

Speech by Mike Jennings, General Secretary, IFUT.

ANNUAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE

27 APRIL 2013

Colleagues, Delegates and Friends,

I am very pleased to formally present for your approval the IFUT Annual Report for the 2012/2013 session.

I am proud of the report. I am proud of the record of achievements on behalf of our members which it contains. I am proud of the evidence it provides of hard work on behalf of those members by our volunteer representatives and by the IFUT staff.

I am especially proud of my two staff colleagues, Phyllis Russell our Office Manager and Joan Donegan our Assistant General Secretary.

The only people who have any idea of how hard Phyllis works are the activists in the union, the Executive and Council members and those who have occasion to contact Head Office and, of course, Joan and I. But I would like everyone to know that it is literally true that without Phyllis IFUT would grind to a standstill. I have two words for Phyllis. They are simple but they are heartfelt – “thank you”.

I have known Joan Donegan for many years when we both worked in SIPTU. I have always admired not just her capacity for hard work and her skill as a negotiator, but also her style and approach to the difficult job of industrial relations. She is quiet and calm and unassuming and not pushy, but my goodness is she effective. She is the living proof that you do not need to be a table-thumper to be a great union official. Joan’s willingness to take on more and more work (I have often said that we pay her for four

days per week and get 7 – quite a bargain!) has ensured that we manage to cope with one of the, if not the heaviest workloads of any year in IFUT's history.

This report is not divided up into Mike's work and Joan's work (or indeed Phyllis's work) and suffice it to say that I am entirely happy with that arrangement.

At this ADC, the ADC of our 50th anniversary year, we are pleased to welcome Minister Pat Rabbitte TD who is attending on behalf of and representing the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn TD. I have known Pat Rabbitte for many years and I am well aware of his connections to and interest in higher education. In welcoming him here to our conference I want to ask him to take very careful note of what I am going to say in this speech and also to pay particular attention to what our President, Dr Marie Clarke will say shortly. Indeed, the speech I make today has been specifically written with a view to its being heard and read by the Minister for Education and his Cabinet colleagues. I know that we can rely on the Minister for Communications to deliver our message in this regard.

In recent years there has been an extraordinary expansion of the level of direct, centralised control of our Higher Education Institutions, in particular our universities. There has been a corresponding and alarming contraction in institutional autonomy. This development is, I believe, totally contrary to the spirit and intent of the 1997 Universities Act. Even more worrying is the fact that, since institutional autonomy like its sister trait, academic freedom, is one of the fundamental characteristics required for an institution to be regarded as a true university, its loss or decrease brings with it the danger of a collapse of international recognition and respect. Universities are international in character and without the respect of others throughout the worldwide community of universities we will be severely diminished.

As an aside, let me emphasise that in sending out a warning signal about the danger to our international reputation I do not want anyone to be confused and to believe that I

somehow give credence to the various purile league tables of “university rankings” which are regarded by most academics as, at best, a distraction and, at worst, a malign source of justification for more managerialism and less scholarly excellence.

One of the curious aspects of this loss of institutional autonomy in favour of centralised control is that the process has been accompanied by an almost Orwellian disingenuity on the part of many of the main players. UCC for instance, at the highest level, gave approval to a lengthy piece of fiction which was presented to the Labour Court. In this document they wrote of their complete “independence” from the Department of Education and stated (with a straight face) that the Department did not exercise even “indirect control” over the university! I assure you that this extraordinary statement is true, we have the written submission in our files.

Of course, the above claim was made in the context where the university was trying to avoid being obliged to afford better treatment to certain of their staff on Fixed-Term Contracts and, by operation of the 2003 Act, if they admitted that they were under even the indirect control of the Department of Education they would have been obliged to concede IFUT’s claim.

The above facts will be a cause of especial disbelief and surprise to our colleagues who work with appalling conditions of employment and pay levels in the Tyndall Institute in UCC. Because here, although UCC admits that the pay and other conditions of employment of these staff is “unacceptable”, they insist that there is nothing they can do because they are so precisely and specifically under the direction and control of the same Department of Education.

They say that the first casualty of war is the truth. That maxim used not to apply to university governance.

But all of this loss of institutional autonomy, worrying and all as it is, is not the whole picture. The additional ingredient contributing to a serious impairment of the

development of our universities in the interest of our society is that, although there has been a huge increase in the direct power of the Department of Education, there has been no increase in the level of understanding or knowledge within the same Department as to how universities actually function and what their essential ethos consists of. In fact, I would go so far as to say that not only is there a lack of understanding of universities, there is distrust and a hostile attitude to them.

Let me give some examples taken from a recent and controversial context, the negotiations for 'Croke Park 2'.

Everyone knows that IFUT fought very hard to defeat these proposals which, in simple terms, sought to validate the Government's decision to break the solemn promises given three years ago in 'Croke Park 1'. I do not propose to deal with this issue in this address. The matter will be well covered later in the conference. But let me just say this much.

Bad and objectionable as were the threatened latest round of pay cuts (on top of our previous cuts) however, the items that actually, in my experience, caused the most anger and annoyance was the attitude to university staff displayed throughout the proposals.

Under "working hours" the LRC said that no one who worked 39 hours per week or more should be hit with additional hours. But the Department of Education, adding insult and contempt to injury, inserted an extra clause – a requirement that we work 78 hours more per year.

The only implication you can draw from that is that the Department thinks we work less than 39 hours per week. Thus they show that they are completely out of touch with the reality on the campuses. They have not read the reports issued to them by University Management (e.g. NUIM and UCD) which stated explicitly that academics work much longer hours than that and they also ignored or were not aware of the research findings

revealed a year ago at this union's last conference by our President, Dr Marie Clarke. The evidence of the weekly hours actually worked by academics in Ireland (50) has been on the IFUT website for a year now.

The Department of Education also defied a Labour Court Ruling that allowances paid to individuals for additional duties which they continue to perform should not be abolished. Despite this clear statement from the Labour Court, exam fees for junior academic staff were listed for abolition even though the Department could not give any coherent answer as to who they believed would do this extra work if it was no longer to be paid for.

Also, in a further astonishing display of unfamiliarity with what happens in the universities the Department, without consulting anyone and without even a veneer of supporting evidence, declared that a total of 16 hours would be recognised as sufficient to do all of this examination marking and correcting.

I wish to make one final point.

There is a further hugely significant example of one arm of Government not knowing what the other arm is doing. I am referring to the State's commitment to research excellence which IFUT fully supports.

But how can you foster research when there is a systematic belittling and downgrading of the career of being a Researcher? The Department of Education has instructed universities time and time again to oppose security of employment for Researchers. They actively sought, including by a written submission, to have permanent Researchers excluded from the no compulsory redundancy clause of 'Croke Park 1'. They have supported an 'Emigration Clause' which says, in effect, that Researchers can only be paid enhanced severance packages if they agree to stop researching in Ireland. And finally, as already mentioned, they have refused to lift a finger to restore any

semblance of coherence or fairness to the miserable and anomalous pay structure of Researchers in the UCC Tyndall Institute.

And so, let me address the Minister directly and ask him to pass this on to his colleagues especially the Minister for Education and Skills.

Minister, we know our country is broke and our economy has been destroyed by a combination of recklessness, incompetence and greed. We know there is little or no point in making requests for expensive and costly concessions or improvements. But what we ask for costs no money. All we ask for is consistency and respect. We ask for fairness and we ask for clear thinking.

If you intend to persist with the micromanagement of the places where we work, then please at least appoint someone to come and talk to us and find out what we do and how we do it.

We have already taken major pay cuts. We continue to deliver a first-class higher education system despite the fact that we are covering for approximately 900 vacant academic posts. With less staff we teach the highest number of students ever to attend higher education in this country.

To quote W B Yeats “we are no petty people” we deserve better. The students and the country we serve deserve better.

I commend this report.

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