

IFUT ADC 2015

President's speech

[preliminaries]

This year, like every year, is a year of historic anniversaries: the centenary of Gallipoli, the centenary of the sinking of the Lusitania, the 70th anniversary of VE day and the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. There are also literary anniversaries. It is the 150th anniversary of the birth of WB Yeats. Although he was certainly no friend of the trade union movement his poetry is so evocative that I have sought out quotations to illustrate the points of this speech, as an antidote and counterpoint to economic and statistical discourse.

The title of my presentation today is "Myths and Legends". I have taken this title from a book I loved as a child. My father, who was largely self-educated, was addicted to second-hand books which he treated with great reverence. Every so often he would take out books and read them to us children. One of our favourites was called "Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race" and consisted of illustrated stories of Cuchulainn and Fionn Mac Cumhail and the Fianna. I want to apply the idea of myths and legends to an analysis of Irish Higher Education. I am using the word "myth" in two senses: in its more colloquial sense of something that is not true [only a myth] and in a slightly more technical sense as meaning a "big idea" or informing concept. Legends are the stories that illustrate the myths. I am going to start with some myths that are pervasive but demonstrably false.

Myth 1: Higher Education is a luxury and only for an elite

In 1960 one could argue that there was some truth in this assertion. Only 5% of the age cohort made the transition to Higher Education. By 1980, the figure had increased to 20% and by 2010, 65% of the age cohort continued to Higher Education. In 1960, the Council of Education report questioned the value of making secondary education universally available as "only a minority could benefit from it". It could be convincingly argued that third level education plays the same role in Irish society today secondary education did in the 1960s. Our expectations for our young people have expanded beyond the most mythical aspirations of the 1960s.

But these overall figures conceal a different reality. When we consider transition to Higher Education by social class grouping, stark inequalities are revealed. While 100% of young people in households headed by a higher professional and 89% of those from farming families make that transition, the figure drops to 50% for skilled manual households, 33% for semi or unskilled and just 27% for non-manual. It could be argued that as Higher Education has become the norm, those excluded from it are at a greater relative disadvantage than was the case when very few progressed. At the same time, participation in higher Education by older adults (25-64) is, at 7%, the second-lowest in the EU.

The Hunt Report (2011) predicted that, by 2025, the numbers entering HE would have increased by over 50%, from 42,500 to 65,000. The bulk of the increase would come from adult and international students.

These changes have taken and are taking place against a background of mandated austerity (another kind of myth that I will deal with shortly). The Hunt Report notes that 85% of the

funding of Irish HE is public funding and that this has declined as a result of the cuts. The OECD (2009) notes that investment per student has declined. This was at a time when participation rates are increasing. This has serious implications for the reduction of inequality. We learn very clearly from experience at primary and secondary levels that equity demands greater spend per student to enable real participation by non-traditional groups. Achieving participation in HE for their children should not require families to

... add halfpence to the pence

And prayer to shivering prayer, until

You have dried the marrow from the bone.

IFUT sees the funding of the universities as a fundamental issue of social justice and educational equity.

[insert response to Minister who will probably refer to equality]

Myth 2: *"as things have been they remain"*

When a film-maker or television producer wants to portray a university, there is a set of iconic images to which they resort – a tiered lecture theatre, ancient buildings framing quiet lawns, students writing quietly in libraries. Academics appear in a swirl of gowns, deliver high-flown words, retreat to book-lined studies, perhaps even to sip sherry. This is the legend that supports the myth of unchanging, timeless universities. These images reflect the reality of neither students' nor academics' lives in the electronic, hyper-connected world. The legendary form of the university had very limited existence, if any and we are not seeking a return to some mythical golden age. This mythical institution was both elitist and patriarchal,

Both the student experience and the work of academics have been irretrievably altered by internet, email and the open-ended nature of the engagement that results. The threefold mission of the universities (teaching, research and civic engagement) is in danger of drowning in the rising tide of administration and proof of compliance.

The most gratuitously offensive proposal in the Haddington Road talks was the one that required an extra 70 hours per year from academics. We are indebted to our mathematicians who point out that an indeterminate number plus 70 is still an indeterminate number.

It is ironic that the Hunt Report should call for greater flexibility from academics – engaged in what is arguably one of the most flexible and open-ended forms of work in existence – while at the same time suggesting that:

In Ireland, the transparency and content of academic contracts needs to be addressed to ensure that productivity is optimized.

The Budapest/Vienna Ministerial Declaration (2010) on the European Higher Education Area acknowledges that a more supportive environment for academics would be necessary to ensure the full implementation of the Bologna process, which enshrines the values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and social equity. Research carried out by our former president, Dr. Marie Clarke, across nine European countries supports the need for a supportive

environment. This excellent report, shortly to be released, makes a major contribution as has been recognised throughout the European Higher Education Area.

To return to Yeats:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul
Nor beauty born out of its own despair
Nor bleary-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

Myth 3: the inevitability of austerity

I now want to broaden the discourse from an exclusive focus on HE to a consideration of the effects of economic policies on Irish civil society more generally. Austerity politics are characterised by a range of measures which I will discuss further below, but the discourse around austerity has the capacity to alter our thinking in subtle and insidious ways. Austerity is a truly hegemonic concept. Not alone is it powerful but it presents itself as inevitable, even in a perverse way, attractive or at least virtuous. [irresponsibly responsible]

The fascination of what's difficult
Has dried the sap out of my bones, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart.

The sense of inevitability leads us to believe that "there is no alternative", and to forget that austerity is a choice, albeit a constrained one. We may have no choice but to reduce State spending and indebtedness but we have some say in how that is to be done. The response of the ICTU to economic collapse was to look for an appropriate balance between taxation and spending in addressing the very real crisis which was not of our making as trade union members. The balance appeared to tilt very strongly towards spending, salary and pension cuts, apart from the regressive USC and pension levy.

Austerity talk is an example of neo-liberal discourse in its purest form. One of the dystopian effects of austerity and neo-liberalism, over and above the real and practical impact on people's lives, is their distorting effect on language. "Reform" used to mean making things better, not destroying the public sphere. Many things done in the name of "rationalisation" have little rationality outside of a narrow economic one [sometimes not even that].

Academics, as public intellectuals can play an important role in combatting austerity and neo-liberalism by providing the detailed analytical critique in a form accessible to public argument.

The myths we want to be true

I now turn to a different form of myth – the foundational myths which underpin our idea of Higher Education. These are the “big ideas” which are at the heart of our practice and our struggle.

Myth 4: The centrality of Academic Freedom

The first of these is the myth of **Academic Freedom**. Arguably, there is no more fundamental idea in Higher Education. It is guaranteed by the Universities’ Act and we will campaign vigorously to ensure that it is included in any new amended form of the Act. We believe that the importance of academic freedom is not restricted to research (where it is of course essential) but also to teaching and to public engagement. But there is a need for more than legislation to ensure that academic freedom has a real meaning in practice. The first and most important guarantor of academic freedom is security of employment. Academic staff who are constantly looking over their shoulders in fear of non-renewal of contracts or redundancy. The single biggest threat to academic freedom is casualization. Casualisation serves neither the academics concerned nor the students nor academic freedom. However, once it becomes the norm it is a really difficult idea to undermine and reverse. The fight against casualization has become one of the most dominant aspects of IFUT’s work because we see security as fundamental both to the conditions of our members and to the foundational concept of academic freedom.

Academic freedom encompasses more than freedom to speak out in unpopular ways. It also refers to the kind of research in which academics engage. We endorse calls for the recognition of the essential importance of Basic research, as well as applied research. Related to that is the need to guarantee security of employment to researchers. We would expect that the universities would here be ad idem with us in seeking to use the Fixed Term Workers’ Act (2003) to establish Contracts of Indefinite Duration as quickly as possible and guarantee the continuity of research. Instead we find the scandalous squandering of public money in paying for legal advice to thwart the application of the Act, using the most convoluted arguments to find “objective grounds” to deny researchers their rights.

It is vital that research be as fearless as Yeats’ squirrel, described thus

Nor the tame will, nor timid brain

Nor heavy knitting of the brow

Bred that fierce tooth and cleanly limb

And threw him up to laugh on the bough;

No government appointed him.

Myth 5: The importance of public service

Paradoxically, we value and defend to the utmost the concept of public service. I am proud (and lucky) to have been a public servant for 37 Of the 41 years of my working life. The other four

were spent as a researcher for an education union, defending public sector education. An insidious part of neo-liberal (and especially austerity) discourse, is the vilification of the public service and its portrayal as a drag upon a thrusting, profit-driven, “modern” state. Images are powerful. The image of public servants as grey men in decaying 20th century office blocks, who “but live where motley is worn” is as much a caricature as the golden image of the old university. Public funding for universities is essential to guarantee freedom from “for profit” approaches to teaching and research. Public sector “reform” should not mean public sector destruction.

Location in the public sector is just one aspect of public service. We see this as simply the most effective way of guaranteeing the concept of “Higher Education as a Public Good”.

Myth 6: Institutional autonomy

Here we have another paradox. Universities are in the public sector, in the public sphere and yet at the same time we argue for their autonomy and independence. Such a demand, however, is based on the idea of a university as a community of scholars, not as a hierarchical, managerialist, corporate organisation. We do not believe that university autonomy should imply a disregard for employment law or equality law.

If the universities behave *simply* as corporate, commercial organisations, there is no reason for IFUT as a trade union to engage with them in any but an adversarial way.

Combining these foundational myths and their inherent contradictions is a challenging task but one that is essential for the promotion of the idea of the HE as a public good., based on academic freedom, the centrality of teaching and care for students, the promotion of basic and applied research and engagement with communities at local and national levels.

Finally we say to you Minister that we have been very patient. We have set our own interests aside, perhaps to too great a degree. The time has now come for restoration.

Minister, “too great a sacrifice can make a stone out of the heart”.

9 May 2015