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Opening Statement for the Roundtable discussion on the Future Funding of Higher Education, hosted by the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science



WIRI statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on 29.03.2022

I am Arjumand Younus and I work as a Research Scientist in a multinational called Afiniti AI, while also being on an hourly paid assistant lecturer contract in TU Dublin. I am here to represent Women in Research Ireland which is a volunteer-run charity working towards increased representation of women and other underrepresented groups in Irish higher education spaces; I am here today to discuss some critical aspects of higher education in Ireland and their impact on women and minority groups. Specifically, the areas of funding, working conditions and accessibility are of utmost importance to Women in Research Ireland.

Ireland is investing less and less in higher education. An OECD report confirms that, in 2018, our government directed less funding than the OECD average towards this key knowledge economy contributor. The current financial model for Irish HEIs is unsustainable due to funding shortfalls and growing budgetary demands. HEA data shows that while funding for higher education was reduced by 38% between 2009 and 2016, the number of students grew by 34,000.

We have experienced firsthand what this funding crisis means: job insecurity, stagnant wages and chronically overworked academics. Underinvestment continues to compromise the quality of higher education in Ireland. It impedes access to education for the most vulnerable members of our society. This is worrying not only for existing stakeholders, but also for future generations in Ireland.

The current higher education policy must be revised to include a funding model that is sustainable. It must recognize the utmost importance of skilled workforce development, economy-focused collaborations, and the expansion of core funding for teaching and research.

With regard to the working conditions of women and minorities in the Irish higher education sector, there has been some progress: we have four female university presidents - the first only

appointed in 2020. Yet the majority of female academics remain in precarious short-term posts, contractually obligated to perform menial tasks. They are denied the dignity and respect they deserve for their hard-earned doctoral degrees. Their casual and fixed-term contracts devastate finances, mental health and make it impossible to plan for either a family or the future.

We highlight the plight of women in academia because there is a gender divide in Irish universities. Women hold 71 percent of part-time temporary academic jobs, while 60 percent of permanent, full-time academic roles are held by men. A UCD Gender Equality Action Groups report shows that 60% of female staff at UCC, UCD and NUIG were temporary contracts in 2019.

A survey by HEA has stated that academics from ethnic minority groups are routinely denied equality and are paid less than their white academic peers. They are more likely to have experienced racial or ethnic discrimination.

This tells us that women and minorities in Ireland are trapped in exploitative working conditions, with little opportunities for fair and balanced career progressions.

We welcome the gender equality action plans that require universities to report progress on goals under threat of a possible loss of government funding if they fail. Yet we also insist that age, race and disability discrimination are not left unaddressed. We are confident that our higher education representatives are able to implement policy levers to shape the future of higher education with an integrated strategy with the input of relevant stakeholders. This includes both the creation of permanent, project-independent positions and professorships in higher education institutions that demonstrate gender and racial equality.

WIRI believes that the entire university staff should be represented on academic committees and universities management platforms. Postdocs, teaching assistants and minority staff are often not represented when important university decisions are taken. Precarious, hourly-paid representatives need to be at departmental meetings, networking events, committee meetings, and sit at the decision making table. They play a vital role in supporting the development of higher education in Ireland and their voices should be heard.

The absence of data is an impediment for the situation of academics to be clearly understood and acted upon. WIRI recommends that data on participation, progression rates, and the lived

experience of staff at all levels is collected. This data can be used to design adequate and up-to-date quality and inclusion strategies and initiatives.

We call for the collaboration of all research stakeholders to improve the governance and management of research careers and to promote inclusion and diversity at the Irish higher education level.

Thank you.