

Response of TUI President Liz Farrell to Minister Simon Harris – Tuesday, 11th April 2023

Bá mhaith liom fáilte ar leith a chur roimh an Aire Breisoideachais, agus Árdoideachais, Taighde, Nualaíochta agus Eolaíochta, Simon Harris ata linn ag an gcomhdháil inniu, agus caithfidh mé a rá l dtosach go bhfuil sé l bhfad nios easca é sin a rá as Bearla.

Is mór againn go bhfuil tú tar éis an t-am a chur ar fail chun bheith inár dteannta, a Aire, taimid búioch as do chuid tacaíochta, agus tá siúl againn go rachaidh an plé le linn na comhdhála chun tairbhe duit

Minister You are very welcome to the 2023 Annual Congress of the TUI.

While I won't keep you long I regret to say that, having monitored the pace of progress over the past year on behalf of our members working in Further and Higher Education, it is with a note of sincere disappointment that I begin this reflection.

Let me tell you why.

As we all know and as you Minister have acknowledged, FE has been described as the Cinderella of the education system. When you became the Minister there was an air of genuine hope and expectation that finally, we had our knight in shining armour a person at the helm who would champion the worthy and important cause of FE. Unfortunately, Minister, despite the good intentions and promises, the tweets and the tik toks much work remains to be done. Many of the promises remain unfulfilled and those working in the sector still feel that they have been left behind, professionally disrespected, struggling to do what is right for all those who need their help.

Take our adult education tutors, Minister. What have you done to ensure that those who look after the most marginalised in society have terms and conditions and a proper, incremental salary scale? Certainly, to begin with, you gave them hope. Indeed, you've assured them an offer is on the way, but they continue to suffer the same Cinderella conditions as they did when the Labour Court Recommendation was issued in 2020. They have been treated appallingly, dismissed - acknowledged in rhetoric alone. Their terms and conditions are far from those of a fairytale. Last July we were promised an "offer" by your Department. Now, almost a year later, we are told that it's not your Department that is holding things up, rather the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. This is simply not good enough Minister. This Claim was encompassed under a national collective agreement, by the Chairman's Note in 2016 – almost seven years ago. It is not good enough that members have to sign on during centre closures; it is not good enough that DPER is treating this as a cost increasing claim when it pre-dates Building Momentum; it is not good enough that despite the TUI following all the relevant industrial relations fora and legislation that I stand here again waiting for DPER to sanction an offer.

Similarly some of these adult education tutors, who have done tremendous work to facilitate and accommodate Ukrainian refugees, are now being told that they're not entitled to the public sector pay increases awarded under Building Momentum and that in order to fix this we have to wait until the miraculous elusive "offer" is finally sanctioned by DPER – insult added to injury. I mean seriously Minister, that really was a cheap shot. It appears to me that the only thing Building Momentum here is the frustration of our members and as the President of this Union I can only tell you that

momentum is making a bee-line in your direction. Good faith, Minister, is a two-way street. I would urge you therefore to act now, show good faith, make the long awaited offer.

Another group who remain thwarted by bureaucracy are our Youthreach members. Minister, you know these people, you know what they do, you've visited their workplaces and have volubly praised their commitment as you did the rounds. More importantly, you have promised to do the right thing by them, to be their Knight errant. Yet despite it all, this group is still waiting for their incremental credit circular? What's the hold up here? How long do they have to wait?

And while we're in the realm of fairyland what about the FET College of the Future? The name alone suggests an impossibility, something that can never be obtained or achieved. One wonders who dreams up these concepts and do they realise the implications for our members. Our diligent professional, highly skilled members in this sector are deeply concerned about what the FET College of the Future will mean for them? They are concerned because they are operating in a vacuum of spin and rumour. Minister, tell us what it is you want, consult us work with us and we'll engage positively and professionally but to continue to operate without us, without consultation and without our input will simply result in a building which houses and espouses great things but signifies nothing. The patience of our members is not inexhaustible. We have trusted to negotiation and process but, in return, have encountered prevarication, opportunism and exclusion. If our reasonable demands for inclusion, consultation and agreement are not met, we will be forced to and have the capacity to take decisive industrial action.

Furthermore, Minister and to dispel any doubt or confusion, teachers who work in the Post-Leaving Certificate colleges are teachers, with teachers' terms and conditions, represented by us at the Teachers' Conciliation Council, protected by a range of collective agreements. We will not have their terms and conditions undermined, their right to be represented by the TUI diminished. We will not have SOLAS – or any other agency or person – unilaterally impose changes in these terms and conditions. Take that road and trouble will ensue.

Finally, from an FE perspective, can someone please wave their magic wand and conjure up some sorely needed coherence and clarity regarding the Organisation and Design Process of the ETB sector. I spent Thursday mornings for three months engaging with a management side that claims to want to initiate change, transform the landscape and redesign the sector yet here I am, months later, none the wiser, with nothing positive to report. - as the mood of our members in the sector from ALOs to AEOs, to CEFs, BTEI and many more drifts from expectation to cynicism. This must be addressed Minister

Similarly the "game changer" as you call it which is the united tertiary sector, while laudable in intent needs to be supplemented with actions on the ground. FE progression to HE is not a new concept Minister, in fact in my home town 30 years ago, post-primary and FE were in the same building and the IT as it was then was 100 meters away, on the same campus. So for those of us engaged in the sector what we need to see are actions, not simply policy statements . This story needs an ending minister, and a happy one.

Unfortunately, and in a similar vein, what of my colleagues in Higher Education? The year didn't begin well Minister, our members found themselves embroiled in the Sectoral Bargaining process that came with Building Momentum. Sectoral Bargaining as we told you last year is a flawed process whereby our members use their own money to solve longstanding issues, caused not by them but Government decisions. How is this reasonable, expecting members to pay for the mistakes made by your Government. We acknowledge the support offered by your Department in recent months but

the process must be concluded without delay. We do not want to hear individual TUs and IoTs telling us they don't have the time or resources to implement our members paying for their own colleagues legitimate claims. Our members have had enough of delays in the Sectoral Bargaining process, in fact Minister they've had enough of the Sectoral Bargaining process full stop.

On a more positive note the 5 TUs are established, 5 entities that are a realisation of what we can achieve when we work together, for our students, our members and our nation. Remember Minister, the TUI put the TU in Technological University- without us they wouldn't exist at all. The TUs bring a vision for the future into the context of education, regionally based centres of excellence. However, Minister you can have all the strategic plans in the world but if our TUs don't have the funding they need to do their job then plans are just targets that can never be achieved. The OECD report Education at a Glance (October 2022) highlighted this deficit. The most damning metric in this report shows that of the countries for which figures are provided, none spends a lower proportion of national wealth on education than Ireland's (2.9%). "In third level colleges, the ratio of students to teaching staff in Ireland now stands at 22:1, which is vastly higher than the respective OECD and European averages of 15:1 and 14:1. This is leading to crowded lecture halls and less time for tutorials and other vital work. It is a legacy of the ongoing political refusal to address the sector's funding crisis, and a generation of students is losing out as a result. This compounded by the workload faced by lecturers was put to you last year at this Congress. Lecturers who are involved in 16/18 hours teaching cannot sustain the load, they cannot be researchers, lecturers, technicians, assessors and program divisors all at the same time. You acknowledged this last year by telling us that you would introduce another ground-breaking initiative, an academic contract that ensures staff are facilitated and encouraged and indeed rewarded for the many and varied roles they fulfil. A year later, they're still waiting. The OECD Review of Academic Contracts has issued Minister. The report has many positives and some negatives but ultimately will require two things, funding, and consultation. When you get the funding Minister, we'll be here ready to listen.

. That funding must do justice to the sector, it must do justice to our professional practitioners and must do justice to our students. And, Minister, you know all about justice don't you? You have a dual brief at the moment minister, so you might understand more fully where our lecturers are coming from, I mean Minister this is a government who insists that our members do more for less repeatedly in an underfunded education sector.

And what about DKIT and IADT; where are they to go now Minister? I must thank you on behalf of the TUI for meeting our Branch Officers and listening to their justifiable concerns. These people, our colleagues deserve a future, they deserve a planned merger with one of the 5 TUs, they deserve to know where their careers are heading and they deserve a voice and an input into their future. They have given years of outstanding service to their students and communities. They Minister offer the real and focused expertise that can drive and grow their colleges. Minister, DkIT and Iadt want to go to the ball as well....You Minister must listen to them .. So, right now, we have 5 TUs and two IOTs. Nobody doubts that in the absence of TU status the days of the IoT are numbered, their funding status impaired, the regions they serve disadvantaged, the IOT sector, has traditionally, if entirely incorrectly, been perceived as a lesser entity to the traditional universities, dwarfed by their size, their legacy reputations and their funding. but the reality, as you know Minister, is that our members, the people here in front of you take the most disadvantaged and allow them progress, allow them utilise their abilities to the full - to level 8 degrees, and facilitate their movement through academia to PHD level. The sector wants coherence, leadership informed by an understanding of how our nation can move towards greater equality of educational opportunity and outcome. You can

provide that leadership. You appear to have listened to our members who advocate for and work with our SEN and AEN students. You have made welcome and much needed announcements in that regard here today Minister but lets not forget the contents of the most recent AHEAD report, there has been a 45% increase in the number of students per disability support staff members in the last 8 years, resourcing has not kept pace with the growing number of students accessing the services. In other words Minister what you are going to do will plug the gap for a while but as it currently stands there is an 85% increase in the number of students per learning support staff members. I do thank you Minister for your commitment to SEN and AEN but unfortunately I am also certain we need you to deliver more staff, more supports and more funding in order that we can follow through.

Something that might be easily achievable for you Minister though would be to speak to whomever it is who devises and creates the terms of reference for our IR Fora mechanisms and to require that the fora be streamlined and made fit for purpose. We now have the NNF/ the IOT IR Forum HESOG/PSAG and who knows what's next. Just because it's been given an acronym doesn't mean it works....Minister sort it out, we've spent a year trying to figure out who holds which role and why. There's really no need to overcomplicate things with layers of bureaucracy. We're straight talking, uncomplicated people really who simply want to see our sector progress in the right direction.

And on that note Minister I must remind you that the theme for this year's Congress is recruit, retain and reclaim. The members of the TUI at FE AND HE are not shielded from the cost of living crisis, they are not cosseted from the realities of lack of childcare provision, or lack of decent affordable public health care but most importantly they are not protected against the reality of the prospect of losing their homes, their place to live, wherever that may be. We cannot have teachers, tutors, or lecturers in towns or cities on low contracts scrambling to find somewhere to live, we cannot have young people or older people queuing for hours with references to pay extortionate rents, we cannot sustain educational provision at any level when the state cannot provide homes for its educators, its students, or its people. This crisis Minister, this emergency impacts on every facet of life, it was predictable, projectable and preventable and impacts on everything all of our members do. This is a wider crisis Minister but cannot be omitted from our discussions today.

And finally, Minister, I'm sure people thought I had forgotten about our apprenticeship sector, but unlike the aforementioned OECD report which barely acknowledges the sector, I saved the best for last. My friends and colleagues in craft, trade, business, media, law and retail apprenticeships need to know what the Action Plan for Apprenticeship means for them. They need, through the TUI, to be fully consulted. These, after all, are the people who will tackle climate and environmental change in our country and devise the technologies needed. These are the people who make the ordinary extraordinary, who create possibilities and drive skills that sustain and build the future. Look at the intense and amazing spectacle that is Worldskills Ireland Minister; look at the possibilities, dream the impossible dream and maybe, then just maybe, I and my colleagues here will start to believe in fairytales again.....