

# **IFUT PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

**27 APRIL 2013.**

**Dr Marie Clarke**

## Introduction

Thank you for your address Minister Rabbitte on behalf of your colleague Minister Quinn who, regrettably, could not be present with us today. However, we were glad to hear that the Minister will meet with the Executive soon so that we can discuss these matters in more depth.

Higher education is one part of the education system which itself reflects, transmits and modifies the values of the whole society. Any analysis must take the national policy making context into account; the policy implementation processes; the agents involved in the process and the identification of needs. All of these are interconnected.

### **1. Being a public servant**

Public service is a commitment to community and solidarity. The central feature of modern public services is based on the principle of mutual support across communities, founded on shared social objectives. The provision of public services is not defined by economic rules alone. Such decisions, which have social consequences, involve political choices which should be mediated through discussion and public debate.

Public service is more than just a job — it is a responsibility and a precious opportunity to make a difference. Irish academics understand that responsibility and opportunity. Among their colleagues in Europe, they have the highest levels of involvement in community organisations along with their colleagues in Norway. They rank third in their involvement in political service, after colleagues in

Switzerland and Portugal, and rank third in the extent to which they work with local, national and international social services (Ćulum *et al.*, 2013).

Our profile of service makes us keenly aware that public servants make a contract with the people to serve them and we carry it out based on our word. The character trait most commonly associated with this partnership between the public service and the people is integrity. It is based on a promise, and a promise is something that must be kept.

Members of Government and public representatives are also public servants and are expected to adhere to the same code. Indeed, the Programme for Government states under the heading ‘Showing Leadership’, “Politicians should be treated in the same manner as all other public servants” (Programme for Government 2011).

This relationship has been threatened in recent times. A concerted campaign has been mounted in sections of the media, which has vilified and demonised public servants. This campaign has been aided and abetted by some in politics and the bile and venom goes largely unchallenged. The result is that the trust between the State and its employees has been seriously damaged. A further blow, perhaps a death blow, has been dealt by this Government’s attitude to its own promises.

The first Croke Park agreement set out a number of guarantees, which are being breached by this Government. This has fundamentally undermined the trust that was a traditional feature of negotiations between unions and Government. We can no longer believe that any current or future guarantees will be honoured by the state.

The original Croke Park deal with the Government was due to expire in 2014. We were working to fulfil our part of the agreement and we expected the Government to honour its guarantees. We did not expect a unilateral renegeing on the existing guarantees, nor a forced “negotiation” on new terms. It seems ridiculous to use the term “negotiations” together with the statement that “you will get the result one way or another”. In fact, there were no “negotiations” in any reasonable meaning of that word; threats and bullying more accurately describe the so-called negotiations.

Under the original agreement we have sustained up to 25% cuts in our salaries to date and this new Croke Park extension was designed to impose a further cut of up to 8%. Taken together, the proposed cuts and reductions over recent years would mean that every single pay increase achieved since the year 2000 had been eroded for all academics below the level of Professor. When adjustments are made for increases in the Consumer Price Index, the deal would have meant that a college lecturer would be earning 3.6% less than in April 2000 (Jennings, 2013; UCC ASA, IFUT Branch, 2013; St. Patrick's College Drumcondra IFUT Branch, 2013).

As academics we have made our contribution, not only in terms of reduced salaries. Our colleges and universities now operate with fewer staff, more students and far less resources than five years ago. However, this is never acknowledged, particularly by politicians. Like our colleagues, we have suffered from the 'divide and conquer' strategy, which resulted in the demonisation of public servants generally.

This is unacceptable and we have sent that message to this Government in the clearest terms through our vote. Our situation is in stark contrast to the position in the private sector where according to IBEC almost 40% of Irish employers expect to increase basic pay this year (Wall, *Irish Times*, Dec 2012).

The protected status of our public servant positions is referred to regularly. Almost uniquely in the public sector, significant numbers of staff in the universities and colleges face the threat of compulsory redundancy. IFUT has been forced to fight all such threats on a case-by-case basis. During the Croke Park Extension talks, the Department of Education and Skills refused to insert any wording into the new proposals which would give more job security to academics and researchers.

Colleagues we should never be complacent about job security in our sector and we must bear in mind that it is the most junior members of our profession that are most vulnerable in this regard.

We are all aware that progressive taxation on income at central government level is the most efficient for redistribution, because it draws on the widest pool of potential contributors. Further, the personnel, expertise and organisation to deal with taxation

are in place. Yet, this Government has turned its face against this and is beginning to promise tax cuts as early as 2016. Have we learned nothing?

In common with our European colleagues, Irish academics take our role as public servants very seriously. We are very proud of our contribution and achievements and we make no apology for being paid to do our job on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis.

We are aware of the State's stark financial pressures, which have been reiterated on so many occasions by Minister Quinn. Regrettably, the Minister seems reluctant to accept that investment in higher education is essential to economic recovery and future growth. Minister Quinn is not alone in this view. Confronted with demands of world economic crises, governments are reluctant to increase public funds for long-term investment in higher education (Castagnos & Echevin, 1984).

Trusting educational professionals is a natural consequence of a generally well-functioning civil society. It is evident that this is not the view held by successive Governments with reference to policy direction and development in higher education.

## **2. The policy narrative in Irish higher education**

### *2.1 Higher education policy in Ireland*

Good policy requires a clear explanation of the problem and an equally clear explanation of how the policy solution will solve it (Gash & Roos, 2012). This has not been articulated in any of the policy documents published by the HEA which include the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011); *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape* (2012); *Review of Funding Model for Higher Education Institutions: Consultation Document*; *Completing the Landscape Process for Irish Higher Education* (2013).

We are cognisant of the fact that the HEA is sensitive to criticism. On 26<sup>th</sup> September 1996 during the debate on the introduction of the Universities Act [1997], Ronan

Fanning, Emeritus Professor of Modern Irish History at UCD, suggested that the HEA's "appetite for power over the universities is insatiable". On 29<sup>th</sup> October 1996, the HEA funded an advertisement in *The Irish Times* suggesting that the public debate around the Universities Bill was 'marked by a series of erroneous conceptions, even bordering on the bizarre' (Walshe, 1999, p. 148). It pointed out that the HEA was an important element in maintaining that 'critical distance' between the universities and the State and its statutory role was to allocate funds made available by Government to the universities and to ensure that deficits were not incurred (Walshe, 1999, p. 148).

But deficits were incurred, massive deficits in fact, and the question still remains, why did the HEA let that happen? Equally, given its past performance, why should anyone be confident that the HEA is capable of either planning or managing the reform agenda that has been set out for higher education?

The HEA does not maintain a critical distance between the universities and the State and this is clear from the various policy documents it has recently commissioned and published.

In the *Review of Funding Model for Higher Education Institutions: Consultation Document*, it is proposed that funding be allocated for a specified number of courses and that core funding, strategic/earmarked funding and performance funding would form the three elements of this model. It was proposed that the performance-funding element would be linked to satisfactory performance in relation to agreed targets. The HEA (2012) stated that "we need to encourage and reward the development of a more cost effective sector. Programme rationalisation and greater collaboration between HEIs have been identified as priority areas for action in 2012/13". In order to achieve this, it is proposed that each HEI will agree a funding contract with the HEA which will set out the key outputs, outcomes and level of service to be delivered and the resources allocated to achieve these (HEA, 2012).

What we are being asked to believe, colleagues, in the absence of any evidence, is that the centralised and technical approach proposed by the HEA, which distributes educational and research activity amongst institutions, will be better. No rationale has

been provided for the kind of centralised system being proposed and no projected cost efficiencies have been outlined. No evidence has been provided that points to inefficiencies in the Irish higher education system and no evidence has been presented that suggests that the existing model is not working.

This Government is committed to a “strong agenda to promote shared services, common procurement and the outsourcing of services where appropriate within the public sector” (Quinn, 2012). We have witnessed first-hand how this has operated so far with reference to the reorganisation of the student grants system. It has proven a very, very expensive financial lesson for the Department of Education and Skills. Extra staff had to be appointed to address the deficiencies in this new system and current staff had to be paid extra over-time to deal with the issues that arose. More importantly, in human terms, it has impacted negatively financially and emotionally on students and on their families who have endured such uncertainty due to delays in the processing of their applications and their accurate assessment. This is not a model or an approach that is appropriate for our public services in general or for our higher education system in particular.

## 2.2 *The policy process in higher education*

During the last decade a number of major reviews of the higher education system in Ireland have been published. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 – Report of the Strategy Group* (2011) provided projections regarding the future numbers participating in the Irish higher education sector. In the year 2012 following the publication of the Strategy Group the HEA commissioned another report to be undertaken by the ESRI on future demand for higher education. Some doubts were cast on the ‘usefulness’ of the Strategy Group projections by the ESRI report which stated:

On the basis of current participation rates and demographic projections, the number of potential undergraduate HE entrants is expected to grow from 41,000 in 2010/2011 to 44,000 in 2019/20 (7%) and to just over 51,000 by 2029/2030. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) estimates are broadly in line with recent projections produced by the Department of

Education and Skills (DES). These estimates are not considerably impacted when the underlying assumptions relating to migration are altered. Both the ESRI and the DES estimates lie substantially below the projections that were used in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Consequently, any policy suggestions centred on the projections contained in this National Strategy document require re-examination (ESRI, 2012, p. 7).

Questions concerning the existence of a ‘discrepancy’ and the reasons why such a discrepancy exists are a repeated feature of Irish education policy discourse and planning, which requires investigation. All too often policy decisions concerning the future of major aspects of our higher education system have been taken in the absence of adequate policy and planning considerations.

### 2.3 *Teacher Education*

In February 1986 the then-Minister for Education, Ms Gemma Hussey, announced the decision to close the 111-year old Carysfort College. She attributed the decision to “falling pupil numbers, a young teaching force, which was giving rise to few retirements, and the need to contain public expenditure and achieve a better allocation of resources” (Dáil Debates, 1986). Surprisingly, very shortly after the closure the numbers of students were increased significantly for the other colleges. The need to contain public expenditure may well have been the basis for this decision, however, no analysis of the situation, identification of the processes involved, or the projected savings were ever presented (Clarke & Killeavy, 2012).

In 2012, two reports were published on this area. *A review of the structure of initial teacher education provision in Ireland: Background paper for the international review team* (Hyland, 2012) and *Report of the International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland: Review Conducted on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills* (Sahlberg, et al., 2012). Hyland (2012) focused on the structure of teacher education provision in Ireland and the question of teacher supply. Sahlberg, et al. (2012, p.6) placed initial teacher education firmly at the centre of Ireland’s economic and social structures and asserted that teachers and teacher education are core to ‘the implementation of national

programmes for sustainable economic growth and prosperity'. Like Hyland (2012) the report emphasised the need for the Government and teacher education providers to address the issues of teacher supply. Further, they recommended that two teacher education providers be closed and that teacher education be reconfigured into six centres across the country as a means of achieving critical mass (Sahlberg, *et al.*, 2012). However, no definition of "critical mass" was offered (Clarke & Killeavy, 2012). Given the lack of clarity concerning teacher supply needs in the system, this is not surprising. The increasing presence of private provision in pre-service primary and post primary teacher education makes this situation more problematic, particularly as private bodies are not subject to any quotas on student intake.

Proposed change in the organisation and delivery of teacher education in Ireland was reported in the *New York Times* [25 November 2012] which stated that:

St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra has been training teachers for more than 135 years, for the past two decades as an autonomous college of Dublin City University. But in September, it received a letter saying that it would become a much more integral part of the university.

The author Christopher Schuetze goes on to note that such proposed mergers between teaching colleges and universities are part of a Government plan to allow the Irish higher education system to educate more people better with less money. The article quotes Malcolm Byrne of the HEA as saying:

There was need for changes anyway, but obviously now working against a background of diminished resources, it brings an urgency.

Further on in the article, the following comments are attributed:

There will be fewer institutions: A lot of the smaller institutions will have been merged and institutions will be encouraged to specialize Mr. Byrne said. "The word in the system is doing more with less".



The Irish Higher Education Authority is eager to promote the kind of education and training that leads directly to jobs.

Even if our graduates can't get a job in Ireland, it is important that we put our graduates in a position that they can get jobs anywhere in the world Mr. Byrne said.

It is clear that little has changed with reference to the policy process in the intervening period between the closure of Carysfort College and the current situation. The approach adopted is one of restructuring, where the structural reforms are introduced as solution, without any attempt to identify and deal with any actual problems within the system. Once again the narrative suggesting that there will be less inefficiencies in terms of "scale" or "critical mass" is put forward as the rationale for the proposed changes. Once again, no evidence is provided in terms of the national educational or international research contexts.

In the context of teacher education, the Irish Federation of University Teachers will defend the rights of our members with reference to their terms and conditions of employment; this is our duty as a trade union. We will demand representation in any discussions surrounding amalgamations that would potentially threaten any diminution of our members' current conditions. Equally, as a professional federation with the single largest range of expertise in teacher education in the country, we will demand representation in any such discussions. It is imperative that the cost-cutting rationale, regardless of how it is 'dressed up', can no longer be justified as the rationale for system change.

#### *2.4 Competitiveness within higher education: the HEA view*

There is a view within the HEA that education is not a public good or service.

During 2012, the HEA indicated that high quality private sector institutions will continue to be a feature of the system and could have an expanded role where they meet particular economic or other demands (HEA, 2012).

At a meeting of the *Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection* (13 March 2013) the Chair, Ms Joanna Tuffy, requested Dr Sean Rowland, founder of Hibernia College, to state the profit margins of the company. He replied:

We absolutely do not discuss that. It is a matter of interest to our competitors as well. It would not be appropriate. It is policy. We have to report everything under Irish law, which is as it should be.

He went on to say that:

The information would be accessible through freedom of information provisions. That is the way we direct people who are interested in that area.

It seems somewhat strange to refuse this information to such a body on the grounds that it would be of “interest to our competitors”. Presumably these competitors are the colleges of the National University of Ireland, Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Limerick and possibly other private colleges in embryo. Of course, competitors may also apply to providers outside of the state. It is fortunate, as Dr Rowland did point out, that recourse may be made through FOI for this company to disclose the profits.

Mr John Hennessy, Chair of the HEA, is a keen supporter of the private sector in education:

As a growing sector, the private sector has the potential to add significantly to the overall capacity of the system (Hennessy, 2012). Competition is as important in education as it is in industry and commerce - every institution is in a way an ‘economic check on its competitors’. The ability to react and anticipate the needs of the economy also echoes the ability of the sector to offer ‘an opportunity to periodically reassess the value for money and

effectiveness of public providers; where private providers can offer better value for money” (Hennessy, 2012).

Mr Hennessy takes this position due, perhaps, to his over-optimistic view of how markets work and that the private sector is ‘obviously’ more efficient than the public sector.

We reject both his assertion and the basis of it. Empirical evidence and theory suggest that this assumption is wrong. There is little systematic evaluation of whether competition in itself raises standards (Gash & Roos 2012). The Finnish economist Johann Willner reviewed empirical evidence from comparative studies in a range of sectors, which showed that public ownership is no less efficient in more than half of the studies he reviewed. We argue that in higher education the universal, mutual-solidarity function of public services must remain the priority – not the market.

Within the policy framework and process there seems to be an over reliance on international experts to tell us what is appropriate for our system.

In 2012, the HEA commissioned inputs from six international experts on the future of Irish higher education. In their report *A Proposed Reconfiguration of the Irish System of Higher Education: Report prepared by an International Expert Panel for the Higher Education Authority of Ireland* (HEA, 2012) they argued:

[That there has] been a growing concern that while the laissez-faire development of the Irish higher education system has achieved successes in some areas – higher participation and research activity - it has also led to mission drift, confusion over the role and mission of institutions, growing institutional homogeneity, unnecessary duplication and fears about the quality and sustainability of the system. There is a widespread agreement among policy makers and the public that the system should be reformed (HEA, 2012, p. 5).

No evidence for this statement was provided by the HEA. There was no discussion with the universities or IFUT and “the panel worked solely on the basis of a portfolio

of information and statistics about Irish higher education” (HEA, 2012, p. 5). They worked over three days and one member of that panel did not even come to Dublin but submitted a report (HEA, 2012, p. 6). This panel claimed that their proposals would assist institutional diversity, expand capacity within constrained budgets and ensure less duplication, while also ensuring each institution will be of a sufficient size to sustain a comprehensive range of research programmes and teaching.

Mr Tom Boland (2011) CEO of the HEA in his vision of higher education has referred to the:

Era of laissez-faire in higher education and its replacement by what might be termed “directed diversity”.

Minister Quinn has commented in the past that the “harsh reality is that as a country we can no longer afford to indulge plans that are not based on credible and realistic analysis of likely outcomes” (Quinn, 2012).

I suggest that the harsh reality is that Irish higher education requires a coherent narrative and little that has emerged from HEA policy documents indicates that the narrative is either coherent or indeed based on “credible and realistic analysis of likely outcomes”.

The debate should not be about whether education reforms are needed, but rather about the kind of reforms, and the conditions for success (Ball & Youdell, 2008).

### **3. Lack of investment in higher education**

While investment in higher education in Ireland increased from the mid 1990s onwards, per capita expenditure remained modest by international standards throughout the period of growth and this expenditure has significantly decreased since 2009. The OECD (2004) reported that Ireland’s investment into its education system as a whole was lower than the OECD average. In public expenditure terms it ranked

only 25th out of 30 OECD countries and with private expenditure added to public, 23rd out of 27 countries for which data were available (OECD 2004). In fact, public expenditure declined from 4.7% to 4.1% as a proportion of a rapidly growing GDP between 1995 and 2000 (OECD, 2004).

We never had appropriate levels of investment in our higher education system compared to other OECD countries.

Between 2008 and 2012 recurrent grant allocations to universities and colleges fell by 25%. The largest cuts in recurrent grants were at UCD, which experienced a reduction of over 25%. Other universities have taken major cuts, including TCD (-22%), UCC (-21%), NUI Maynooth (-18%) and NUIIG (-16%). The recurrent grant to St Patrick's College, Drumcondra was cut by 25% and Mary Immaculate College in Limerick was down 18% in the four-year period reviewed. The budget introduced in 2013 brought a further 7.4% reduction in general recurrent funding levels for the third level education sector.

The HEA achieved and surpassed the targeted staff reductions set out in the first Employment Control Framework, which expired in December 2010 (HEA, Annual Report, 2011).

There are 10,300 WTE core staff employed in universities and colleges, of which 4,701 (45.5%) are academic and 5,599 (54.4%) are non-academic (HEA Key Facts and Figures 2011-2012). We have a higher proportion of non-academic staff than academics employed in our universities. This is a matter of grave concern and highlights the over bureaucratisation of Irish universities at the expense of their core academic teaching and research functions.

In order to deal with existing budgetary deficits and resulting cuts in state expenditure, higher education institutions have begun to focus on measures involving staff student ratios, research income metrics, the recruitment of international students and cuts in non-pay budgets. Cuts in expenditure affecting staff student ratios tend to be blunt measures that are taken with the objective of saving money and educational

issues are rarely - if ever - considered in justifying these measures. Typically, reductions in full-time staffing take the form of non-replacement of existing staff on their retirement. This means that areas of course work can no longer be provided for students and their experience deteriorates (Clarke & Killeavy, 2012).

The extensive nature of these cuts highlights the seriousness of the crisis that is now facing Irish universities.

#### **4. Student access to and experiences in higher education**

It is important that we retain an expansive view of the university as an engine for social change and economic self-direction. Central to this is equity of access and opportunity and these values are at risk in current budgetary arrangements. Higher education should remain accessible to all who meet entry qualifications, regardless of their personal circumstances.

##### *4.1 Student Grants*

The research evidence indicates that the proportion of young people in receipt of student grants varies considerably across different socio-economic groups, particularly across employee and self-employed groups. The value of grant payments has also declined over time (McCoy *et al.*, 2010). The reduction of 3% in the rates of grants announced in Budget 2012 was implemented for all existing and new student grant holders from January 2012. The decline in grant eligibility by students from lower non-manual backgrounds, such as personal services, sales and clerical workers, is particularly striking (McGuinness *et al.*, 2012). These groups are also likely to be at the margins of the income thresholds in relation to any fee exemptions.

These issues are all the more pressing in the current climate as families are struggling to provide financial support to their sons and daughters on entering higher education. Young people themselves face difficulties in securing part-time employment to support their studies. A situation is developing where parents are afraid to take on available work, or work hours that might put them in excess of the income thresholds

whereby they would lose grant eligibility for children at third level. This is not acceptable in a country that promotes education as a key to economic recovery.

Foreign national students who have been educated at primary and secondary school in this country face serious challenges in securing grants if they have not applied for citizenship in their own right even if their parents have done so. This often occurs because of lack of information. Such students need appropriate support to ensure that they actually know what steps they must take if they are not to be disadvantaged when it comes to securing support for third level education.

The issues in relation to shared services with reference to the student grant system have been debated extensively elsewhere. It is not possible to easily share information across databases from social welfare, revenue and education. This requires legislation and should be a priority for the ministers involved so that a proper service can be provided for our students who wish to access higher education. Every child in this country has a right to expect to receive a university education and should receive the necessary supports to do so.

#### 4.2 *Transition from secondary to university*

Greater collaboration between universities and the second level education system with reference to enhanced curricular alignment has been proposed. Curricular change is also influenced by the availability of existing resources, shared vision, and appropriate organisational infrastructure (Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005). The NCCA / HEA Conference on *Entry into Higher Education in Ireland in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (2011) and the recent publication *Supporting a Better Transition from Second Level to Higher Education: Key Directions and Next Steps* (2013) marked a new beginning in this regard. There are potential pedagogical and logistical challenges arising from these proposals within higher education institutions, including increases in class sizes and difficulties allocating students to different subject areas within programmes (*Supporting a Better Transition from Second Level to Higher Education: Key Directions and Next Steps, 2013*). Equally, we must not allow any dilution of the disciplinary areas in our universities.

Curricular reform at post primary level and in higher education implies more than making changes to curricula. While conferences and reports promote thinking and provide new directions, what is essential is ongoing and meaningful engagement between schools and universities, and that can only be achieved when there are people available to engage in that process. The cuts to guidance counsellors in schools and the declining numbers of academics in third level make this necessary engagement very remote. It is very important that students who are struggling to meet the academic requirements of their courses are identified with a view to providing additional academic (and social) guidance and supports, particularly in the first year of their studies (McGuinness *et al.*, 2012). This requires personnel.

### 4.3 *Teaching Quality*

At the launch of the *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning*, Minister Quinn suggested that this initiative will allow the system to provide all students with a teaching and learning experience of the highest quality through engagement with innovative pedagogies and technologies that support these (Quinn, 2012).

Irish academics engage in innovative pedagogy. They emphasise international perspectives, a values-based and meritocratic approach in their teaching in line with their colleagues from Finland, the United Kingdom and Austria (Höhle & Teichler, 2013).

The range of diverse teaching methodologies employed by Irish academics compares very favourably - ranking third after their colleagues in the UK and Finland on these approaches (Höhle & Teichler, 2013).

What we strive to develop within our students is intellectual curiosity – to give them the potential to develop. To do this, students need individual support. This cannot be achieved while staff-student ratios are deteriorating significantly in the university sector.



Table 1 Staffing levels in higher education in Ireland 2008-2011

| University | Academic Staff<br>Only | Student (WTE)<br>Numbers | Ratio |
|------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------|
| 2008-09    | 4,795.56               | 89, 650                  | 18.7  |
| 2009-10    | 4,543.98               | 95,061                   | 20.9  |
| 2010-11    | 4,426.31               | 106,448                  | 24.0  |

Source HEA, 2011. Report *Sustainability Study: Aligning Participation, Quality and Funding in Irish Higher Education*.

Despite the 12% decrease in core staff numbers and the increase in staff-student ratios from 1:18 in 2008/9 to 1:24 in 2010/11, Irish academics still prioritise values and diverse approaches in teaching and learning. This is achieved within a quality assurance system, legislatively-based and widely respected internationally (McGuinness 2009). This is an outstanding achievement and would be judged as such if we were only in the business of teaching and graduate supply. Regrettably, this increase in the staff-student ratio does indicate a future erosion in research strength. Increased teaching loads of staff in Irish third level education mean that less time is available for necessary research activity.

## 5. Research

Increasing pressure on Irish and European academics to raise research funding from external agencies has been a feature of academic life over recent years. This is particularly difficult during a period of financial stringency. However, certain subject areas, particularly those within the arts and humanities, are much less likely to secure research funding than areas connected with subjects such as science and medicine. Further, there is a pressure on all academic staff to produce more extensive research

than heretofore. Drennan, et al., (2013) reported that both senior and junior academics in Ireland, similar to colleagues in Europe, are in agreement that the pressures to increase research productivity are a threat to the quality of research.

Peer reviewing is an important external research activity undertaken by academics. Senior academics in Ireland report high levels of involvement in this activity (90%) ahead of their colleagues in Germany (52%) and the Netherlands (55%). Irish junior academics (56%) have higher levels of engagement in this activity compared to their German colleagues (17%). Irish academics (75%) have the second highest levels of participation as members of scientific committees after Switzerland (84%). Collaborative research work amongst academics at national and international levels has increased in recent years. Irish senior academics (90%) ranked third after colleagues in Switzerland (95%) and Austria (92%) with reference to international collaboration (Drennan *et al.*, 2013).

Irish universities continue to do well. The impact of Irish research is at an all-time high (HEA, 2011), but this level of research activity is undermined by declining income levels, increases in staff–student ratios and excessive administrative burdens.

Our success rate is ahead of the EU average when it comes to winning funding under the *EU's Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development* (FP7) (Hennessy, 2012). The Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, in their publication *Staying the Course* noted that 'Ireland has benefited greatly from, and contributed to, international relations and the internationalisation of research'. (Hennessy, 2012).

Much emphasis has been placed on collaboration among academics, particularly with reference to bidding for research funding. However, the imperative to collaborate is management-led rather than coming from the nature of the work of existing research teams which actually undermines the organic research process. Further, pressure from Government to increase such collaboration is a cause of similar problems. This was reiterated in the publication of the *Research Prioritisation Steering Group Report* (2011).

The Government announced in March 2012 that it would refocus public research spending on 14 areas with the greatest potential for creating jobs and growth. These priorities place a strong focus on life sciences and information technology as well as innovation in manufacturing, services and business processes. There is a bias in favour of STEM - science, technology, engineering and mathematics - but that does not represent the range of knowledge or research interests in the universities (Barrett, 2013). Arts, humanities and social sciences subjects have been marginalised.

During the Seanad Debate on *Industrial Development (Science Foundation Ireland)(Amendment) Bill 2012* referring to the 14 priorities and the role of researchers, Minister Sherlock commented:

They need to start thinking more laterally about engaging and collaborating in an interdisciplinary fashion, think about their own output as it stands at present and find new areas of opportunity for themselves (Sherlock, 2013).

All academics - regardless of their disciplinary background - should be both aware and wary of restricted interpretations of Government policy documents, particularly the research prioritisation exercise. The historic links between the university system and Irish society are deeply rooted in terms of the arts and humanities; social sciences; business; science and medicine. We must maintain the ideal of a comprehensive university system, sustaining education and scholarship across every discipline and this should be defended by all academics in the university system.

As academics, we must not take instruction from any Government minister as to our research priorities and we must preserve and defend our right to academic freedom always.

## **6. Rankings**

High quality information and feedback for national and international students is necessary in mass systems and robust quality assurance is essential. The production of international league tables has become a lucrative business for those involved. They are presented as value-free, objective assessments when they are neither. They

have become as pernicious as the ratings agencies have become in national economic terms.

Table 2 International ranking league tables

|  |
|--|
| US News and World Report (with QS Symonds),  |
| Times Higher Education Supplement (with Thomson Reuters),                                |
| Academic Rank of World Universities (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China)               |
| Global Universities Rankings (Lomonosov State University, Russia)                        |
| Scientific Papers for World Universities (Accreditation and Evaluation Council, Taiwan), |
| Leiden Research Ranking (Leiden University, Netherlands),                                |
| University Web Ranking (CSIC Cybernetics, Spain)   |

The most influential ranking league tables are Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) and Academic Rank of World Universities (ARWU, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China). In rich countries, they are used by governments in domestic policy debate and by universities in marketing and promotion, particularly in North and South East Asia. In emerging and developing countries, they are used by governments as benchmarks for the development of domestic institutions and systems. They directly affect institutional behaviour and indirectly high achieving student choice (McCulloch, 2013). ARWU is based solely on metrics with research (maths and science in particular), accounting for 90% of composite scores. THES is more balanced (30% teaching, 30% research volume, income and reputation, 32.5% research citations, 7.5% international and 2.5% economic innovation), but has actually a closer to 75% weighting for research (McCulloch, 2013). It is important to bear in mind not only what these rankings are based on, but equally the areas and issues which they exclude. Both rankings reflect the prestige, high selectivity in student enrolments and staff appointments, economic resources and global reach of each university. They do not attempt to reflect diversity of institutions and systems, access and issues of equality or their cultural economic and social contexts. Quality assurance and performance assessment should reflect the characteristics, resources and social and educational objectives of each institution and should be autonomously determined within each university using peer review and stakeholder consultation

(McCullogh, 2013). This author goes on to say that academic freedom, collegial decision-making, trade union rights and employment standards should also be part of quality assurance criteria (McCullogh, 2013). Further, he disagrees fundamentally with the provision of league tables when these are used as a basis for competition between institutions. He asserts that the aggregation of data at national and international level for any cross-institutional comparative purposes should prevent the construction of league tables (McCullogh, 2013).

As a member of Education International, IFUT supports its efforts to develop direct dialogue with the Berlin rankings group (CHE/die Ziet and IREG) on the development of University Ranking and U-Map, and with the EU on U-Multirank as these approaches are consciously constructed to enable comparison without league tables.

It is encouraging to note that Minister Quinn has expressed similar views, but disturbing that the HEA does not seem to be as well informed:

The pursuit of excellence is at risk of being reduced to a narrow pursuit of high profile league tables rankings. Some of those are based on limited and sometimes flawed or questionable indicators. We need to recognise the dangers of encouraging a culture of ‘playing the rankings’ in higher education to the detriment of more rounded and important quality development objectives (Quinn, 2013).

The view of the HEA is as follows:

All Irish higher educational institutions fell heavily in their academic reputation ranking. This plummeting of the international reputation of Irish higher education extends across all universities and disciplines and appears to be particularly severe in the areas of science, engineering and technology (HEA, 2012).

Irish universities have absorbed serious funding cuts while maintaining acceptable levels of excellence and quality as measured by existing rankings. More importantly, they have achieved this in the current financial climate with resources that are substantially smaller than those available to less successful competing national systems. The HEA should not be using rankings as a guide to measure development within the Irish third level education system.

Irish universities have become very influenced by rankings. It was distressing to read in the *New York Times* [December 30<sup>th</sup> 2012], that the company behind the QS World University Rankings announced “a new initiative that gives universities the opportunity to highlight their strength” by paying a fee for the chance to be rated on a scale of one to five stars. This initiative was introduced in 2012.

This article also reported that after paying a one-time audit fee of \$9,850 and an annual license fee of \$6,850, the University of Limerick is now able to boast that it has been awarded an overall ranking of four stars (Guttenplan, *New York Times*, December 2012). The author of this report went on to note that “the University of Limerick did not make two other major international rankings — Times Higher Education’s top 400 or Shanghai Jiaotong University’s top 500 — though it was listed as one of T.H.E.’s top 100 new universities” (Guttenplan, *New York Times*, December 2012).

University College Cork also featured in this report. This institution came 190th in the QS rankings, and received an overall rating of five stars. This places it “among an international elite” that, according to QS, offers students “cutting edge facilities and internationally renowned research and teaching faculty”. However, it was further noted that “in comparison, it was placed in the 301-400 band in the Shanghai Jiaotong rankings and in the 301-350 band in the T.H.E. rankings”. An official from University College Cork is quoted in the *Irish Examiner* as stating if the QS stars:

result in attracting a single additional, full-time international student to study at U.C.C. then the costs of participation are covered.

Such attitudes are far removed from what we have come to expect from our higher education institutions.

Altbach, (2012) a leading author in the area of higher education, has described the star ratings as particularly problematic and conflictual. He points out that:

by asking universities to respond to surveys for rankings and then asking them to pay for a star rating — I'm not accusing them of pay-for-play. I don't have any evidence that is happening. But the appearance of conflict is there.

Ben Sowter, head of the QS Intelligence Unit, provides a different and somewhat foreign rationale for the star system. He suggests that:

in a world where Harvard is five stars, why wouldn't you want to be seen as a three-star school?

He added:

Plenty of people are happy to stay in three-star hotels.

If all of this is true of the management of our universities, then as academics we must find the situation extremely disappointing and deeply depressing. Regrettably, it does seem that the management of two of our universities felt obliged to pursue this form of star rating and in doing so leave themselves, their institutions and their staff open to accusations of conflict of interest and the associated negative international publicity that accompanies this.

## **7. Staff and working conditions**

### *7.1 Workload*

As we are well aware colleagues, a key element of any higher education system is its staff. Minister Quinn has suggested that there is a need to have:

transparency relating to academic workloads and to have more public information about this (Quinn, 2012).

This was a very surprising comment by the Minister. Senior academics in Ireland work on average 50 hours a week. This compares to an average of 48 hours across European countries (Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2013). Junior academics work 47 hours a week on average, compared to 42 hours at this level across Europe. The Minister has also commented that there were issues around embedded and restrictive work practices (Quinn, 2012). We reject this unfounded assertion. Academics in Irish universities, in line with their European colleagues, work under considerable personal strain (Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2013). The Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Declaration on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in March 2010, recognised the need for “a more supportive environment for the staff to fulfill their tasks...” This declaration highlights the centrality of this issue at European level and it should also be recognised in the Irish context.

## 7.2 *Early Career Researchers*

As far back as 2005 we had an ageing academic workforce. In 2005 21% of academics in Ireland were over 55, compared to an average over all occupations of 12% (EGFSN, 2005). The proportion of PhD graduates entering the third level sector dropped significantly between 2001 and 2003, from 17.2% to 14.3% of graduates, while the proportion entering other fields/professions has risen from 82.8% to 85.7% (EGFSN, 2005).



Table 3 The Number and Percentage of PhD Graduates, Graduating the Previous Year, and Choosing to become University Academics versus Entry to Other Professions

|                                      | 2001   |                       | 2002   |       | 2003   |       |
|--------------------------------------|--------|-----------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
|                                      | Number | % of all PhD students | Number | %     | Number | %     |
| Third Level Lecturers                | 44     | 16.1%                 | 56     | 19.5% | 37     | 13.5% |
| Third Level assistants/demonstrators | 3      | 1.1%                  | 1      | 0.3%  | 2      | 0.7%  |
| Total                                | 47     | 17.2%                 | 57     | 19.9% | 39     | 14.3% |
| Other Professions                    | 226    | 82.8%                 | 229    | 80.1% | 234    | 85.7% |

Source: HEA First Destination of Graduates Reports.

In 2008, 46.7% PhD graduates were employed in third level, 34% of those were working in third level overseas (HEA, 2008).

The treatment of our early career researchers and academics has been disgraceful particularly in the way it impacts negatively upon the formation of their professional identity (Clarke *et al.*, 2012). In Ireland, many young academics have very fragmented employment experiences in the early years of their careers. Many move from position to position on short term or part-time contracts. There is little by way of support for these early-career academics 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. These institutions are increasingly prioritising research, while at the same time discontinuing young researchers' contracts of employment when there is a danger they will become eligible for a contract of indefinite duration. Securing fair treatment for researchers

should be a major priority for all who are involved in higher education. IFUT is committed to representing early career researchers in the industrial relations context as per our Memorandum of Understanding, which we signed with the Irish Research Staff Association (IRSA) at our 2012 Annual Delegate Conference.

### *7.3 Attitudes to the industrial relations framework.*

The most vulnerable university staff are increasingly seeing their jobs threatened as university management seeks to breach the provisions of the 2003 *Fixed-Term Work Act*. In 2012, IFUT dealt with 15 separate cases and had to fight each one to defend rights under the 2003 Act. Even though the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform were aware of the large amounts of public money being spent by universities to circumvent the 2003 Act, there appeared to be, at the very least, tacit approval for the actions of universities on this issue. In some cases, universities targeted lecturers and librarians for compulsory redundancy and unequal treatment. We had an unnecessary and prolonged dispute with Trinity College Dublin about three staff members whom they had tried to make redundant. The manner in which the university management acted indicated a blatant disregard for accepted industrial relations process. IFUT took a firm stand on this issue and our position was vindicated. However, it is important to point out that the situation should not have been allowed to go on for such a long period and did so without any public comment from the Minister for Education and Skills. We commend and applaud our colleagues who found themselves in this unenviable position for their resilience throughout their long struggle for success.

### *7.4 Attitudes to equality*

Bullying and harassment cases in third-level institutions have consumed vast amounts of public money. When after going through the proper industrial process awards are made to academic staff, the Department of Education and Skills has shown great reluctance to sanction the payments. This should not be happening.

In Ireland there is a higher proportion of females than males at junior lecturer level, whereas the reverse is true at senior lecturer level (Goastellec & Pekari, 2013). 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% and men spend 36% of their time on teaching-related activities (Goastellec & Pekari, 2013).

It is difficult to believe that women in Irish universities are not replaced when they take maternity leave or adoptive leave, which is totally unacceptable. The IFUT Equality Committee will continue to work vigorously to defend equal rights in all areas of university employment. We are delighted to be hosting Education International's second World Women's Conference, which will take place at the Burlington Hotel, Dublin, on 7-9 April, 2014 to discuss the theme *On the Move to Equality*.

## **Conclusion**

We are facing a very serious crisis in university education in this country for the reasons that I have outlined. In an extended recessionary period, when major policy decisions concerning university education are based almost exclusively on reduced resourcing for the sector, the outlook for growth and development is bleak - for the universities themselves and for the higher education sector in which they are located. Our students and society deserve better than this.

IFUT celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year. This union has grown in strength over that period and has made an excellent contribution to higher education and to the development of industrial relations. We can be justifiably proud of our achievements in both of these areas.

It has been a privilege and honour to serve as President of this union. I want to thank our General Secretary, Mike Jennings, our Assistant General Secretary, Joan Donegan, and our administrator, Phyllis Russell, for their constant assistance and advice.

I want to thank colleagues from my own branch in UCD who were so supportive of me during my term as President.

I also want to thank in particular the IFUT Executive - the elected leaders of this union - for their dedication, hard work and honesty of engagement.

Finally colleagues, I want to congratulate our new President, Dr Rose Malone, on taking up office. We are very fortunate to have someone of her calibre and ability and I know that IFUT will prosper under her guidance and leadership.

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