

Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2024 - Embargo until delivery

Thank you, Minister, on behalf of the TUI, I would like to start by welcoming you and your staff to our Congress.

Whilst DFHERIS is a relatively new department, we greatly value the long-standing tradition of Ministers with an education brief attending our conferences and hearing directly from the people who work at the coal face of education.

Obviously, there are very unusual extenuating circumstances that have kept Minister Harris from attending here today. I would like to congratulate him on his imminent appointment as Taoiseach.

The commitment he showed to Further and Higher Education was commendable over his tenure as Minister, and now that he is in a position of significantly more power, the TUI fully expects that this commitment will be honoured through unwavering support for the sector from his new office, and the restrictions – financial and otherwise, that bound further progress in our sector when he was Minister, will soon be lifted, so his successor can complete the many challenges that lie before us.

I would like to thank you Minister Collins, for attending on such short notice; it is greatly appreciated. If the TUI and the Department are both to achieve our shared ambition of a better and more equitable education system, then it is vital that policy makers and practitioners meet on occasions such as these.

### *Youthreach*

It is often observed that the ethical and cultural health of a society can best be judged by how it treats its most marginalised communities and, in terms of the public education system, Youthreach has for too long been consigned to the margins.

Minister Harris has spoken previously, and very passionately, of his belief in the positive impact of Youthreach. This is a programme that deals with some of the most vulnerable in our society. Students who would have otherwise fallen through the cracks of the education system, are thrown a lifeline because of Youthreach. There are countless instances of people, quite literally, being saved, by the work of the TUI's members in Youthreach. The intergenerational impact is enormous, the benefit to learners and their families incalculable.

Yet Minister, we still have centres operating in extremely poor conditions, we still have centres with staff that feel like they are an aside to the traditional education route, we still

have the ludicrous scenario when during mid-terms, half of the staff leave and yet the centre is expected to continue running as normal, operating the same service to the same standards. The continued division in terms of the treatment of teacher and resource person is sapping morale to breaking point.

The TUI has met Department officials in the WRC, and I must acknowledge that your officials have operated in good faith, in trying to find a resolution that would help align Youthreach centres to the second level calendar. This would help prevent burnout, increase morale, and ultimately offer a much better educational experience to students.

Youthreach members often feel they are the forgotten amongst the wider educational sphere, so I implore you Minister, and your department, to remember them. I would also, through you, ask our soon to be Taoiseach, to remember Youthreach, and remember the commitment that, as Minister, he previously gave to help in any way that he can to find a viable lasting solution for the whole of Youthreach.

### *Adult Education*

Speaking of the forgotten, our Adult Education Tutors, many of whom - unlike any other group of public servants, are yet to receive their Building Momentum payments. Despite the

fact that they were able to vote for the agreement, they saw no benefit of the agreement. Farcically, a lot of members – many the lowest paid in our membership, in a cost-of-living crisis, won't have seen any pay increases, to which they were entitled, until the agreement expired, and a new pay agreement had been reached. Minister, whilst I must thank you and your officials for finally last week finding a resolution to this, it is still an outrage that no worker should have to endure.

Unfortunately for our Adult Educators, this kind of treatment is not a surprise. Even though they themselves spend their working lives helping some of the most disenfranchised; the people who struggle with literacy, the people who had no access to education in their early years, migrants attempting to make Ireland their new home, it is in fact our Adult Educators, who were marginalised for so long from the true fabric of Irish society, as they were forced to sign on for social welfare payments during closures.

This is a group who unfortunately have become quite accustomed to waiting, to lack of progress, to being kept on the sideline. On behalf of Congress, I absolutely welcome the eventual arrival of the 'Adult Education Offer', but Minister, the Labour Court recommendation was in 2020!

The TUI has had to work extremely hard in the interim to drag any sort of offer from government; an offer, let me remind you, that covers the very basic entitlements any worker would expect, such as an annualised salary with proper pension entitlements.

That is not to belittle the complexity of the work involved, or the effort put in by your Department and the ETBI, but it is outrageous that it has taken this long. Years have passed for our members where important, and basic, life decisions could not be made. Mortgages and car loans were permanently left idle in the absence of this offer. They are some of the most skilled members in education, it is high time that they are treated that way.

*FE*

Minister, there is a great philosophical question that haunts the halls of every PLC College and FET Centre in the country: what is the Further Education College of the Future?

Depending on who you ask, or in what part of the country you ask the question, or when you have asked them, you get remarkably different answers.

Thankfully, SOLAS now agree that the notion of an all-encompassing FET practitioner is dead, and it seems the relevant stakeholders are now seeing the inherent value in having teachers in the FET sector. Minister, this is welcome, but it does raise very concerning, and quite frankly puzzling, questions as to why there is still an FET Practitioner Working Group in operation. If you will forgive the bluntness, this is a complete waste of resources, and its being spent on a very poorly considered idea, which has at its core a contempt for the terms and conditions of service hard won by our Union. In this context, we are also extremely disappointed, and

none the wiser, as to where the very illusive Organisation and Design process is and why the resourcing being wasted on the FET Practitioner Working Group have not been diverted to this much more important, and pressing, work. So, while confusion still reigns, and since there is no definitive view on the Further Education College of the Future, allow me to give some suggestions, in the present.

Start with what we are doing well, PLC colleges up and down the country are offering superb tuition with minimal resourcing. Instead of embarking on a branding campaign, begin with a funding campaign. Make sure all colleges and centres have the right resources and capacity so that all students, regardless of ability, or background, get the full educational experience. Capital expenditure should not be solely focussed on the major works of designing new 'Colleges of the Future' when we have 'Colleges of the Present'/'Colleges of Excellence' which would really benefit from targeted infrastructure projects, to bring their facilities up to modern standards.

Minister Harris has spoken before about the need for proper SEN and AEN support in FE Colleges. It is utterly absurd that students who need special or additional help right up to when they are 17 or 18, are then suddenly expected to be able to transition to further education seamlessly without any additional assistance. This is not only an educational issue, but also a moral one. I know this is an issue particularly close to Minister Harris' heart, so I urge you and your Department, and the new Taoiseach, to acknowledge that this must be an imperative in any future landscape of Further Education.

Minister, if Further Education is to have a future, then it needs promotional posts. Workload is already at a staggeringly high level and our members cannot keep manning the breach and taking on extra responsibilities, whilst also drowning in a sea of bureaucracy. If you want to revolutionise the FE sector, then offering proper career paths, and reducing the workload on our principals, deputies, and most importantly, our teachers, would be a great place to start.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, consult with the TUI. It is both ridiculous and extremely frustrating, at how many 'go it alone' plans have to be brought back and dissected by the TUI, and then ultimately disregarded by the Department. Everyone sitting out there in this room is an expert in education. Use them, Minister. A vast amount of progress could be made on a whole range of issues if the TUI are included. Consultation must be the core value to any planned change, big or small, to our sector.

*NTO*

Minister, speaking of consultation, this year has not been a smooth ride between the TUI and DFHERIS. On several occasions the TUI has found itself side-lined by the Department, excluded either purposefully or inadvertently, from any real concrete negotiations.

The National Tertiary Programme is generally a laudable ambition. Initiatives that increase the accessibility of education for students, from all backgrounds and walks of life, will always find a worthy ally in the TUI. However, the lack of planning and detail behind the programme has left many wondering about its future.

To start with, the timing of introducing the NTO programme in the summer, where no guidance counsellors could assist in student's awareness of the programme, left a lot to be desired. Questions remain around supports for students, and how we are to ensure those who avail of the NT programme have parity of esteem with their fellow students who have accessed the course through the CAO. Most importantly, the lack of consultation with the TUI, whose members are actually going to 'do the job', was quite frankly outrageous. We only received meaningful engagement after our members took action and lodged collective grievances all around the country. Honestly Minister, if we hadn't intervened, what were deemed as serious concerns, would have been catastrophic.

To Minister Harris' credit, he did come out publicly and say the TUI had legitimate concerns, and a lot of the early issues were rectified. We recognised that and appreciate it albeit after the horse had bolted.

### *Apprenticeships*

However, roll on further and we come to another serious issue, that of apprenticeships and the phase 2 backlog. Once again, there was a proposal of a potentially innovative idea, where the Department would ask TUs and IOTs to step in and fill the gap. Or, more accurately, ask TUI members to step in and fill the gap. This is why, it was beyond



comprehension, that a Minister and a Department, who wanted to solve a very serious issue for the country wouldn't contact the TUI until the very last minute. There was absolutely no consultation with the TUI until matters reached crisis point.

To top it off Minister, just before the first meeting with the TUI was to be held, there was an opportunistic announcement of hundreds of thousands of Euro becoming available for the TUs to take on these apprenticeships. That is no way to conduct business. We are not the 'add-on' meeting that needs to be arranged when other things are falling into place. We are the people who are going to implement your initiatives on the ground. We, the TUI, are the first phone-call! We must be included and consulted on anything and everything that affects TUI members.

Nonetheless, the outcomes from the discussions between your Department and the TUI were very productive for both sides, and more importantly for the apprentices. Despite these initial difficulties, Minister, your department has proven your dedication to apprenticeships. The €17 million for capital expenditure has been a significant boost for the sector. A new Labour Employer Economic Forum, chaired by the Minister, is very significant. These structural supports will have a real and lasting impact on education, and you, and your Department, should be proud to have introduced them. However, you cannot keep bringing the TUI to the brink of war each time you wish to launch a new initiative.

That is why I am delighted the TUI has been invited to be a part of the Apprenticeship Stakeholder Group. This is a prime example of how the TUI and the Department can work together for real change.

It is very important to remember, when the Department needed the TUI to solve the more recent backlog at phase 4 and 6. We did not hesitate. Our record is unblemished when it comes to our commitment to apprenticeships and the sector overall. This is the type of collegiality and consultation that will move this sector forward, and it needs to be the model for all our future engagements.

### *MTU Management Grades*

Unfortunately, Minister, the TUI were forced to act in January when another failing in consultation resulted in the very idea of a coherent TU sector being brought into jeopardy. The May 2017 Agreement provides for an industrial relations mechanism known as the National Negotiation Forum, or NNF, which would deal with issues around terms and conditions of service in the TU sector. The forum was beyond dysfunctional as claims languished there for years with no prospect of ever coming to a resolution. However, you can imagine the consternation when, as if the NNF did not even exist, the new grades created in MTU weren't even brought into the forum. We were only informed by TUI members on the ground who were at the opening of a sports facility in MTU, where they heard the announcement, without any consultation with the TUI, about how we 'were on the cusp of agreeing new grades for MTU.'

Members were justifiably furious at the determination to once again bypass the Union and felt forced to ballot on this issue. 92% - for industrial action. Let there be no doubt Minister, the TUI will protect the TU sector from regional disparity, even if others will not and the TUI

will not countenance management's attempts to devalue academic grades and aggrandise administrative ones.

After long engagement with DFHERIS on this issue, and many hours in the WRC, a small bit of progress has been made, with both sides being solution focussed. Minister, I hope we can come to a resolution on this issue in the very near future. I would ask you, in the name of the TU sector, take early and decisive action in this regard. For a very modest amount of money, the integrity of the TU sector and its pledge to the regions can be protected. TU Presidents come and go, their tenure is short and their understanding of the core mission, in some cases, is weak. TUI third level members are however the heart and soul of the sector. Their commitment is to see it thrive into future, for our students, their communities, and the country.

### *Researchers Pensions*

In a wider context, the TUI's long standing concern about regressive overreach by DPER is unabated. DPER's overreaching powers are having a drastically negative effect on getting any constructive business done. We have an utterly ludicrous situation where the TUI's claim for pensions for researchers, which was first lodged in 2015, finally has agreement from DFHERIS, only to fall at the altar of the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform. Their rejection of a deal, made between your Department, and the Union that represents the

workers in higher education, is damaging trust in negotiation and generating demand for industrial action. DPER may be indifferent to the precarity of researchers. We in the TUI are not.

DPER may not care that researchers face being impoverished on retirement. We in the TUI do care and will not tolerate this callous disrespect for our colleagues. To all intents and purposes, DPER is making the other government departments defunct, and it is incumbent on your government, with our new Taoiseach at the helm, to remedy this situation, not just for our researchers who have been fighting this for 9 whole years, but also more broadly, to protect the industrial relations mechanisms of the state.

### *TU Funding*

Minister, there are wider ongoing issues in the TU sector that need to be addressed. In particular, we have some of the highest student lecturer ratios in the OECD at 23:1, compared to an average of 17:1. If we are aiming for excellence, then the necessary resources need to be made available so that colleges can provide the best educational

experience possible. Students thrive when they receive the adequate attention needed and can easily fall away when that provision is not made available.

The TUI has been consistently calling for more resources. The TU sector is a fledging one but one you have supported. However, if adequate, multi-annual funding is not provided then the sector will not be able to deliver what everyone in this room wants and expects, which is a more equitable and accessible education for all our citizens regardless of where they are in the country.

#### *DKIT/IADT*

There is one issue that has dominated the TU landscape since its inception. That of course, is where do DkIT and IADT fit into this new TU sector. Their managements have exercised irresponsible autonomy in a manner that has allowed them to 'sit-out' the important developments in the sector.

Minister Harris has been especially vociferous in his support of these two institutions, and I must acknowledge the fact that he arranged a meeting with members of both branches. I would like to state categorically, that this Union holds Minister Harris's to his clearly stated

belief that DkIT and IADT's quest for a place in this new order should be supported and facilitated. I would ask that you, and your department, continue to support the TUI in this regard and reaffirm your commitment to making sure that there will be no financial impediment, and that everything possible will be done to aid these institutions in that endeavour.

### *Gaza*

Minister, there is something that is occurring far from Irish shores, but close to Irish hearts. That is, of course, the scandalous violence that is being inflicted upon the people of Gaza.

The attack by Hamas on October 7<sup>th</sup> was heinous, so too has been the appalling onslaught by the Israeli Defence Forces on Gaza. The destruction and loss of life beggars' belief - north of 30,000 people killed, of whom over 14,000 are estimated to be children, and the region on the brink of famine. Regrettably there doesn't seem to be any end to the violence in sight. The children and students of Gaza are like any of the students that we teach on a daily basis. The savagery of the IDF must be called out, and I am sure Minister, you will join us in our condemnation of the violence.

On behalf of Congress, I urge you, your government colleagues, and Minister Harris in particular, to be the moral compass that the world currently needs, and, by all means necessary, to redouble your efforts to get a complete cessation to the grotesque violence we are witnessing on a daily basis and help create a lasting peace for the region.

### *Housing*

Minister, there is also a very serious matter closer to home I would like to discuss. That of course, is housing. It is a wider societal issue, but it is having a crippling effect on the education system. The recent publication of housing figures does not reflect well on this government. Since taking office back in 2020, and notwithstanding the COVID pandemic, the housing crisis has escalated even further than was originally thought comprehensible. Quite frankly, it is an unmitigated disaster, which is entirely man-made and policy driven, and it directly affects both our members and our students.

It has exacerbated the recruitment and retention crisis in education and has disenfranchised thousands of young people from a proper education, as more pressing matters, such as, 'where are their family going to live?' takes rightful precedence. As President of the TUI, I would like to make it unequivocally clear, the housing crisis is the greatest failing, and disgrace, of not only this government, but of successive governments, and its scars will leave an indelible mark on the Irish people for decades to come.

### *Demands of Taoiseach*

Minister, whilst I am aware some of what I am about to mention is beyond the remit of DFHERIS, the strong probability of Minister Harris becoming Taoiseach has significance. We in the TUI, would hope and expect that his experience as Minister for Further and Higher Education will be reflected in a more acute focus on education during his tenure as Taoiseach, accompanied by enhanced investment in quality public education at all levels.

Ireland ranks at the bottom of the OECD for its investment in education. That is absolutely shameful. It is important to remember that when this country was in freefall, it was our education system that kept producing top quality graduates. It was our education system that kept attracting foreign investment. It was our education system that helped this country escape one of its darkest chapters. We want our new Taoiseach to imagine what we could do if we were actually resourced properly.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude Minister, while there may be many differences between the TUI and the Department, but there are more things that we share in common. However, you have to talk to us, to find them out.



If you will forgive the English teacher, George Bernard Shaw said, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." The Department has fallen foul of this illusion for too long, and the Union will not continue to tolerate the persistent need to engage, after the fact, on a solution rather than pro-actively co-designing a future.

I believe all of us want to create an inclusive and strong education system, so I ask that you consult with us, work with us, build with us, and let's shape a relationship, a sector, and a society that values, and benefits, students, educators, and all citizens. Thank you.