

## **IFUT Presidential Address**

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“Educate that you may be free”, Thomas Davis (1846) *Influences of Education Literary and Historical Essays*. Davis recognised the importance of education during our worst national tragedy, the Great Famine.

Newman, among others, has enumerated the aims of education and among the most important ones in the current economic situation are to enable and to serve. Education enables the individual to focus and to work with the mind, to have a broader view, to expand life possibilities. Education habituates a community to the rule of law. It facilitates good governance and a stable political system. It enables commercial enterprise and wealth creation. Education prepares individuals to serve others, work for the common good, educate the next generations, cure disease, relieve suffering, elevate living standards and create opportunity. We can point to many achievements in the Irish education system of which we can be justifiably proud. In these challenging economic times, education must not stay in neutral. It is imperative for us working together that we create, through education, communities of practice that are vital, collaborative and connective.

As university teachers, we are obligated to prepare and enable our students to be caring, engaged citizens; thinking, feeling individuals capable of recognising and discovering their own emotions and reactions to the world around them and physically and mentally healthy people who live full lives as Irish, European and world citizens.

A dramatic culture shift has occurred over the past two decades. It used to be more or less taken for granted that higher education was a public good. That consensus has diminished. Education is a key public service for all citizens and only a highly and widely educated nation will be successful in world markets (Aho, 2006). Education is nation-building and it should be retained in the hands of educators.

### **Creating opportunity deficit**

The cost and price of higher education are matters of great importance. Not only is the payment of the registration fees a significant burden but, even more so, are the costs that relate to accommodation, food and other expenses for families who are coping with unemployment, mortgage arrears and surviving on a day-to-day basis. For those who come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds it is even more difficult. It is also very important that students from our immigrant communities are given the proper supports to facilitate their progression to and within higher education.

Recently, Government Ministers have referred to the fact that about 40% of our undergraduate students are in receipt of grant support. In some cases, however, the eligibility criteria of social welfare support programmes have the potential to preclude students from getting financial support in higher education, particularly mature students who, having lost their jobs, wish to up-skill and return to the workforce.

What is required is a thorough examination of all Government support schemes in both the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Education and Skills to ensure that those who deserve support get it and are facilitated in their progression or

return to higher education. This should be a priority for Ministers. In seeking and promoting change, addressing the micro issues of effective administration is equally as important as focusing on issues on a grander scale.

Our education system must be planned for in a unified way. Many students are unaware of or misinformed about the rules and regulations that govern grant support when applying for higher education courses. Some students are unclear about the regulations surrounding the financial implications of changing courses if they find that they have not made the right choice. Others have lost out due to a lack of clarity on their part about courses that qualify for State support.

Cuts to guidance and counselling services at second level make worse an already difficult situation. Students rely on guidance and counselling services in relation to their decision making about their higher education options and it is disadvantaged students who most require that support.

The Minister for Education and Skills has quite rightly sought greater collaboration between universities and the second level education system with reference to enhanced curricular alignment. The NCCA/HEA Conference on *Entry into Higher Education in Ireland in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, held during September 2011, marked a new beginning in this regard. While conferences promote thinking and provide new directions, there is a further requirement for ongoing and meaningful engagement between schools and universities. That can only be achieved when there are people to engage in that process. It is a contradiction, therefore, to cut guidance and counselling teachers in second level on the one hand while seeking greater collaboration between schools and universities on the other.

In the international context, rising costs and reductions in state support have forced many public universities to cut their investment in research, reduce faculty strength, increase class size, trim academic programs, defer the maintenance and renewal of research and teaching facilities and reduce library collections.

While investment in higher education in Ireland increased from the mid 1990s onwards, *per capita* expenditure has remained modest by international standards and has decreased significantly since 2009. In his Exchequer Budget speech, (December 2011), the Minister for Education and Skills referred to a 2% real funding reduction for the higher education sector, comprising a 5% reduction in State funding and a parallel €250 increase in Student Contribution from 2012/13. The Minister signalled a further 2% funding reduction in 2013 and 1% in each year 2014 and 2015. These kinds of cuts to an already over stretched system put us in danger of creating deficit of opportunity.

Individuals who receive higher education benefit from it. A well-educated citizenry offers collective benefits to our community and to our nation. Irish universities are under resourced and it is important that proposed funding models protect our higher education system without damaging its ethos or adversely affecting participation levels. In the context of these discussions some commentators focus on academic staff and their levels of productivity.

**So what we do we do as academics? Are we “dossers” as has been suggested in some sections of the media?**

It has been stated that ‘it is clear that many people think university lecturers are dossers’ (*Irish Times*, Louise Holden, 12-May-2009: 18). There has been much discussion about teaching hours in third-level

institutions. The matter was raised at the meeting between university presidents and the Dáil's Public Accounts Committee in 2010, which heard that some academics could work for as few as fifteen hours per week.

It was also suggested that IFUT 'needs to acknowledge the need for getting more value out of excessively paid university lecturers' adding that 'these people present the same material to students for years over the course of too short a year' (*Irish Times* Florence Craven 10 Jan 2011: 1).

It is important to address these concerns, but to do so from a research base rather than relying on the **anecdotal reminiscences of individuals**. A forthcoming book - *Work Situation, Views and Activities of the Academic Professions: Findings of a Survey in Twelve European Countries* - provides some interesting data in relation to these issues which allows comparisons to be made between European and Irish academics. This study was funded by ESF/EURCORES. The countries surveyed were Austria, Switzerland, Croatia, Ireland, Poland, Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Italy, Norway, Portugal and the UK. A separate Irish report funded by the IRCHSS will be published before the start of the next academic year. The Irish sample consisted of more than 1,200 respondents who were employed full time; 826 academics in universities and 347 in the IoTs; 16 in private colleges and 31 in other colleges. It also included 60 interviews with academics across a range of disciplines, grades and higher education institutions. The experiences of senior and junior academics were analysed. The data from the survey presented here focuses exclusively on the university sector.

To get an overview of the amount time academics spend on different activities, respondents were asked to estimate the average number of hours for teaching, research, service, administration and other

academic activities, both for the periods when classes are in session and when classes are not in session.

Across the 12 European countries in the study, senior academics on average work 48 hours a week, which is one fifth more than the typical work schedule of full-time employed persons. In Ireland, senior academics work on average 50 hours per week. Junior academics in universities across Europe work on average 42 hours per week. Irish junior academics have a longer working week than their European colleagues, reporting 47 hours per week on average.

### **So what do academics do during those hours?**

#### *Senior Academics*

When classes are in session, senior academics in European countries spend on average 18 hours per week on teaching activities. Academics spend on average between two and three hours on teaching-related activities per teaching hour. During the entire year, the average time spent on teaching activities by senior academics in Europe is 14 hours per week, corresponding to 30% of their overall work time. Senior academics in Ireland spend 16 hours per week on teaching activities when classes are in session. Over the entire year, senior academics spend 12 hours per week on teaching related activities, representing 24% of their working time.

In Europe, senior academics devote more time to research, on average 18 hours per week, representing 38% of their work time. Senior academics in Ireland spend 19 hours a week on research for the entire year, representing 38% of their time.

Senior academics in Europe spend eight hours per week on administration, which represents 17% of their time. In Ireland,

senior academics spend 11 hours per week on administration, representing 22% of their work time.

In Europe, senior academics devote on average four hours per week on service to the community, representing 7% of their time. Senior academics in Ireland spend three hours per week on service to the community, which represents 6% of their time. In the study, senior academics included other non-specified tasks indicating that they spent four hours per week on such tasks, representing 8% of their time. Senior academics in Ireland indicated that they spent five hours per week on unspecified work-related activities representing 10% of their work time.

### *Junior Academics*

Junior academics in Europe spend 15 hours of their time per week on teaching-related activities when classes are in session. Over the entire year, junior academics spend on average 12 hours weekly on teaching activities, which represents 28% of their work time. In Ireland, junior academics spend 18 hours per week on teaching related activities when classes are in session and over the entire year spend 14 hours per week on teaching related activities, which represents 30% of their work time.

European junior academics spend 20 hours on average per week on research related activities, which represents 49% of their work time. In Ireland, junior academics spend 18 hours per week on research related activities, which represents 38% of their work time.

With reference to other activities, junior academics in Ireland spend nine hours per week on administration, which represents 19% of their work time. They devote two hours per week to service to the community, which represents 4% of their time. They spend four

hours per week on other unspecified work-related activities, which represents 9% of their time.

**So what patterns emerge from this data? Well we are not “dossers”.**

Irish academics compare very well to their European counterparts in all aspects of their work. Irish junior academics spend more time on teaching than their counterparts in Europe. This is a matter of concern as junior academics starting their careers require support in developing the research side of their role and they cannot do this if they are spending time teaching and completing administrative tasks.

The data also reveals that both senior and junior academics in Ireland are spending too much time on administration. Our senior academics spend 22% of their time on administration, almost as much as the 24% that they devote to teaching. Our junior academics spend 19% of their time on administration and this is also excessive. It represents an imbalance in relation to duties within the Irish university sector and is a poor use of staff time and qualifications. It has occurred as a result of an intensified audit culture.

Academics in Europe and in Ireland, at both senior and junior levels, are spending more time on research than on teaching. This requires reconsideration. The excellence of Irish research is recognised on the international stage. Irish academics both at senior and junior levels, in common with their European counterparts, are engaged in the preparation of research projects; participate in international research collaboration; publish academic papers; act as peer reviewers for international journals and serve as members of international scientific committees (Drennan *et al.*, 2012). This



activity will be affected by cuts in the allocation of resources. It has been suggested that academics, particularly those in Education Departments and Schools in our universities, are underperforming as researchers in relation to educational issues (*Irish Times, Teacher's Pet, 17-April-2012*). Such commentary is misinformed. *Irish Educational Studies* (IES), the journal of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) is an excellent starting point from which to explore current research in Irish education. The publications profile of academics in the field of education in Ireland highlights their standing as international experts in their chosen specialisms and the diversity of their research interests. A lack of awareness about the working hours of Irish academics underpins the debate on salary levels in the sector.

## **Salaries**

In these discussions, it is the higher salaries of the few that are always taken as the average. Less frequently are the salaries at the lower end of the scales referred to and little reference is made to the length of time that it takes to get started on an academic career, or to progress within the academic career structure, particularly in the absence of promotional opportunities.

## **A willingness to engage in change?**

There is an absence of trust in Irish higher education. Trusting educational professionals is a natural consequence of a generally well-functioning civil society. The culture of trust simply means that education authorities and political leaders believe that university academics, together with education professionals in schools, with parents and their communities, know how to provide the best possible education for their children and young people.

Higher education across the world has witnessed increased enrolments, greater diversity in student intake and the development of new relationships with governments and the corporate world. This is coupled with an expansion in knowledge across all disciplines, both traditional and emerging. Linked to this is the need for higher education to provide curricula that will enable society to confront the complex social and economic problems that present.

Many commentators suggest that higher education should be reformed and that there is inertia on the part of academics in universities. The Minister for Education and Skills suggested, during an interview on Morning Ireland [Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012], that universities don't like change because they are cautious. There are many reasons to be cautious about changes in education.

Educational change efforts regularly fail because they are ineptly implemented and the frenetic pace of change often exceeds the flow of resources that can support it (Hargreaves, 2009). Curricular reform in higher education on a wide-scale implies more than making changes to curriculum, which academics engage in regularly as a result of research and experimentation with new teaching methods. Curricular change is also influenced by the availability of existing resources, shared vision and appropriate organisational infrastructure (Innes, 2004).

Irish academics have facilitated immense change in a short space of time, in work practices and in curricular innovation across all disciplines and areas. We are not afraid of change. In fact, we have led change in our institutions. We have done so while seeing a rise in staff-student ratios, which were close to international norms, but have now worsened. In 2008-9, the staff student ratio was 1:18.7, by 2010-11 it was 1:24 (HEA, 2012).

Examples of the change led by academics include: the facilitation of student transfer, flexibility and mobility; the introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS); and modularisation and semesterisation. In line with the Bologna process, modules, courses and programmes in Irish higher education institutions have been rewritten with a greater emphasis on learning outcomes. Elective modules have been provided and student choice has been broadened.

In some commentary, credit for changes in Irish universities is given to the presidents of those institutions. Ed Walsh maintained that 'managing a university has been likened to herding cats at a crossroads' [Walsh, *Irish Times*, 31 Oct 2006: 28]. This was a particularly insulting remark about frontline academic staff coming from a former university president.

It has been suggested that Irish academics are unwilling to embrace change in their teaching practice. This view is not based in evidence. Changes have been implemented to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning for students including: the increased use of educational technologies; a shift from the traditional lecturing modes to more active teaching and learning methodologies and the adoption of innovative approaches to assessment.

Senior and junior academics in Ireland, like their European counterparts, promote practice-based approaches in their teaching. Irish academics place more emphasis on international content in their teaching than their European colleagues. Academics in Irish universities believe that research reinforces their teaching and they consider that the experience gained from their service to the community impacts positively on their teaching approaches (Teichler & Höhle, 2012).

While there have been many changes in Irish universities, some issues continue to be a major source of concern, particularly those related to gender discrimination and the treatment of early-career researchers.

## **Gender**

In Europe, the proportion of women among junior academics is about one and a half times as high as among senior academics. In Europe, female academics spend more time on teaching-related activities when classes are in session than their male counterparts. This pattern is replicated in the Irish context among junior academics, where women spend 44% of their time on teaching-related activities, whereas men spend 36% of their time (Teichler & Höhle, 2012). It remains the case that women in Irish universities are not replaced when they take maternity leave or adoptive leave and this is a totally unacceptable situation.

## **Early-Career Researchers**

The treatment of our early-career researchers/academics has been disgraceful. The experiences of early-career researchers impact upon the formation of their professional identity (Clarke *et al.*, 2012). In Ireland, many young academics at the beginning of their careers are moving from position to position, which results in fragmented experiences. There is little by way of support for these early-career people within university structures. Legislation, that was introduced as protection, has led to a situation where they are disadvantaged time and time again. We have a paradoxical situation in many universities. They increasingly prioritise research yet many researchers have poor employment conditions and job

security. Securing fair treatment for researchers should be a major priority for all who are involved in higher education.

## **University Autonomy and Regulation**

The mantra that we must do more with less is a persistent theme. Regrettably, the history of Irish higher education, since the publication of the first report on the sector in 1959: *Commission on Accommodation Needs of the NUI Colleges*, (Hyland and Milne, 1992), is that Irish academics have always been doing more with less. The reality is that universities are expected to implement change, reform and quality processes within a zero-cost environment (Duffy, O'Mara and Duggan, 2007).

Autonomy, along with academic freedom, is intrinsic to the nature of the university and a precondition if a university is to best fulfil its role and its responsibilities toward society (Thorens, 1993). Higher education systems need to set a regulatory framework in which their universities can act. There must be a balance between autonomy and accountability. However, the prevailing view of both government and education authorities is that regulation and control needs to be tighter. The most recent examples of this include the *Revised Employment Control Framework* (2011) the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) and *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape* (2012).

### *Revised Employment Control Framework*

The *Revised Employment Control Framework* is a strait jacket. It is an example of intrusive micro management in higher education institutions. It provides a clear example of how the Government is undermining its own policies. The Assistant Secretary at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation has argued that the

framework will penalise research activity (*Irish Times* 18 Mar 2011). It will also destroy the employment prospects of future researchers.

### *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* marked a missed opportunity to really consider the role of higher education and its future direction in any significant way. Instead it focuses on the governance and coordination of the system in general without exploring in-depth the issues that confront the sector.

### *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape*

In the recent document, *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape*, the HEA has indicated that from 2013 onwards it will enter into a process of regular dialogue with higher education institutions about their performance and their mission within the agreed configuration for the system. The document also indicates that a menu of Key Performance Indicators is being developed collaboratively between the HEA and representatives of the institutions which will be used to monitor performance against agreed objectives and may also be used to inform performance-funding allocations.

However, when the CEO of the HEA was asked to appear on a Prime Time programme on the subject of value for money in State agencies, he declined to do so and was reported as stating that the functions of the HEA were too 'complex and would be difficult to communicate effectively . . . in a short time' (Flynn, *Irish Times* 9-May-2009: 17). If the functions are so complex that they cannot be explained in a short period of time, then they require re-examination.

Any cursory reading of the research literature from higher education clearly underlines the view that national systems are blunt instruments for reform and obsessive managerialism is ineffective (Hyde *et al.*, 2012).

University autonomy means that universities must be free from pressure of external interests of different kinds, be it economic, political, social or cultural. It is imperative that academics are vigilant in guarding against efforts to decrease autonomy and it is important that this core concept is strengthened and protected in a spirit of collegiality. This ensures that universities, free from political and financial interest group pressure, can best serve both learning and the society of which they are an integral part.

Of course, management in universities and the Department of Education and Skills have questions to answer. In the last number of years, a series of legal actions have been taken by some universities to try to circumvent equal treatment legislation. During 2008, UCC spent €900,000 on legal fees in relation to industrial relations matters, TCD spent €480,000 in that year, and DCU spent €476,500 in 2007 (*Irish Times*, Sean Flynn, 5-February-2010: 3). This was a dreadful waste of public money since each university has highly resourced HR departments. All of these cases, IFUT understands, have been initiated or supported by the Department of Education and Skills and all have been rejected by the courts. The recent High Court decision regarding redundancy payments for fixed-term workers in universities is very welcome, and IFUT awaits its implementation. Bullying and harassment cases in third-level institutions have also consumed vast amounts of taxpayers' money. Why is this type of expenditure not questioned? When awards are made to academic staff, after going through the proper industrial relations processes, the Department of Education and Skills has

shown great reluctance to sanction these awards. This should not be happening.

## **Conclusion**

IFUT is very proud of its tradition and the contribution that it has made to higher education and to the wider trade union movement. As a national organisation, it serves as a blueprint for volunteerism and working in a spirit of collegiality. Without the support of colleagues in local branches, many academics would feel very isolated when difficult and distressing work related issues emerge. Through supporting one another, we have the confidence to speak with one voice. Our council meetings and our ADC provide us with the opportunity to promote and develop ideas about the type of higher education system that we want. This ongoing work is extremely important and must be sustained.

I want to take this opportunity to thank our General Secretary, Mr Mike Jennings, who has since his appointment worked tirelessly and with total commitment in the interests of this organisation and its members both in national and international contexts. I also want to thank our Assistant General Secretary, Ms Joan Donegan, who since her recent appointment has shown tremendous dedication and hard work. I want to thank Ms Phyllis Russell who provides, and has provided over a long number of years, excellent administrative support in every aspect of the organisation.

The issues that face higher education in this country are very serious. Irish academics have performed miracles in higher education, despite the lack of funding and resources. We compare very favourably to our European colleagues in all aspects of our work. However, there are still major issues that must be addressed such as the continued discrimination against women in academia,



the appalling treatment of our early-career researchers and the persistent encroachment on university autonomy. We are always available to discuss with the Minister the challenges that exist in the higher education sector, and we look forward to much more engagement on these matters so that we can start rebuilding this Nation again through education.

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