

# **Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Skills**

---

**Investing in National Ambition: a Strategy for Funding Higher  
Education, Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher  
Education.**

**Opening Statement:  
Dr Caroline McMullan  
Associate Dean for Teaching & Learning, DCU Business School  
Senior Lecturer in Emergency, Crisis & Risk Management  
Dublin City University**

**24<sup>th</sup> November 2016**

My name is Caroline McMullan and I am the Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning in DCU Business School. This means I look after all our taught programmes and the quality of the student learning experience. I am also a senior lecturer in risk, crisis and emergency management.

I would like to thank you for inviting me to come before you today to share my view of how the reduced funding for Higher Education has impacted on the work we do as academics within the seven Irish universities and, in my case, within DCU.

I would like to record my appreciation for the emphasis being placed by you on funding for Higher Education and thank Peter Cassells and his team for the indepth, considered and insightful report which they have produced. I look forward to playing a role in helping to implement its findings.

I would like to reflect on the three areas which have been impacted by the under-funding for Higher Education. But first I would like to say that the impact on students has been greatly reduced because of the efforts of the university and academic and administrative staff to shelter students from the impact of these cuts as far as is possible. However, we are now at a point where this is becoming increasingly difficult.

## **Quality**

So to begin, a focus on quality. The poor staff:student ratios within the sector mean that quality cannot be sustained long term – no matter how much we try to reduce the impact on the student experience. The cuts have resulted in reduced subject choice within programmes, larger class sizes, less opportunity for small group tutorials, a reduction in the number of assessments being completed and fewer pieces of work of a formative nature. Instead greater emphasis has been placed on terminal assessments – such as exams – which are summative in nature and focus on checking if the students have reached the specified learning outcomes, rather than guiding their development along the way.

Enhanced funding would allow for greater innovation and diversity in terms of the learning opportunities designed for our students; enhanced feedback on assessments at several points during the semester and even more industry and community based projects for our students.

DCU Business School, since its foundation, has been focused on industry and community engagement. We have always been recognised for our proactive approach to the development of programmes which we need at a national and regional level. However, time pressures now mean we have little time for developing new, innovative programmes. This lack of development can be absorbed in the short term – but is not compatible with the medium to long term economic and social well being of the country.

Our University Strategic plan commits us to being a research intensive university. This means the research which we complete is fed into our classrooms on an ongoing basis. This is vital in order to expose students to cutting edge theory and practice. Our students study research undertaken in an Irish setting and not just, for example, US-centric material. Teaching and research quality are inextricably linked. Sacrificing research to cope with unfunded increases in student numbers is a false economy. This approach is not sustainable if we are to produce graduates who can perform on a global stage. It is important to remember that there is a direct relationship between the quality of our university graduates and the quality of our national institutions and services. We need the

resources required to produce the quality of primary and secondary school teachers, nurses and doctors, engineers, social workers etc that our citizens deserve.

Finally, with regard to quality, I must mention the urgent need for investment in the infrastructure of our universities. Our buildings, classrooms and technology are in need of maintenance in the short term and upgrade in the medium to long term.

## **Participation Rates**

I am proud of our participation rates in Higher Education in Ireland and I too ask that all decisions with regard to future funding preserve this important right for our citizens. However, it is important to remember that equality of access does not always mean equality of opportunity. Many of our students require specific supports because of special learning needs and competing pressures in their personal lives. The reduced level of funding, at a time when we have more students than ever entering via HEAR, DARE and ACCESS programmes, means increased time must be allocated to this element of our work at a time when we are already stretched. Improved student to staff ratios and additional specialist services will allow us to support *all* students to reach their full potential.

We need to invest in our campuses so that we can extend the capacity of our classrooms and so that students do not have to travel excessive distances each day because of a lack of student accommodation. We need to do so now – so that we are prepared for the opportunities which can come from the increased student numbers projected as a result of Brexit and as a result of our own demographic profile. Let's be ready to meet the challenge and not struggling to manage a crisis.

## **Success**

Finally I would like to highlight the impact which the continued lack of funding and other restrictions has had on the overall success of Irish universities. We are often set incompatible objectives. We are asked to secure additional non exchequer funding – to sustain high quality teaching and research – yet we are asked to do so without additional staff and with inflexible human resource management protocols. A more balanced workload model is required if we are to have time bid for, and win, international funding for all our activities.

To conclude, I ask that you work with us to fund Higher Education to the appropriate level. It is clear that we have a mutual desire to have a Higher Education system which is held as an example of good practice across the world. The implementation of the report from Cassells and his team is an important step in the achievement of this ambition and I endorse it wholeheartedly. Thank you.