be documented and located on a workload model. It is a tradition that has served research and teaching very well because most academics work far in excess of the number of hours in a normal working week. The requirement, however, that more and more of this work be undertaken on campus under surveillance is not one that we support nor do we believe that it is positive for the work of scholarship. At the same time our presence in the virtual workplace, while the earth spins on its axis and completes a circuit of the sun means that there can be an assumption of constant availability to students. This we would argue is not reasonable nor in the longer term beneficial to students.

Section 3 what are the threats against which we need to defend the university

I have set out a case here in support of defending the Irish university but this is a purely theoretical unless I can identify what I am proposing to defend it against. Colleagues, I believe that the answer is not far to seek. I will deal with some of the major ones.

Underfunding

I am not going to reiterate the statistical evidence that Irish universities are underfunded but it is an incontrovertible fact and I have attempted to demonstrate how the mission of the universities is undermined and distorted by this fact. It is simply not possible for the universities to be a public good, serving society as well as the economy if they are not adequately funded. Seeking alternative sources of funding distorts the mission of the universities.

Casualisation

The disease of casualisation eats away the concept of academic freedom and without academic freedom there can be no scholarship. This is perhaps the single biggest issue with which we have to deal. I could also add that it is a simple and fundamental issue of social justice and must be at the core of any union's activities – the fight against casualisation is central.

Consumerism

The use of league tables, indices of satisfaction and other consumer-type measures can lead to a serious slippage of language where students are cast as customers and consumers rather pro-active and creative users of knowledge.

Undermining of conditions

Moratoria on promotions and further limiting of already limited promotion opportunities do not serve the universities well in addition to their effect on academics and on recruitment.

Denigration of the public service

Our identity as public servants is an important part of our defence of the university as a public good.

Economic recession in Ireland seems , inevitably, to be accompanied by attacks on the very idea of public service and a culture of blame of public service workers. It is important that we do not internalize that blame and recognize that the cuts to pay and pensions imposed on us were disgraceful . The threat of the draconian measure of the latest FEMPI Act represents a serious and invidious change in industrial relations. Together with seeking restoration of pay and pensions we must demand the repeal of this measure.

In conclusion: The landscape of Irish Higher Education has undergone significant change recently but further and perhaps more far-reaching change is planned. The universities have a crucial role to play in that landscape. We will seek to defend the positive aspects of the Irish university in whatever new configurations may emerge. Industrial relations processes will be an essential part in any re-organizations, amalgamation or collaborations. IFUT will continue to play a significant part in defending the university and its members within it