# **TUI President’s Address to Minister for DFHERIS,**

# **James Lawless, TD**

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**David Waters, TUI President**

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# **President’s Address to Minister for DFHERIS, James Lawless, TD**

Thank you, Minister, I would firstly like to welcome you and your Department’s officials to TUI Annual Congress and to congratulate you on your recent appointment as Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Ministers addressing our Congress has been a core part of TUI tradition and your attendance here today is very much appreciated. It is vital that you, representing our elected government, and we as practitioners, who are at the coal face of education, meet on occasions such as these.

Over the past year we have met your officials across a wide variety of fora, and while we didn’t always agree with each other, both sides acted in good faith, and that must be acknowledged.

We, in the TUI, have many ambitions, and of course concerns about the Further and Higher Education sectors, and we look forward to working with you, as Minister, over the next five years.

## **Youthreach**

Minister, education does not consist of just one straight path. Circumstance and events dictate the educational journey we all take. This abundance of pathways is one of the healthier aspects of the Irish education system. However, for far too long, these non-traditional routes have been left largely to fend for themselves.

A prime example of this is Youthreach, which is far more than just an educational programme. Indeed, for many, it is a lifeline. Without it, very many young people—some of the most vulnerable in our society—would be lost to the education system entirely. Instead, because of Youthreach, they find support, structure, and a second chance. The impact is profound, not just for the learners themselves but also for their families and communities.

And yet, despite this, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Many Youthreach centres continue to operate in unacceptable work environments. Staff, dedicated and committed as they are, feel sidelined, and treated as an afterthought within the wider education sector. They feel their concerns have been ignored time and time again.

This is most evident in the divide between teachers and Youthreach resource persons, which is draining morale in nearly every Youthreach centre to crisis levels. Mid-term breaks see half the staff leave, yet Centres remain open and are somehow expected to function, as normal, to the same high standards we expect. This is a nonsense, Minister, and needs to be one of the first things you address in your new office for both our members and our students.

Youthreach students and the Resource Persons who serve them deserve the same breaks as their peers at second level and to continue to deny them this is quite simply wrong!

The TUI has engaged with your Department, again in good faith, under the auspices of the WRC around aligning the Youthreach calendar to that of second level. In this regard, Minister, I welcome your recent, encouraging statement in the Dáil that you aim to have a decision on this matter for the next academic year. Let me remind you that the original commitment from the Department was that the process would be quick and decisive. Last year progress was being made. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances the process was delayed. However, Minister, those circumstances no longer apply and the pace of progress over recent months has been glacial, with the Department seeming to want to re-examine, and cover old ground to see if there is merit to our claim. This is unacceptable and is causing huge frustration amongst our members. Our claim is fair and justified and we expect your decision to reflect this.

Minister, the evidence is very clear. Aligning Youthreach centres with the second-level school calendar would be a simple but significant step—one that would help prevent burnout, boost morale, and, most importantly, improve the educational experience for our students.

Minister, you have an opportunity, at the beginning of your tenure, to make a real and tangible difference to a cohort of students and staff who have for too long been consigned to the margins. Now is not the time to delay, Minister, but to act.

## **Adult Education**

Minister, delayed responses and the need for action also characterise the treatment of our members in Adult Education. To put it simply, they deserve better.

Our members in Adult Education teach the most marginalised in our society. They dedicate their careers to empowering the most disenfranchised, those facing literacy challenges, individuals who are restarting their educational journey and those who have sought refuge in our country having fled conflict or oppression in their own. Our Adult Educators cannot do this work unsupported, and there is an ever-increasing need for more investment, as well as the appointment of additional Adult Literacy Organisers and Adult Education Officers, to ensure that a quality service is provided.

Back in 2020, long before your time in office, the Labour Court instructed the Department to make Adult Educators an offer; an offer that would ensure the very basics that any employee would expect, such as annualised salary and pension entitlements. Despite the Labour Court’s instruction, the TUI had to fight tirelessly to drag any sort of offer from the Department. It eventually arrived only last year – four years late.

If you will forgive my naivety, Minister, I thought we might actually have brought one part of this to a conclusion. However, yet again, Adult Educators have been let down, this time by the extreme tardiness of obstructionist ETBs that claimed not to have the funds to implement the offer, despite the fact that your Department had agreed to it.

Outrageously, some ETBs still haven’t even commenced processing it at all. How can we, in the TUI, have any faith in reaching agreements with your Department if those tasked with implementing it not only ignore us but ignore your officials also?

Minister, we also have some rogue ETBs claiming – in blatant breach of the agreement - that the 15 associated hours must be timetabled, which they explicitly should not. They are to aid in an Adult Educator’s preparation for class, they are not to aid management in syphoning off their own administrative workload. Minister, the TUI will not tolerate this – nor should you.

Agreements between the TUI and your Department are not open to selective implementation by ETBs. We are not dealing with numbers on a spreadsheet here Minister, we are dealing with people - their lives, their mortgages, their families and their careers.

Since the Adult Educator offer was first made, we have had 3 Ministers for Further and Higher Education. Let us make it under your time in office, that our Adult Educators are treated as the top-quality educationalists that they are, that they are respected for the quality service they provide. Minister, we need you to use your office to ensure that all ETBs (not just the good ones) implement properly the deal that we all signed up to.

## **FET College of the Future**

Minister, one of the most notable problems we have seen in our sector is the create your own, do it yourself, whatever you’re having, vision of the Further Education College of the Future.

It has become a completely nebulous and elusive concept, with such a wide variety of iterations, that the term is now for most people, utterly meaningless. Unfortunately, too many in the ETB sector, are so preoccupied with the optics of the FET College of the Future, that its viability or appropriateness never received sufficient attention.

Across the sector there has been a failure to acknowledge that PLC colleges are currently delivering outstanding tuition, despite being often under significant resource constraints. Many prioritised rebranding, and what the overall grand dream of what a College of the Future would look like, forgetting the more predominant and pertinent problem of inadequate funding.

Every college and education centre should be equipped with the necessary resources and capacity to ensure that all students—regardless of their starting point or background—receive a comprehensive and enriching educational experience. There must be investment in both capital infrastructure and the modernising of existing equipment for this to be a success.

However, Minister, if these proposed changes had been merely cosmetic, while frustrating and wasteful, it may not have become the dominant issue it is today. The fact is, in the name of the Further Education College of the Future, there have been numerous attempts to wreak havoc on members’ terms and conditions.

Some decided to use the College of the Future as a smoke screen, resulting in members being relocated, the splitting of existing schools into multiple centres, the unilateral removal of programmes, the imposition of semesterisation with no regard for members’ terms and conditions, unagreed changes to reporting structures, the arbitrary assignment of post duties across multiple centres, and an increase in members’ already unsustainable workload. Minister, this was, and is, intolerable to the TUI.

## **ETB Ballot**

It was these, and other similar actions by some ETBs, that, last November, forced the TUI to ballot our members in the ETB sector. Across ETBs, management at various levels sought to make unilateral changes that increased the workload of our members, altered established practices, and deviated from the terms of collective agreements.

This troubling trend characterised a complete disregard for meaningful consultation, established procedures, and nationally agreed terms and conditions. An overwhelming mandate was given by members, with 94% voting in favour of taking industrial action. We, in the TUI, always try to resolve matters locally, and it is a shame that members felt they had to take such dramatic and decisive action against ETB employers and the ETBI for their concerns to be listened to.

Minister, let me be clear, the TUI will not countenance anyone trying to run riot through well established procedures which we, as a trade union, have fought long and hard to achieve. Collective Agreements set the rules and parameters of engagement for all of us – union and management. The TUI abides by anything it signs up to, and we have an unwavering expectation that management and the Department will uphold their end of the bargain as well. Failure to do so, has been, and will be met, with swift action from the TUI.

That being said, Minister, I must commend the Department’s recent engagement with the Union in relation to the ETB sector. There have been a number of meetings with ETBI which so far have resulted in progress. Firstly – and very importantly - explicit agreement regarding the maximum distance that applies to transfers under the 1999 transfer agreement.

The establishment of a National Engagement Forum – a vehicle where we, the TUI, can discuss and hopefully resolve our many concerns for the sector. We are also near finalisation of an agreed procedure for local engagement between individual ETBs and TUI members locally – we hope that this proposal will be accepted by the CEs at their next forum meeting.

Finally, the Department has recently written to all ETBs stating they cannot change terms and conditions, that reporting structures must remain as currently established and that two separate groups to examine how to implement the College of the Future effectively, which will involve the TUI, have been established.

Minister, you have only recently been appointed to your position, but for this to work into the future, any ETB that chooses to go rogue and abandon said agreement needs to be dealt with, by your office, with decisive and prompt action.

## **SEN and AEN**

Minister, there is a particular deficit in Further Education provision that needs your immediate attention. This is the lack of proper SEN and AEN supports in our FE Colleges. I have raised this myself with your Department several times, have heard it repeatedly mentioned of how urgent this matter is and yet the pace of progress seems to be non-existent.

Currently, students who are entitled to special or additional help right throughout their secondary education are then suddenly expected to adapt effortlessly to life in a Further Education College without any additional supports.

Minister, there is a moral obligation on us as educators and on you as Minister, to aid the most vulnerable in our society. If we are to bridge the gap, be inclusive and make a positive educational experience ubiquitous for all students, then this is a necessity that cannot wait.

The current situation is farcical and quite frankly, we are failing these students by not providing the necessary supports. Minister, they can no longer be cut adrift from their rightful expectation of a meaningful education and next year’s Congress cannot roll by without significant progress being made on this issue.

## **Apprenticeships**

Minister, in the current economic climate, under the shadow of the tantrum politics of Trump and his tariffs and, especially in the context of a dire housing crisis there is a clear and acute need for skills and craftspeople. Our apprenticeship lecturers provide the country with graduates with those necessary skills to ensure that we can have a dynamic and thriving economy. We need to see what action your office is going to take to boost apprenticeships in Ireland, and how the Action Plan for Apprenticeships affects our members.

The movement to a single, integrated system that is industry-led, while worthy of consideration, has raised serious concerns within the TUI. The need for apprenticeship programmes to remain relevant is obvious and undeniable. However, the TUI is seeking assurances that the programmes remain educationally focused, rather than industry dependent. There is a genuine fear that industry-led consortia will lead to the evolution of programmes that do not produce apprentices with transferable skills, and our apprentices may be educated for niche industry-led programmes which are not sustainable into the future.

For the avoidance of doubt, the TUI must be represented on all consortia development groups into the future. Our members will bring vast experience, the requisite apprenticeship expertise and, just as importantly, a considered trade union voice, to the development groups.

Minister, we would also like to see the issue of parity of esteem for apprenticeships addressed on your watch. Great strides have been made in recent years to remove the stigma attached to apprenticeships. We - and you, Minister - must help wider society see their true value.

While we cannot prevent certain media outlets publishing school league tables – themselves a crude distortion - that do not factor in apprenticeship progression, we can help create an integrated application process where apprenticeship applications can be submitted through the CAO. This would ensure that students feel valued and would enhance the value we, as a nation, place on apprenticeships.

## **Management Grades – Third Level**

Minister, we in the TUI, represent many grades across the sector. However, there is one grade in particular that we wish to see no more. In this very room, there are both Lecturers, and the ludicrously named ‘Assistant’ Lecturer. Let me assure you, Minister, they do not ‘assist’ – what they do is lecture. Minister this is an archaic terminology that bears no resemblance to reality. They do the exact same job as a lecturer, and we, the TUI, believe their position, and name, should reflect that, in a unified grade of Lecturer.

Minister, in January 2024, the TUI was forced to take industrial action owing to the unilateral imposition of new Technological University management grades. The TUI was not consulted in this decision which has resulted in regional disparity between the TUs, as management grades in Dublin are bizarrely deemed superior to the rest of the country and paid more. This not only flies in the face of the notion of creating a sector, but also, is completely contrary to your own government’s National Development Plan. TUI members justifiably expressed their outrage in a 92% yes vote, for industrial action.

As a result of this ballot there have been long and protracted talks in the WRC over the last year. This has led to significant progress in some areas and helped establish a better working relationship with your Department. However, the attempt to limit TUI representation at the newly designed forum will not be tolerated by the Union into the future. Our consent to an interim arrangement to facilitate the completion of important work, particularly in regard to Local Bargaining, cannot be taken as acceptance by us of the unacceptable. TUI’s representative structures must be fully respected, just as TUI respects the representative structures of the Department and of management.

Speaking of Local Bargaining, the lethargy in this process has been nothing short of frightening. The TUI signed up to an agreement with very strict payment deadlines and under no circumstances will we accept delayed payments when the fault is clearly not of our making.

Minister, I have never seen such grotesque political opportunism than from your predecessor, who in the last hours of his ministry, decided to bypass not only the TUI, but also the WRC, the very industrial relations mechanisms that we in the trade union movement are lectured about exhausting, and sanctioned more management grades in the TU sector at the lower level of payment. This was outrageous.

The disrespect shown to ourselves, and the WRC, left the TUI with no alternative but to refer the matter to the Labour Court.

I freely acknowledge that you didn’t make this decision, but your Government did, and you have now, as a direct consequence, inherited the distrust and damage caused by this decision.

You are now in a position to repair your office’s reputation with the TUI. You are now in a position to demonstrate your belief in the regional mission of the TUs and IOTs, and you are now in a position to restore confidence in the sector and ensure consistency of payment across all TUs, regardless of where they are in the country and to engage in an appropriate and coordinated organisational design process with the TUI.

## **Investment**

Minister, there are also broader ongoing challenges in the TU sector that remain unaddressed, most notably funding. Today’s students suffer larger class sizes and significantly curtailed access to essential facilities such as libraries and laboratories. They have also endured sharp cuts to tutorial and student support provision.

Our exceptionally high student-lecturer ratio—23:1, - is significantly above the OECD average of 17:1, and, as a result, lecturer workload has increased considerably.

If we are serious about achieving excellence, we must ensure that colleges have the necessary resources to provide the highest quality education. Ireland ranks at the bottom of the OECD countries for its investment in education. That is absolutely shameful, Minister. Students succeed when they receive the necessary attention they need, but without adequate support, many risk being left behind permanently.

The TUI has repeatedly called for increased investment. The strides that have been made cannot be maintained without sustained multi-annual funding. Without this, we simply cannot meet the expectations we all share—an education system that is truly equitable and accessible to every citizen, regardless of their location in the country.

## **Researchers’ Pensions**

Minister, I spoke about researchers’ pensions at last year’s Congress. In fact, members have been speaking about this for a long, long time. The TUI first lodged this claim in 2015. A full decade has passed, and we still don’t have a resolution. The TUI’s deep concern about the Department of Expenditure and Reform’s persistent pattern of out and out obstructionism remains unaltered and is an absolute disgrace. Their actions, or lack of at times, prevent anything constructive being achieved. The absolute absurdity of both the TUI and your Department, Minister, reaching agreement, at long last, only for it to be dismissed by the Department of Expenditure and Reform. This is ridiculous Minister.

By all accounts we are not alone in our discontent, and there is growing opinion that DPER are inhibiting all usual industrial fora. One has to question the point of designated departments if vital decisions directly effecting stakeholders cannot be implemented without the ominous overreach of DPER. Minister, ten years of engagement, by any metric represents extraordinary patience, and on this matter, our patience has run out. Minister, urgent intervention with your cabinet colleagues is now imperative, if you are to restore any faith in this process. Research we are told is an indispensable element of the mission in the technological sector. If so, why are our Researchers being treated like indentures servants. This abuse – and abuse it is – must stop.

## **DkIT and IADT**

Minister, yet again we are at another Congress, another year has passed and the primary issue in the TU sector still looms large—where do DkIT and IADT belong in this evolving landscape of the technological sector? Unfortunately, while the rest of the country is embarking on a new future, these two IOTs will remain on the sidelines.

It is important to state, the current Tánaiste and former Minister for DFHERIS, Simon Harris, was determined in his support of these two institutions and met both TUI branches about the potential future of IADT and DkIT. The TUI expects the Tánaiste to stand by this clear commitment that their pursuit of university status would be supported and facilitated.

As President of the TUI, I also urge you and your department to reaffirm your commitment to ensuring that financial, or other, constraints will not stand in the way of either DkIT or IADT, and that every possible measure will be taken to assist these institutions to achieve the status that was promised, and to help them remain the key regional focal points that they are.

## **Housing**

Minister, education does not operate in a silo. It is interconnected and interdependent with all aspects of Irish society. However, one aspect, dominates above all else, and that of course is housing. Successive governments, most of which included your party, have failed the Irish people in this regard.

Policies over reliant on the private market have led to homelessness figures skyrocket and generations of people being completely priced out of the market. The lack of affordable accommodation is at the epicentre of the recruitment and retention crisis across the education sector. It is the reason why so many of our newly qualified, and quality trained teachers and lecturers seek employment beyond these shores. It is the reason so many classrooms and lecture halls remain vacant as there is no one employed to teach in them. It is the reason so many students are forced to leave school early, or drop out of university courses, forever altering their career prospects, their social circles, and their lives.

The government should be under no illusions, the housing crisis is not inevitable or undefeatable. It is man-made. It was created by policy. As President of the TUI, I find it reprehensible, that over the last decade there seemed to be far more concern around profit margins than the livelihoods of our own people. Students, families, and teachers alike, are all suffering from this crisis. The inability or unwillingness of politicians to tackle this problem is without doubt the greatest scandal and stain on this country, and the intergenerational damage caused will have catastrophic social consequences for decades to come.

## **Wider/International Issues**

Minister, in a wider context, we are also witnessing terrifying developments across the world, in particular, the devastation in Gaza. As a Union we have been vociferous in our support for humanitarian aid and a lasting peace based on a two-state solution. We have clearly stated on numerous occasions our abhorrence at the violence perpetrated by Hamas and the Israeli Defence Forces. Israel’s extreme right-wing government is clearly trying to dehumanise Palestinians and denigrate a whole people. The sadistic, disgusting suggestions of a Gaza Riveria need to be condemned in the strongest possible terms. This is a homeland, not the plaything of narcissistic billionaires.

I know you will join us in our condemnation of these acts, but on behalf of the TUI, I want you to do more, I am asking that you and your government colleagues honour your election commitment and pass the Occupied Territories Bill.

This shift to the right is sadly not just a problem for the Middle East. From Italy to Hungary, to Russia to America, the more powerful the far right becomes, the more lies that are spread, and the more we abandon the values of integrity and decency. It is both an attack on education and our way of life. The rise of the far right risks the destruction of everything we hold dear. However, we will not be intimidated.

At its core, education is about critical thinking, diversity of ideas, and the pursuit of truth. It empowers individuals to question, to understand different perspectives, and to envision a more just future.

History has shown us that far-right movements fear this kind of education. They thrive on conformity, intolerance, and the suppression of dissent.

Today, we see this attack on education manifesting in multiple ways. Schools and universities are increasingly targeted as battlegrounds in ideological wars. Educators who teach history, science, the arts are vilified for being “biased” or “unpatriotic.” Subjects that explore racism, gender, or colonialism are dismissed as “indoctrination.” In some places, far-right governments and groups are actively rewriting curricula to distort history, downplay past atrocities, or omit uncomfortable realities. This is not just an academic issue—it is an attack on truth itself.

This corrosive drift to the far right must be brought to a halt and only by working together, Minister, in a fully funded, and properly resourced education system will we have the tools to stop it.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, you are at the beginning of your journey as Minister. Despite our many concerns, we have great hope that you will deliver for our Further and Higher Education sector.

The TUI is always cautiously optimistic when a new Minister takes over, but we, unfortunately, have a lot of experience of being let down. We will judge you not on your words but on your actions. On your willingness to engage with us, to consult with us, and to build with us.

You now have the time to make the requisite changes and put your stamp and legacy on this Department. The TUI is always willing to help create a better education system that values both our members and our students. Even our recent ballots, both in ETBs and at Third Level, were about the viability of the respective sectors. We identify as both educationalists and trade unionists and take great pride in where we work.

Our record of commitment to the sector is unblemished and judging from your speech today, we hold many shared aims and aspirations. We look forward to working with you and your team to advance Further, Adult and Higher Education into the future.

Thank you

David Waters

TUI President