

Submission on a new Forum for Further & Higher Education to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

September 2020

Background

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions' **Education Sector Group** comprises a number of affiliated trade unions with members working on the delivery of education and training at all levels, ranging from early childhood to higher education and lifelong learning. These are: SIPTU, TUI, IFUT, Unite, ASTI, INTO and Forasa

The primary role of the Education Sector Group is to support the work of Congress and affiliated unions in working to ensure that the education system as a whole is suitably structured and resourced to deliver high quality learning for students, high quality standards of employment for staff and plays a key role in the achievement of greater equality, opportunity and social progress.

The Group works on the development of policy and campaign initiatives with particular reference to:

- Education, skills and training for employment, economic development and social progress;
- Emerging global trends in education and training in respect of challenges posed by the low carbon and digital transitions, the ageing workforce, Artificial Intelligence and related issues.

A New Form of Engagement

The Programme for Government (PfG) includes specific commitments on **social dialogue**, noting the key role of “regular and open engagement with all sectors of society” as part of rebuilding and re-opening, in the aftermath of the public health emergency.

To that end, the government has committed to: “Establish a unit in the Department of Taoiseach to coordinate social dialogue...(to) create new models of sectoral engagement.”

The PfG contains similar commitments on the creation of sectoral task forces that would tackle issues around rebooting the economy.

In that context, sector-level engagement on the basis of social dialogue will be integral to a wider recovery process across both economy and society.

In May 2020, the Congress Education Sector Group formally called for the establishment of a new Forum for Higher Level Education - based on social dialogue - with the participation of all key parties in the sector.

In our view, the further and higher education sector has suffered from **an absence of structured engagement** to date, in sharp contrast to the situation at other levels of the education sector, where there are systems in place to facilitate ongoing engagement between all key parties on the major policy issues.

This deficit had exacerbated a **structural and policy drift** across the sector, ensuring that major issues - such as funding - were left unaddressed over many years, thereby leaving the sector deeply exposed and vulnerable when the current crisis erupted.

New Department, New Departure

The establishment of an entirely new Department of Further & Higher Education is a welcome development which has **significant potential** to address some of the major issues across the sector.

Equally, the decision to endorse the Congress proposal on a new Forum should ensure that all key parties will have the opportunity to contribute to the **development of an agreed vision** on the wider role and function of the sector.

It is our view that the development of such a vision is an essential prerequisite to addressing existing deficits and ensuring the longer-term sustainability of a system that must be **accessible, inclusive, affordable** and provided as a **public service**.

This means addressing and resolving the core problems of funding and insecure/ precarious work at all levels of the system.

It is now almost five years since the 2016 publication of report of the **Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education** (Cassells' Report) and, regrettably, not one of its findings on the key issue of funding has yet been implemented.

In the same year (2016), funding for full time equivalent students at Third Level was just 61.2% of the average across a range of comparator EU countries.

More recently (Sept 2020) a report from the Dail's own Parliamentary Budget Office revealed that funding per student in 2018/2019 (full time, part time, remote and FETAC) was 44% lower than in 2008.

Over the years, that failure to keep pace and address the funding issue in a planned, sustainable manner has had **a corrosive impact** on the Further & Higher Education system.

It has served to deepen an **unhealthy dependency on private income** for many key Third Level institutions, something that is characteristic of education as a private concern and is incompatible with education as a public good.

It **harms accessibility and affordability** for students who want to avail of further and higher education and it impairs the sector's capacity to deliver high quality learning.

It also put enormous **downward pressure on conditions of employment** for staff at all levels.

Even before the public health emergency began we were faced with two critical and interlinked challenges:

- *The transition to a lower carbon economy, a challenge which we are already struggling and failing to deliver on;*
- *The impact of digital technology and automation.*

According to the National, Economic & Social Council (NESC) these processes are very likely to prove transformative of how we work and live.

In conjunction with the more immediate task of trying to rebuild post-Covid 19, this will **make very deep demands** of our Further & Higher Education system in the medium and longer-term.

The challenge now is to develop an agreed vision for the sector and to ensure that it is sufficiently resourced and clearly tasked to meet these challenges.

In our view, the proposed Forum should be established according to the principles set out below.

1. Role of the Forum

The Forum should be established on the basis of Social Dialogue, in line with the commitments set out in the Programme for Government.

The Forum will serve to help shape and develop an overarching, agreed vision on the role and function of the Further and Higher Education sector, ensuring a system that is accessible, affordable and provided as a public service.

It will provide for key policy issues and related matters to be discussed and debated by members of the Forum, with the aim of achieving agreed outcomes and developing recommendations for policy action by the Minister for Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The Forum will not engage on issues relating to Industrial Relations (IR), as there are well-established mechanisms in place to deal with these matters.

However, it would be important for the new Department of Further and Higher Education to develop its own Industrial Relations' competency and systems over time, without impinging on the work of existing IR fora.

2. Membership of the Forum

Membership of the Forum should be composed of:

- (i) **The Minister for Further & Higher Education** represented by the Minister and/or senior officials from the Department of Further & Higher Education;

- (ii) **Trade unions representatives** of staff employed in further and higher education, namely: Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT); Services, Industrial, Professional & Technical Union (SIPTU); Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI); Unite; Forasa;
- (iii) **Employer bodies and representatives** from further and higher education, namely: the Irish Universities' Association (IUA); the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA); TU Dublin; Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI);
- (iv) **Student representatives**, namely: the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

In addition, consideration should be given to the inclusion of selected **industry representatives** (IDA, Science Foundation, Solas, QQI etc) and **academic experts**, from time to time, on specific policy issues and areas where Forum members agree additional input is required or would be helpful.

3. Scope & Remit/ Terms of Reference

The Forum will engage on key issues in respect of the further and higher education system, such issues being agreed and prioritised by Forum members in advance.

For example, the Programme for Government already references a number of the main issues affecting the sector: Investment/ Funding; Career Paths; Role of the HEA; Apprenticeships; Role of PhD Students/ Workers; Adult Education.

The schedule and frequency of Forum meetings will be agreed by members, with six meetings annually seen as the most viable option.

The Forum will seek to develop an agreed long-term vision for the sector with the goal of building a world class publicly-funded further and higher education system that is accessible, affordable and is recognised in policy terms as a 'public good'.

As noted above the Forum will have no remit in relation to Industrial Relations matters and will not seek to impinge on the work of existing IR fora in the sector.

The Forum should aim to work and operate at all times in accordance with the highest standards of accountability and transparency.

Irish Congress of Trade Unions,

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