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Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

**Covid-19 Committee – Scrutiny Proposal**

Addressing the Multiple Crises in the Third Level Sector

IRISH FEDERATION OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

**19<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had an extraordinarily negative impact on the higher education sector. The education system now faces enormous challenges and demands, over the short, medium and longer-term.

Indeed, just as the health emergency highlighted the essential role of education as a whole, so it has laid bare very real flaws and shortcomings in the model that obtains in Third Level sector. As currently constituted the sector is not capable of meeting such demands and is certainly not sufficiently resourced to do so.

Precarious employment in the academic field is a serious ongoing concern and goes far beyond the current worldwide emergency context. Long-term plans to tangibly tackle the related issues should be considered by policy makers and developed in collaboration with all key actors in the sector, both to meet the more immediate challenges and to help develop a longer-term plan for Third Level and equip it for the critical challenges that lie ahead.

### **1. Funding challenges – exchequer and non-exchequer**

It is no secret that the sector entered the current emergency already in a deep state of crisis and its frailties have now been exposed and exacerbated. There was a decline of 22% in the core funding of higher education over a seven-year period from 2015, which included public sources and student fees - and that's despite increased numbers of international students and major expansion generally. Higher education has faced a 'perfect storm' - dramatic increases in student numbers, combined with sharp cuts in recurrent and capital funding.

To give one example, public funding of the sector fell from 85% to 51% of overall funding between 2008 and 2015. Meanwhile almost 60% of 18-20 year-olds in the Republic of Ireland are entering higher education since 2015 (58% in 2015): it is well known that the third-level sector, including the universities, has been characterised by 'mass' higher education over the past generation. But the transfer of school leavers to higher education is now at record levels and is among the highest in OECD

states, while mature participation has also become more significant in the early 2000s.

The funding removed during the previous global financial crisis has never been replaced in any serious way and this has had a devastating impact on the higher education sector. The result is that teaching and learning is heavily underfunded, replacement of equipment is inadequate and the quality of the system is under great strain: this now threatens the international reputation of Irish higher education.

All of this preceded COVID-19. Higher education institutions developed alternative strategies to meet the public funding collapse, focusing on business funding, philanthropy and above all international students. This corporate model was always vulnerable to international economic trends and was never really sustainable, but it has now been completely upended by the pandemic.

The financial model on which universities in particular have worked over the last decade has just been swept away. An emergency programme of Government assistance is urgently needed – this would not be a bailout at this stage but an overdue investment in the essential functions of knowledge generation and knowledge transfer. But if Government fails to act quickly, then a bailout will be required within a year or two years – we should be under no illusion that a number of HEIs are close to insolvency as acknowledged by the HEA as far back as 2016.

Therefore the first priority must be to address the immediate impact of the health emergency on the sector, primarily in respect of the critical funding shortfalls that have emerged and the resultant uncertainty in terms of employment at many levels, itself a result of the prevalence of precarious contracts in Third Level.

Casual and contract staff provide vital services to the operation of the universities but now are faced with the potential of loss of teaching hours, non-renewal of contracts and limited access to university IT services.

It worth noting that this call - the need to address the immediate crisis in the sector and to place it on a more sustainable, long-term footing - is also supported by the Irish Universities Association and the Union of Students in Ireland.

Such a sector-specific approach presents the only viable means of creating a sustainable platform for the future evolution and development of the sector into the future.

We also note the proposal to establish a standalone Dept of Higher Education and Research that has emerged in discussions on a new programme for government. Such a proposal has considerable merit and

could be capable of addressing the challenges set out above, if it's approach was to be rooted in the principles and practice of social dialogue, if it was to be suitably resourced and if it was to move with urgency to tackle the key issues identified by IFUT and other key actors in the sector.

IFUT is calling for the following key measures, as part of any such process:

- Establish a Third Level Sector Forum with representation from all key actors in the sector that will be tasked with developing a response to the immediate crisis and, by an agreed date/ time, with formulating a longer-term plan to help develop and grow the sector, in a sustainable manner
- Such a plan must also address all issues in respect of contract and precarious employment across the sector, with the goal of creating far greater security and certainty for those who work in the sector at all levels, thereby making the sector an employer of choice capable of attracting and retaining talent
- It must also address the longer-term future of the sector in respect of funding, in terms of the unsustainable dependence of institutions of private funding and its impact on the evolution of Third Level into the future
- The new Government has to commit to an early infusion of resources to support the recurrent funding of higher education – in other words fund the day to day business of teaching and learning and research, not just special projects for restructuring or 'reform' that attract the particular attention of policymakers or politicians. This could be supplemented with funding from the National Training Fund which could be channelled to higher and further education: it is also worth considering allocating even a modest portion of the tax take from corporation tax to higher education as proposed by IBEC and a number of unions in the sector. In the medium term, a publicly funded model for higher education as outlined in the Cassells report should be adopted, with the goal of state funding reaching the OECD average level of funding over the lifetime of an incoming government.

## **2. Research funding**

For more than a decade, research funding, particularly in disciplines that are not of immediate commercial impact, has been cut and this has had an associated impact on staff's ability to fulfil their potential. In particular, Researchers including post-doctoral researchers and research

assistants at Irish universities are particularly likely to be employed on short (one or two year) fixed-term contracts, many of which will expire in the coming months.

Austerity measures implemented during the previous global financial crisis placed many researchers into untenable positions – the previously available route into academia, after a long period of time working as a postdoctoral researcher, was cut off, so the majority of researcher staff had to leave their preferred work sector. There were, and still are, no research scientist positions in Ireland that highly qualified staff could apply for in order to continue contributing to Irish economic growth, work in a sustainable career path and therefore avoid trying to survive on precarious rolling contracts.

The current crisis has made clear the urgent need for highly qualified research scientists to be embedded within the higher education sector. Past experience has shown that postdoctoral researchers will again suffer a shutdown of their current career plans and will have to leave the academic sector. The teaching pathway was already severely restricted before 2020, and as a result of the Covid-19-related funding crisis, universities have stopped recruiting new early career professorial staff. Without adequate financing, third level institutions will not be able to retain our highly qualified researchers, apply research expertise to deal with the current crisis and ensure that sufficient human capacity will be in place to cope with related events in the future.

Funding agencies do not provide clarity or further detail in their guidelines, and we are concerned that a strictly case-by-case approach will lead to arbitrary decisions. Furthermore, in the case of SFI, their “analysis indicates that SFI is not in a position to provide costed extensions on grants at present, as this would require a substantial additional budget that is currently not available and approval from the SFI Board”.

Only providing no-cost extensions will not enable the successful completion of many ongoing projects as HEI’s are not in the position to fund continuing staff and resources costs. Loss of skilled researchers will lead to the collapse of research projects, The projects, investment-to-date and the careers of highly qualified researchers are all at risk. This is compounded by many HEIs having to implement hiring-freezes so, as researcher contracts terminate, they will be unable to find research jobs in Ireland and thereby contribute to the economic growth we will sorely need to come through the economic meltdown happening in Ireland.

In light of these developments, we are calling on policymakers to consult the trade unions in higher education, to implement the following measures:

- Emergency funding should be made available by the Government to provide for costed extensions wherever possible, thereby ensuring continuity of research.
- Additional funding should also include broad based basic research funding (particularly as there are references to longer term planning for the sector) so that funding is not severely channelled into Applied research.
- Funding Agencies should have more uniformity in their policies, converging toward higher standards, taking into account international best practice.
- At a minimum, greater detail and clarity should be provided surrounding the criteria used for formulating extension decisions

Research staff play a vital role in universities' contribution to society. With the fallout of the pandemic, Ireland risks another lost generation of research staff if supports are not put in place.

IFUT calls on the universities, the research councils and all stakeholders to explore options for emergency funding to ensure that all research projects can achieve their objectives. Where possible, key staff must be given access to laboratories and other facilities to ensure that critical processes are continued.

### **3. Teaching with social distancing and remoting learning**

IFUT is supportive of maintaining teaching and learning in the context of ensuring that academic staff would have the greatest possible flexibility and autonomy in developing practical solutions to support students.

This is an unprecedented national crisis due to the severe impact of the COVID-19 virus. IFUT is committed to maintaining teaching and learning and ensuring that students can progress to the next academic year. A great deal of effort is being made to ensure that academic activity can be maintained as fully as possible and academic staff are seeing a substantial increase in their workload as a result of the sudden transition to online teaching in an emergency situation. Academic staff are showing a great deal of flexibility and collegiality in exceptionally difficult circumstances and exceptional measures have been taken in an emergency situation which would not happen normally and indeed could not become the norm. Some financial support is needed for staff who do not have the necessary equipment to offer teaching and learning from home – this requires consideration in the budget for HE.

There needs to be support for staff and students with additional needs, those staff members who, for a variety of personal, (often health-related), reasons feel that they cannot see themselves in a position to return to work in the "old" way of working in lecture halls, close person-to-person contact and also those staff members who are simply from an older generation and are less technologically able to work in a new working environment

It is crucial that academic staff have a high degree of discretion and autonomy in designing and implementing pragmatic solutions to support students. A variety of issues affect the ability to deliver remote teaching. Staff working remotely may have inadequate space, limited ICT facilities or poor or even non-existent internet connections and normal working may not always be possible in such circumstances. It may not be possible to deliver lectures or materials in line with existing timetables and academic staff must have a high degree of autonomy in providing practical solutions.

Working remotely brings significant additional pressures. Simply reproducing every timetabled class online faces formidable challenges and is not pedagogically desirable or useful to students. Solutions cannot be imposed centrally or dictated by central online systems. Flexibility is also required in how assessment is managed and no specific approaches should be imposed on academic staff. To maintain HE's high academic standards, it is crucial that sufficient funding is provided so that the integrity of on-line assessments is maintained, it is particularly important that appropriate checks are in place to ensure that it is the student, and the student alone, that completes online assessments.

#### **4. Gender parity in research**

A realistic approach has to be taken towards the exceptional demands on both academic and professional staff. Staff who are caring for children or elderly relatives may not be available for teaching or meetings at particular times. Considering the options available through online platforms flexibility of working arrangements should be afforded to such staff.

A summary of the significant data that emerged from a recent IFUT nationwide survey, is attached at the end of this submission, including a sampling of some of those astute analyses of the current situation for academics. (Appendix I).

## **5. Issues relating to International Students/Student accommodation challenges**

Next academic year: numerous challenges await in the new academic year, including delayed intake of first-year students and the impact on working practices. IFUT seeks a united approach across the sector, supported by all stakeholders, and negotiation around significant changes in established work practices associated with an abnormal academic cycle.

IFUT also seeks that the key issue of supports and cost of living for students are addressed and provide transparency in the current grant system, to ensure participation at Third Level does not lead to student or family indebtedness

The envisaged collapse of income from foreign students worth €380 million a year to the Republic's economy, accommodation services, summer schools, research councils and other non-exchequer sources will greatly exacerbate the financial crisis already facing the sector.

IFUT is committed to working with the universities, government, students and all other stakeholders to find solutions. It is our view that the temporary transition to online teaching and learning is not a 'new normal', but an exceptional challenge to be met through co-operation and including all relevant partners in decision-making. There is also more to the return to campus and indeed the 'on campus' experience for first year students than attending lectures in great numbers. Consideration could be given to establishing small pods of students, perhaps linked with a Tutor / Lecturer. These small groups could restrict their contact with others outside of the group while sharing the 'on-campus' experiences and the peer to peer learning that is expected from their college experiences.

It would also make sense to accept that most lectures will be online in the first semester, and support staff properly to offer these lectures and prioritise socially distanced face to face study space for students.

Finally, we have to reiterate that none of this is going to work without a significant, short-term emergency funding programme for higher education. Higher education institutions have been in crisis for years and have received an official response which is cautious, conservative and ineffective. Investment in higher education is not a luxury item, but an urgent necessity if the quality of teaching and learning is to be maintained and the essential contribution of research to society is to be realised. The new Government should prioritise investment in teaching and research as the essential missions of higher education. A timely investment now will be repaid many times over in the coming decades both in terms of benefits to families, communities and our wider society.



## **APPENDIX I**

### **Report on IFUT nationwide survey “Work-Life Balance in an Irish University during COVID”**

#### **Number of Respondents**

603 responses were submitted, the survey closed on June 6 2020.  
81.2% were full-time permanent staff. 9.5% were full-time on fixed term contracts. 4.8% were part-time permanent. 2.8% were part-time on a fixed term contract. 1% had no contract.  
87.2% were working in academic roles, 5.3% were in a professional capacity, 3.2% were administrators, other roles (e.g Technical, Library, etc, made up the remainder)

#### **Gender Identification of Respondents**

62.7% of respondents identified as female, 36.3% as male.

#### **Age Profile of Respondents:**

37.1%: 40s  
34.2%: 50s  
14.9%: 30s  
11.9%: 60s  
1%: 70s  
0.8%: 20s

#### **Illness**

In a way that broadly reflected the national statistics relating to COVID infection, over two thirds of the respondents reported that they, or nobody close to them, had exhibited serious symptoms of COVID. However, 14% reported that a family member not in their household had become ill with COVID, and significant numbers reported that their friends, neighbours or colleagues had become ill with the virus (close to 6% in each category). 12.5% reported a bereavement during the pandemic.

#### **Caring responsibilities**

The majority of the respondents live in households consisting of 2-5 people, and over half of them reported (56.7%) that people they live with

depend upon them for care. The majority of this responsibility is for their children. 32.8% identified themselves as principal carer in their home. A similar number (31.2%) had responsibilities for caring for someone outside of their home.

### **Home Schooling**

45.1% of the respondents reported that they have responsibility for homeschooling their children in the crisis. Most (47.8%) are homeschooling one child, 28.7% had two, 11.5% were dealing with three children, and 1% four or five.

### **Home Working Environment**

57.9% indicated that they have a dedicated office space in their own home that they could use for work. 22.6% have no such space, however, and 19.6% have only intermittent access to such a space.

26% said that they would have as much access as they like to such a space. Many people reported a range of available time from 2-6 hours, but then 17.2% said that they would only have one hour a day of access available.

### **Adequacy of Broadband**

The vast majority of people indicated that they had at least a very good (44.8%) or excellent (23.1%) level of broadband coverage.

### **Degree to which Work can be Completed "as Normal"**

There was real hesitancy in this response, with the majority of respondents 37.2% putting themselves halfway on a sliding scale between an inability to do anything as normal (1%) and people experiencing little discontinuity (5.9%)

### **Workload Change for Academics**

Most academics reported that the balance of their workload had altered significantly since the outbreak of COVID-19. They emphasized that online teaching was much more labour intensive in terms of planning but also the level of pastoral support that needed to be offered to students. Time for research had been eliminated for some, especially those having to manage the demands of online delivery with other responsibilities, such as caring and home schooling. Lack of adequate resources in terms of technology was another issue. Members reported feeling as if they were always on call. Administrative workload had risen dramatically, both for

members at Head of school level, but also in terms of module and course co-ordination.

### **Workload Change for Other Members**

The members employed in roles other than conventionally academic also reported a surge in workload, and the attendant stresses of having to combine work and home life around the clock. The issue of adequate technical support emerged again.

### **Workload Balance**

45.8% of members reported that their life-work balance got worse under COVID, as their workload increased. 10.7% said that they were not able to work much at all.

25.4% said that their life/work balance had in fact improved, owing to the slowing down of life overall, and not having to commute. Another 7.2% said that they were able to get their work done from home without difficulty, and that they appreciated being at home with their family in a crisis. This all suggests that working from home should remain an option in the future for those who want it.

Switching online was seen as the biggest factor in the change to workload balance, as it had seen levels of email correspondence and an ever-increasing frequency of meetings, quite aside from the actual delivery of classes. There was also anxiety about the lack of content with students, and the damage this was doing to the vital social engagement of university working.

### **Supports**

73.1% identified that they needed to hear an acknowledgement from management that there would be specific challenges experienced by staff

62.7% communicated that there needed to be meaningful dialogue about the implications of all of the recent changes for education

62.4% saw the need for more consultation about the workload implications of what is happening because of COVID

61.8% indicated that adequate technical resourcing was essential for continued online delivery

49% thought that family responsibilities needed to be taken into consideration when workload was being allocated

45.9% said that a statement of care, acknowledging the challenging context, from management to staff would be apt

44.1% thought that health and safety needed to be taken into consideration when workload was being allocated

40.7% suggested fewer meetings

40.5% asked for flexibility with regard to carry-over of leave

36.8% asked for more training and support with regard to online delivery

### **In Their Own Voice**

(Members were asked to express themselves freely)

13 examples from 136 responses:

1. The assumption from management is that this is a "business as usual" scenario while stating otherwise. There has been no real accommodation for those places in the impossible position of having to look after small children while fulfilling work duties. Research indicates that women in particular have borne the brunt of the covid burden in this regard which has obvious implications for research; promotion; mental health etc. Is some kind of recognition of this going to be put in place when things "revert to normal"? E.g. research leave for those with care responsibilities?
2. I understand that this is an unprecedented crisis and that everyone must put their shoulder to the wheel. I can do that and I am happy to do that. But decisions are being made in HEIs by people who don't necessarily teach and who do not understand the dynamic of a classroom or a lecture theatre any more. Lecturers do not need 'upskilling' or more webinars to move online. Management need to recognise that this emergency remote teaching is short-term, that lecturers will do our best to engage our students who are at the heart of our institutions and to keep them focused while they work

in this way, and that this emergency is not an opportunity to begin blended/online options. It has worked 'well' to date because it was 4-5 weeks of a semester where we knew our students. But these last weeks are not a blueprint for the future.

3. In terms of equality, gender is one of the key issues. It has been demonstrated that female colleagues, who are (on a general basis) those most involved in emergency-response childcare, homeschooling or eldercare have been submitting far fewer articles than their male counterparts since the start of the Covid-19 emergency in March 2020. Steps need to be taken to address this, starting by recognizing the problem, and temporarily reducing expectations (e.g. of research delivery) on the staff involved, and (more importantly) requiring less teaching so the research can get done. NB: Less research production impacts greatly on promotion opportunities. Measurement of research according to Scopus/Web of Science expectations should be left aside for the moment.
4. There needs to be a recognition some colleagues find the constant uses of technology physically difficult, whether they are prone to back/neck/wrist/eye or migraine problems, or are simply from an older generation or are somehow less technologically able than the "super techno" staff member imagined by those making decisions about the new working environment.
5. As a precarious academic (fixed term contract) it is especially difficult as there is so much uncertainty about my future employment prospects. There is more pressure to be productive and to find new ways to generate income for the university to retain my job
6. There is an implicit view taken by senior management that staff have adequate IT and work station resources to do our jobs. Try working with a 3-year-old surface for 2 months, sitting on a kitchen chair. This would not have passed the VDU and workstation health and safety training we had to complete when in the University. Even if we could get discounted rates on purchases (screen) would be a help - I'm not suggesting this as a solution but it would show some action that acknowledges our working situations. All we are being told is that more material will be moving online - with a 3-year-old surface? I suspect not.
7. The biggest challenge over the past few weeks is the constant fear of missing something - in the office you checked your emails, used the phone and you were up to date. Now there is the inbox, Canvas, micro-soft teams, google hangouts, zoom, workvivo... it's overwhelming and I'm concerned about my and my colleagues

cognitive load. My colleagues and I have taken to phoning each other on our private phones to keep each other up to date on what of what we call 'management surveillance' is on the schedule!

8. Overall I feel there is a need for a gendered assessment of the impact of this pandemic on academic research as well as academic workload. We already know that single-authored submissions by women to journals are down, and many women are unable to avail of the cov-19 research funding opportunities as they are time-poor while striving to balance work and care responsibilities. And we know from a recent CSO study that 'Women's well-being more adversely affected by the COVID-19 crisis' <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2020pressreleases/presstatementsocialimpactofcovid-19onwomenandmenapril2020/>. Aside from care responsibilities outside of work, I can't but feel that it is female colleagues who are offering much of the pastoral care for students/colleagues during this period, a reality that must also be acknowledged and factored into the gendered impacts/assessments of this crisis.
9. There is a lot of talk about consultation but in practice Vice Presidents only consult with their apparatchiks, appointees and acolytes.
10. Evidence is emerging that the lockdowns are having greater impact on the research productivity of women academics & researchers than on men academics and researchers. I saw one university leader from Norway suggesting that this should be taken into consideration when re-opening campuses, so that women researchers (particularly those earlier in their careers) be allowed back first. This makes a lot of sense to me, but it's not necessarily going to work for single parents or for those of us who are sometimes solo parents, like me. It would be great if universities could find a safe way to offer childcare for employees who have no other options.
11. Top-down model of Covid-19 management is not conducive to staff cohesion, decisions being made without substantive input from those who will be asked to implement them.
12. I purchased a headset for all of the meetings and asked school to reimburse me so I didn't need to put it on a research account. Was told no. This highlighted to me how unfair everything is. I have no support from my school. Every resource I use for teaching has been purchased using my research accounts. No laptop, no laser pointer, nothing. There aren't even PCs in most

rooms. So either the school is supporting only others or no one and both are unacceptable.

13. If we are to teach online next year, the extra work and working conditions involved need to be taken into account, and we need more time for assessment/examination and marking. Also, College cannot rely on personal equipment and wifi and should provide/subsidise technical and financial support.