

## IFUT PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2022 Dr. Anthony Harvey (RIA)



**MINISTER,**

I am sure I speak for all of us here today in saying how glad we are to have learned of the government's plan to increase investment in higher education. As was expressed in a press statement issued by IFUT the other day, "the explicit commitment to address the core funding deficit in our sector is as significant as it is overdue". I think we owe this breakthrough, such as it is, to the very welcome establishment of the separate department for Higher Education that you head; but also, if I may say so, to your own proven willingness to take the initiative and lead in such matters, which is a development that should be recognized and for which I should like to express the sincere gratitude of this Conference.

Minister, we are additionally grateful to you for remaining on after your speech to hear a couple of points that we consider it vital for you to take into consideration if your initiative is to achieve a fully worthwhile effect. The first is this: Whenever State funding is used to reduce or eliminate student fees, that is a very beneficial move in terms of widening access to university; but from the point of view of the institutions concerned it makes no difference to their own shortage of finance — which is acute — if all that happens is that money from the State replaces payment by the students themselves (or by their parents). In fact, it could even make it worse, if the result is that more students can afford to come. But we think you are aware of this, given our understanding that a key objective of your initiative is explicitly designed to address the chronic deterioration of staff-to-student ratios. In other words, you recognize that the current dire situation of the Higher Education sector itself will only improve to the extent that additional core funding is made available above and beyond what is required to reduce student fees.

**“-THE CURRENT DIRE SITUATION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR ITSELF WILL ONLY IMPROVE TO THE EXTENT THAT ADDITIONAL CORE FUNDING IS MADE AVAILABLE ABOVE AND BEYOND WHAT IS REQUIRED TO REDUCE STUDENT FEES.”**

### ***Precarious Employment in Higher Education***

The second point is one of which we fear you (or at least the Department) may still be a little less aware, as it is one that the Government probably won't have been hearing quite so much from any other source than ourselves: namely the pernicious extent to which genuinely precarious employment has spread throughout our sector. In the first two levels of education, the difficulty is to retain teachers once they are established (because, with their skills, they can find higher-paid employment elsewhere) — and we know that both Government and

Opposition are regularly and appropriately lobbied about this by our fellow teacher-  
Unions. But in Higher Education, the  
difficulty is to get our people established in  
the first place.

A few years ago, it was found that, on average, academics were in their early forties before they gained even their first permanent post (that was an international figure; but Ireland was hardly bucking the trend, and the situation has certainly not improved since then). This is sector-wide precarity on a level as bad as that experienced by shop workers, as our incoming Assistant General Secretary Robert McNamara can attest from his current employment with the Mandate Union. The fact is that we have whole cohorts of Third Level teachers and researchers who for decades have had no choice but to endure one short-term contract after another — each one often having to be applied for against stiff competition, and gained on the basis of hard-won qualifications and expertise far above what is required in any other profession for a contract with comparable terms and conditions.

Now, one reason why this alarming picture may not seem to chime with the generally-held perception of Third Level employment is that it doesn't get reported (even by those in a position to report it). For example, Post-Doctoral Researchers are not conventionally included in figures for precarious employment. The historical reason for this is that the traditional post-doc fellowship was seen as a time-limited transition to a secure lectureship

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(or equivalent), during which one could build up valuable experience. But it was always very poorly paid; and the norm now is that it is simply the first in a series of dogsbody jobs; it has no security and, as for prospects, the ultimate goal is officially viewed in one notorious document as being exit from the

**“-PRECARITY IN EMPLOYMENT IS AN EVIL AND A SCOURGE THAT, IN THE END, WILL BENEFIT NO-ONE.”**

sector! In the meantime, the poor post-doc employees are often demeaned by continuing to be referred to as “trainees”, although they are already more highly qualified than their contemporaries who have gone into other professions, and yet behind whom they are falling further and further in terms of pay. Also, much of the final year in each of the short-term contracts can't be fully dedicated to the relevant research, because the incumbent has to spend so much time and effort preparing applications for the next one. So, the current set-up makes no sense either for the employee or, in terms of value for money, for the sector itself. And I haven't even touched upon the other enforcedly lowly, but still expert and highly professional, teachers and tutors in our institutions who get laid off and laid on again in a dreary annual round of increasingly unsustainable existence. In short, Minister, precarity in employment is an evil and a scourge that, in the end, will benefit no-one; as the IFUT press release pointed out, it “threatens to undermine the very fabric of teaching in higher education”, and it is vital that your very valuable funding initiative should be linked to tackling and reversing it.

### ***Sectoral Engagement in Higher Education***

Now, as I said earlier, we perceive a risk that your Department is not always consistently aware of the extent to which issues such as this beset the Higher Education sector. That is because, unlike the situation of our fellow Teacher Unions, there is at present no formal structure to provide for regular sectoral engagement between ourselves in IFUT and our employers, by which we could keep each other up to date. This means that briefings have to be done *ad hoc* and on the fringes of other engagements and meetings. The situation is unsustainable, and is surely unsatisfactory to all parties; we urge that it be rectified. After all, this particular Union, though quite small, is uniquely well informed on issues such as precarity, as a disproportionate and increasing



number of our members are affected by it; we would welcome an opportunity to engage in a formal and sustained fashion with your Department, so as to be a central part of any resulting discussions, given the scope that

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these would provide for agreeing on suitable remedies. One such remedy, given that yourself and the Taoiseach are next week launching the new Research and Innovation Strategy that you mentioned, is pointed to by an understanding and appreciation currently emerging at EU level. This is the realization that the funding model for research needs to move away from the current one, whereby the money follows the research, to one that is more supportive of the specific Researcher,involved. Not only is this fairer to that individual; it also yields better results.

Colleagues, my remarks so far have been addressed primarily to the Minister, and I make no apology for that. But it is vitally important that academics themselves don't fall into the trap of exacerbating precarity by colluding with it. As IFUT members we must be careful never to countenance attempts by senior academics to justify a lack of sympathy on their part with the precarious employment situations of their juniors by saying, or at least implying, “Well, I went through that myself back in the day; it's a rite of passage that all scholars need to pass through, so they shouldn't complain”. That attitude is unacceptable for a number of reasons. First, it is out of date: the situation is now objectively much worse than it was when the senior academic was at that stage himself (and the chances are I do mean *himself*); in any case he is probably looking back on it through rose-coloured spectacles given how things have turned out for him. Second, his remark implies that the precarious phase is necessary in order to weed out people who are not really cut out to be academics; but that in turn rests on the assumption that there are

sufficient opportunities in the system to cater for everyone who deserves it, provided they have first proved their worth by persevering for long enough. But it's a fallacy: there aren't sufficient opportunities, and the people who get weeded out aren't necessarily the ones who are academically inferior; it's the ones whose social and financial situations oblige them to give up.

**“PRECARITY DOESN'T ENSURE THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST; IT INSTITUTIONALIZES THE DOMINANCE OF THE FATTEST.”**

Precarity doesn't ensure the survival of the fittest; it institutionalizes the dominance of the fattest. Third, I would look with a cold eye at the circumstances in which the senior academic is making his complacent remark about precarity: is he perhaps in the very process of embarking on a research project of his own that will itself involve hiring junior staff on an unjustifiedly precarious, short-term basis? At all events, whatever about senior academics in general, those who are IFUT



members in particular have a duty to examine their consciences: complacency about precarity has no place in our Union; far less should any of us collude with it, exploiting our academic colleagues in the process.



## Higher Education Authority Act

Now, let's turn from the scene as it affects individuals, and cohorts of individuals, to the scene as it affects the institutions where we work. The current bill to change the Higher Education Authority also contains some worrying proposals to change how those institutions themselves operate. Though IFUT has worked hard to make our concerns felt at the discussion stage, we have

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to say that we are not confident that we have been listened to. One of our points of concern is the proposal in the Bill not only severely to limit the size of governing bodies, which would restrict further the opportunities for our members to make the voice of the teachers, lecturers and researchers heard, but also the seeming obsession with having outside interests represented, and to a quite disproportionate degree. Now, in life at large a board or committee may benefit from having outside influences within it – it can widen the perspective and introduce some welcome fresh thinking. But that word “thinking” is key here, and is what makes the matter different when it comes to Higher Education. The point is that thinking, including the maximum amount of fresh thinking, is the very business that universities are in; in the final analysis, it is their reason for existence. So, to have them influenced by a preponderance of people appointed from outside, whose priorities therefore lie primarily elsewhere, is not, in fact, analogous to healthy practices such as having patients represented on a hospital board, or lay representation on a church committee. Instead, it is like having untrained individuals not just inside a surgeon's clinic as observers, but actually wielding the scalpel themselves. And who would include, in a professional sports team, people who were untrained in that particular sport – and I mean include them for the very reason that they were untrained? It is telling that documents that favour this approach to Higher Education governance, including for example the now outdated OECD report on Ireland of a dozen years ago, suddenly get very thin on supporting evidence at the point where they start advocating a large proportion of lay governance. It's because they are taking an ideological rather than an evidence-based stance: after all, the best-performing universities overall, such as Ivy League colleges in the United States, or Oxford or Cambridge, or even (dare we say it) Trinity College here, are precisely the ones that are the most internally democratic and self-governing, in the sense of having a minimum of external, non-academic voices involved in directing them.

## Academic Freedom

In speaking of what should be an institution's autonomy in the true sense of the word we are now getting into the territory of Academic Freedom, whose importance will I think be central to what our esteemed guest speaker Professor Petö is going to tell us later this morning. For my part, I will say this. When IFUT champions Academic Freedom as we do, as one of our core concerns, we don't mean freedom for our members to break the law, or to stay away from lectures they are timetabled to give, or – like caricatures in a play set many decades ago – to drink port every afternoon instead of conducting supervisions. No. Instead, in the words of the Universities Act, what we are talking about is simply the freedom, quote, “to question and test received

wisdom, to put forward new ideas, and to state controversial or unpopular opinions”. And that’s it!

## “IFUT CHAMPIONS ACADEMIC FREEDOM”

Now, when you think about it, how else can human knowledge be advanced other than by people doing those things? To be valid, they have to be done in an intellectually defensible manner, using shareable observation, explicit logic, and unbiassed argumentation; but to say that is simply to define scholarship. And advancing human knowledge, and teaching others how to do so, is what scholarship is ultimately all about. That being the case, we may well ask (as I did when bringing a motion on the subject to this Union’s ADC back in 2011), “would anyone really suggest that scholars should not question and test received wisdom? That we should not put forward new ideas? That we should not state controversial or unpopular opinions?” But in that case, why do we have to keep intervening so actively to prevent all mention of Academic Freedom from simply dropping out of the discourse in debates such as the current one about the HEA Bill?

Colleagues, the reason we have to be so alert and active is because the strange illusion continues to exist – and indeed to be actively fostered and propagated – that Academic Freedom is somehow a frivolous, high-faluting luxury enjoyed by scholars; and furthermore, that it somehow comes at the expense of everyone else. It is the free conduct of academic research that produces expertise; but since we debated that motion in 2011 the view has been explicitly stated that “we’ve had enough of experts”. Those are the words used by an influential British government minister to dismiss objections to his policy; it’s chilling when you reflect that, without academic expertise of the kind he disparages, we should (for example) have no Covid vaccine.

Again, while insisting on an openness to reinterpreting the findings of research, real scholarship insists equally that the findings themselves can be objective; we call such findings “facts”, and must be prepared to stand by them with integrity — a stance that increasingly matters, when we hear appeals to so-called “alternative facts” being voiced on behalf of the former President of the United States, or conspiracy theories concerning Covid being given equal weight with properly conducted scientific research.

**“–TO DENY THE IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS AT BEST TO MISUNDERSTAND, AND AT WORST ACTIVELY TO UNDERMINE, THE CUMULATIVE STRUCTURE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE.”**

In short, to deny the importance of Academic Freedom is at best to misunderstand, and at worst actively to undermine, the cumulative structure of human knowledge. I say this because to do so amounts to the opinion that any scholarly assertion, no matter how soundly based, can be countered by effectively saying “That’s just your education talking”. Such sentiments imply an unfair exclusivism on the part of the much-derided liberal elite, but the attack is actually upon the knowledge-seeking enterprise itself. In its unlimited relativism it makes a specious appeal to common sense and to egalitarian ideals, and it’s at that point that the true motivation of active anti-intellectuals reveals itself: if their mindset doesn’t even claim to rely on objective, hard-won truth and knowledge, it’s because it appeals instead to what are allegedly valid basic instincts on the part of the population as a whole (those who tend to be described as “real people” – presumably in contrast to fake people like ourselves). And the template of what those basic instincts supposedly are can then be filled in and fed by demagogic leaders, in their own interests. Examples include the thinly disguised racism promulgated by right-wing Republicans in the United States; by the latent xenophobia appealed to by English Tory party policies in the United Kingdom; by the populist nationalism espoused by the Fidesz



government in Hungary; and, of course, in the context of the current war in Ukraine, by the mindset of its awful perpetrator. Society's best defence against mind gaming, gaslighting, the use of disinformational techniques, and the preservation of plausible deniability,

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is surely to rally around a recognition of the need for honesty and thoroughness in researching, and truthfulness and reliability in reporting, without fear or favour. This goes for scholarly research in the long term just as much as it goes for journalism in the short term. So, when scholars exercise their right of Academic Freedom, it is by no means at *the expense of* everyone else. Instead, the legitimate exercise

of it is *for the sake of* everyone else! The greatest service that academics can render to the society in which we are embedded is to continue to think original thoughts, to find out new knowledge, and to publish and teach the results. Because if we don't do this for our fellow human beings, who will? Who else is in a position to? Colleagues, the surgical operation of lobotomy was always a tragic thing. I think everyone would agree that the idea of a self-inflicted lobotomy is a horrendous notion. Why, then, should it even for a moment be thought acceptable for society as a whole to allow itself to be subjected to a collective self-inflicted lobotomy? That is what the abandonment of Academic Freedom would actually amount to, and it is why IFUT will always be fiercely vigilant in its defence.

***Go raibh míle maith agaibh, a chairde uilig!***



**ANTHONY HARVEY,  
PRESIDENT**

