

Speech by Mike Jennings, General Secretary, IFUT.

ANNUAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE

9 MAY 2015

Colleagues, Delegates, Invited Guests and Friends,

I'm very pleased to come to this podium to formally propose the adoption of the 2014/2015 IFUT Annual Report.

My colleague, the Deputy General Secretary, Joan Donegan will take the conference through the report in greater detail. I will make a more general statement.

This format of presentation reminds me to some degree of the unfair system of pass and honours papers in the Leaving Certificate when I was in School.

Take History for example; if you sat the Pass Exam you were expected to be precise, to remember the dates of battles, the names of Kings and Popes and such like. On the other hand, if

you sat the Honours Paper you were assumed to know all of these basics and so you had the scope to be more discursive, more analytical, take a broader view etc.

So now, Joan has to deal with the precise and concrete items in our report whereas I get to indulge myself in some more general ruminations.

I do not say this is fair.

But it does suit me.

So what are my general observations on the occasion of this annual look-back at IFUT's year?

Let me share some general thoughts about the state of our profession as academics and professionals in the Irish Higher Education system in 2015.

When I took up the position as General Secretary of IFUT in 2007 I benefitted from some humorous but perceptive and useful advice from Dr Daire Keogh who was then a leading member of the IFUT Executive and still a member of ours in good standing.

Daire advised me that fitting in in IFUT would be easier if I bore two things in mind; Gaeilge and Newman.

Well, no problem for me to use the cúpla focal frequently. I love the Irish language.

Regarding the second item, Newman; To be honest I do not think of John Henry Cardinal Newman very much and I speak about him less often. But I do think a lot about “**The Idea of a University**”. When I say this I do not necessarily think just of Newman’s idea of a university. I think of my idea of a university, of other people’s ideas of a university, of the ideas of Philosophers and Politicians of a university.

In a short address such as this I do not propose to compare and contrast these various ideas and concepts. That is not my purpose today at all.

I have been tempted to refer today to the idea of a university because, depressingly, the people and the agencies which have more and more control and influence over us and what we strive to do have literally **no idea of a university**.

Going back again to when I was in secondary school, one of my favourite publications was Mad Magazine. The mascot for this crazy, bizarre, surreal world was the instantly recognisable Alfred E. Neuman.

So, with calculated disrespect I am going to refer to some of the worst and most enervating “policies” (for want of a better term) which are imposed upon us as “**Neuman’s Idea of a University**”.

Neuman’s idea of a university is a training school run by IBEC and the Small Firms Association. Students and Academics are expected to think small. Short-term targets are best, medium-term ones, a bit risky but long-term thinking is completely out. And, as for new horizons or blue skies thinking, they are not even understood.

Neuman’s idea of a university is to stick to what we know. We know the kind of jobs that will be available next year so why would we bother to consider that the nature of work and employment itself will change radically over the coming years just as it did over the past decades. Why should we care? What did posterity ever do for us?

And as for research and the discovery of new knowledge; “why bother?” Neuman asks. “Sure it might all be a waste of time”.

Neuman likes measuring things and hates things that can't be easily measured. For Neuman teaching is not a process or an engagement or an act of inspiring thought and learning in others. No, teaching is a product and is defined by inputs and outputs.

Neuman loves citations, especially in a narrower and narrower range of “high impact publications”. Neuman would prefer ten citations of a routine nature than one major game-changing big discovery.

You see, the problem with big, historic ideas or discoveries is that they take too long. And anyway, how can you be sure that the academics are doing any work during all these lead-up years?

He would rather have us doing useless and soul-destroying work, like filling in endless forms, rather than spend his nights worrying that we might all be dossers.

Neuman wonders why we bring all these students to a university campus when we could e-mail the lectures to them at home. Just think of the savings!

But I am perhaps labouring the point, so let me just summarise the main points of Neuman's **Idea of a University**.

- Neuman doesn't understand academics so naturally he is suspicious of them.
- Neuman believes that without constant measurement and surveillance none of us will do a fair day's work.
- Neuman thinks that students need more training and less education.
- Neuman fears all that he does not instantly comprehend and can render simple and he especially fears the unknown and the unexplained.

Of course Neuman is a mere figment of my imagination.

Or is he?

Whether or not my Neuman is an accurate personification of those who, in reality, now run our universities, it is a fact that the competition between different ideas of a university (and the more fundamental contest between those with varying ideas and those with **no** idea at all of a university) throws up for our examination and scrutiny the concept of “**institutional autonomy**”.

Academic Freedom and institutional autonomy have been for many, many years the twin essential characteristics of genuine (as opposed to nominal) universities.

Academic Freedom, though it is sometimes misunderstood is, of the two, the easier to defend and extol. Institutional autonomy can so easily be misrepresented as elitist and anti-democratic. “How dare you accept public funds and not accept public control?” is a tough question to deal with, especially for those of us who put serving all the people of our nation at the heart of our political philosophy.

Of course, we accept the requirement of democratic accountability – the piper and the tune and so on. But how is this accountability to be exercised? Is “accountability” to be synonymous with “control”? Who should do the job of overseeing

our work and contribution? Is there not an obligation on those who are chosen to perform this task (or, more commonly, those who abrogate this role on to themselves) to understand what it is that we do and to have some notion not only of our historic mission but also the humility to recognise that for hundreds of years we have put our unique traditions and modus operandi to the good benefit of society?

For instance, universities insisted on peer review for many decades before the term quality control was even invented. We practised collegial governance when the norms of the wider societies we worked in were of a much less democratic character. If we were an “ivory tower” it was because every top and beneficial position in society, from the enjoyment of good health and housing, to education, to the right to enjoy interesting work rather than mere drudgery, was preserved for the few and paid for by the many.

You may or may not believe that we have all become fully the victims of Neuman’s Idea of a University, but you cannot deny we are certainly going in that direction. Perhaps this impending reality will challenge us not only to assert more vigorously the traditional demand for institutional autonomy but to work hard to find

mechanisms whereby this autonomy can be in harmony with, and not antithetical to, the common good and the principles of democratic accountability.

The past 7-8 years of austerity have hit our members very hard financially. But we must not lose sight of the huge damage which was done in the same period to independence and freedom of decision-making in the University Sector. Much of this damage was self-inflicted, for instance by TCD's disgraceful treatment of its own staff to the extent where even the Government was shocked and forced to act. UCC and other universities abuse the little institutional autonomy they have left by wasting many thousands of euro every year paying Europe's most expensive lawyers to wage war on their own employees.

I could go on.

What we need is a coming together of all of those who believe in the core values – in the **idea of a university** – to work together to reverse the damage that has been done. To do this we need to endorse democratic accountability and to distinguish this from external micro-management bordering on control freakery.

As the leading voice of academics in Ireland, IFUT has an important role to play in this campaign. The record of our work and achievements as set out in our report today proves our capacity in this regard.

I commend the report to you for adoption.

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