

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

Meeting 1st December 2016

Opening Statement

I am grateful to the Committee for this opportunity to join in the current discussion of the funding of Higher Education and of the *Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education*. I am speaking here in my capacity as Cathaoirleach of Údarás na hOllscoile, the Governing Body of NUIGalway. In that capacity I work closely with the President of NUIG, Professor James Browne, and with the other leaders of the University. It is to some extent also relevant that for some years previously I was Chair of the Irish Universities Quality Board. That body has now been subsumed into *Quality and Qualifications Ireland* (QQI).

The Committee will already have received the relevant Submission made to the Committee by the Irish Universities Association, together with the Opening Statement by Professor Don Barry of the University of Limerick. I am in general agreement with the points made by Professor Barry, and with the detailed arguments made in the IUA Submission. I also welcome the report of the Expert Group so ably led by Peter Cassells. The Report clearly sets out the national benefits of investment in the higher education area.

The difficulties caused by almost a decade of cutbacks in higher education funding have been clearly demonstrated in the Cassells Report and in a recent debate in Dáil Éireann. A crucial part of the work of Údarás na hOllscoile concerns financial and budgeting issues. Both I myself and all our Údarás members are acutely conscious of the constant effort to stretch resources to cover essential needs and to source funding from both internal and external sources. In his Opening Statement Professor Barry, as Chair of the Irish Universities Association, refers to the purpose of investment in higher education as follows:

“Firstly, the more complex and changing world for which we are educating students requires more sophisticated educational approaches. The (Cassells) group captures this well in identifying the need to invest in improved student staff ratios, smaller tutorial groups, more one-to-one contact with students, more project work, enhanced feedback and more time to engage in diverse learning styles and to support at-risk students. The group also highlights the need for investments in support services such as library and information services, student guidance and counselling. . . .”

At the coalface, in the oversight of the realities of university life, we in NUIG are only too aware of the difficulty, and sometimes impossibility, of meeting these needs. If we fail to meet them, we also weaken the international standing of our universities. More importantly, we fail this country and we fail our students.

The Cassells Report identifies three groups that benefit from higher education – the state, students and employers. The point of view of employers has been clearly set out in a recent article in the *Irish Times* by Danny McCoy, Chief Executive of IBEC, where he states that “accepting the status quo is incompatible with our national ambitions and will condemn Ireland to become an education and research backwater.” Mr. McCoy adds:

“Ireland’s reputation for having one of the best educated work forces in the world becomes increasingly threatened.” He then concludes: “Failure to invest now in third level will place an entire generation of students and the future of this country at a serious disadvantage.”

Both the Cassells report and the IUA Submission recommend that investment in higher education should come from three sources – it should be a funded system involving the State, students and employers. I would agree with this conclusion, and with the need to investigate the setting up of a loan system where graduates would contribute when their earnings reach a certain level. This is an urgent matter, not one to be put off to another distant commission.

In looking at the specific position of NUI Galway, the Committee should not forget the importance of the University’s statutory and strategic obligation to An Gaeilge, the Irish language. In *Vision 2020*, NUI Galway’s Strategic Plan 2015-2020, under “Pobal na Gaeilge agus an Gaeltachta” the Plan deals with the university’s statutory obligations to the provision of education through Irish and its commitment to respond to the living needs of the Irish speaking community regionally and nationally. NUI Galway is the primary national provider of post-primary initial teacher education through the medium of Irish. Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, established in 2004, operates fully through Irish and is responsible for the development and delivery of academic programmes, research and other services through the medium of Irish. The University operates Gaeltacht centres in An Ceathdú Rua and Carna in Co. Galway and in Gaoth Dobhair in Co. Donegal. All this requires investment both by the HEA and the University itself.

NUI Galway is the major higher education institution in the West of Ireland, and serves the student population of the west and north-west. It is designated by the Higher Education Authority as the leader of a group of higher education centres in this entire area. In considering the funding of higher education the Committee must look at the population of students which is served. There is a degree of prosperity in the city of Galway area. But it cannot be doubted that in the rural areas of Galway, Mayo and Donegal students and their parents are unlikely to have the means to meet large upfront fees. As my own son and his family live in An Spidéal and his children have been educated there I am well aware that the average family in the Gaeltacht will find university costs as fixed at present extremely difficult to meet.

“A reminder of inequality in society” is the lead headline on the Irish Times list of feeder schools for our third level institutions. This Committee, in its present discussion, must deal with the needs of society, of the economy and of our higher education providers. It must do so with justice. Above all it must deal with the needs of our young people. It must find the courage to move on this issue now.

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