

Re: Submission to Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

I would like to thank the members of the committee for inviting me here today and giving me the opportunity to describe some of the changes which I have observed in my own university since 2010. I have been working and teaching in the higher education sector in Ireland since 1997 and have spent 14 years in UCC. I run a Department which was affected particularly negatively by the shortfall in funding to the universities after 2010. In 2009, we had a small staff but large student numbers varying between 900-1000 from year to year. Between 2010 and 2011, due to a demographic quirk and incentivized retirement, five staff members retired. These retirements left us with a skeleton staff to deal with huge student numbers and no possibility of adequately replacing them because of the Employment Control Framework.

We had to take a number of strategic decisions in order to survive during this period

- We had to collapse modules creating classes with larger student numbers despite our desire for and commitment to small group teaching
- We had to launch new programmes to increase revenue even though we didn't have the staff to adequately teach our existing programmes
- Staff in the Sociology Department also agreed to contribute to a range of new programmes across the wider university which were also aimed at further income generation

- There was a new focus within the Dept on generating research funding. In the 2008 research quality review conducted in UCC, Sociology was the highest ranking dept along with Mathematics – our reviewers commented that the Dept would rank in the top 10-15% of Departments in the UK at the time. However, not only did we lose a number of valuable staff members due to retirement who contributed to this outstanding research profile but the demands of seeking and winning research funding became much greater.
- As many of you will be aware, local sources of funding here in Ireland diminished rapidly after 2010. As a result, winning research funding awards began to require much higher levels of engagement with other institutional partners across Europe in order to develop larger inter-institutional bids oriented towards EU programmes such as Horizon 2020.
- Fortunately, members of our Dept have been successful in winning awards under the schemes specifically on themes such as climate change, gender and energy transitions. However, the demands that these achievements have placed on staff in terms of time has been enormous.

Therefore, we are department which was hit very hard under austerity but survived. We did all the things we were told to do – we did more with less, we generated income through increased student numbers and new programmes. We won major funding awards.

Our performance has been mirrored in a number of other schools and department across UCC. However, as Head of the Department I wonder how much longer that performance can be sustained without realistic funding structures. In 2014 in response to a Dáil question, it was indicated that the staff: student ratio across the Higher Education sector in Ireland was 1:19. The Cassells report puts the ratio at 1: 21. A staff student ratio of 1:19 or indeed 1:21 is something that we in the Department of Sociology in University College Cork could only dream about. The average staff student ratio across our college (College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences) is 1:38 and we ourselves have the highest staff student ratio with 45 students to every one staff member – a staff student ratio of 1:45!

The international league tables have been hard on the Irish universities in recent years and for good reason. For members of my Department, with a staff student ratio of 1:45, it is almost impossible to provide the level attention that students require. Students with learning difficulties or emotional challenges experience particularly negative consequences as lecturers are stretched to the limit to provide the most basic supports.

In the last year, we have lost two of our most high performing staff who moved to other departments and other universities because of the demands of our teaching environment are so extensive. We are having difficulties finding replacements despite the huge supply of qualified personnel available for lecturing jobs currently.

As a manager of a university department in Ireland, the part of the current debate about changes to funding structures which I find most offensive is the idea that universities need to further perform or 'reform' in order to acquire research funding. Having delivered BA/ BSoc degree, MA and PhD programmes to increased numbers of students with half the staff between 2010 and 2016, I believe that my colleagues and myself have performed outstandingly. We have launched new programmes and we have increased research funding. The decline of the Irish universities position in international rankings is not due to poor performance of existing staff but the failure to provide adequate financial support for the core activities of Irish universities in a deeply competitive international environment. This is a reality which cannot be avoided and I think frontline staff in the universities have been silent for too long about its consequences.

Thank you.

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