

Address by Sinn Féin Leader, Mary Lou McDonald TD
Irish Universities Association
'The future of Higher Education in Ireland'
Monday, 21st June 2021

Thank you to the IUA for this opportunity to speak with you about the future of Higher Education in Ireland.

I am very conscious of the fact that I address you today not only as Leader of the opposition but as the Leader of a party whose firm intention it is to lead government.

I want to say at the outset that I see higher education and research as being critical to shaping a better future for all the people of our island.

I have always believed that the importance and value of education, of building knowledge and fostering academic curiosity can never be overstated.

Education is after all not only the best way of changing the lives of individuals, it is the best way of changing the world and creating a more equal society.

Encouraging and fuelling cutting edge research and scientific endeavour is the best way to overcome the challenges facing all of humanity.

If anybody was in any doubt about this reality, then surely the development of Covid-19 vaccines - and indeed the multitude of ways medical science has risen to challenge posed by the pandemic - has put paid to any misgivings.

At the root of this success is independent thinking and intellectual creativity.

However, as we forge forward with fostering advancements in these areas, we must also guard against a hegemony that suggests higher education is solely about scientific research, technology, commerce or engineering.

Of course, these areas are fundamentally important for the future but so are the arts and literature, philosophy and critical thinking, law, teaching, nursing and social research.

All of these areas must be nurtured and progressed in order to harness the diversity of talent, ability and intellect that pulses through our society.

It takes a village to raise a child and it takes a kaleidoscope of academic interests, pursuits and disciplines to grow a higher education sector that will transform our society and our society for the better.

After a year in which a pandemic has upended everything and swept away much of the old certainties, we are now presented with a unique opportunity - and a fresh canvas - upon which to renew a progressive vision for higher education in Ireland.

It is incumbent on all of us to grasp the vital role that Higher Education and research will undoubtedly play in our social and economic recovery and in building Ireland back better.

To boldly set out to ensure that higher education has the supports and resources needed.

To guarantee that - in this coming decade - the sector truly has the reservoir of assets required to fulfil its undoubted potential to lead in world-class education, research output and in driving innovation.

For those in leadership positions - whether in government or in the sector itself - there is a key question now to be answered.

Will we use this unprecedented opportunity to allow higher education to become an avenue through which inequality is widened or will we use it to ensure that education realises its promise as the great equaliser and delivers opportunity for all?

Access

If we are to build a better society, if we are to create a stronger, fairer economy driven by innovation and knowledge, then surely the answer must be the latter.

People are the best resource that higher education institutions are ever going to have. The opportunity to attend third-level education must be an opportunity afforded everybody regardless of their economic status.

There has been progress - it is important to acknowledge that - but it is equally important to acknowledge that it hasn't been enough.

Huge systemic barriers still exist for students. Far too many are still denied access to higher education because they cannot afford it.

If we take Dublin as a snapshot, students from the most affluent areas are up to 14 times more likely to progress to university than their counterparts from some schools in the city's most disadvantaged areas.

I represent the North Inner City, where hardly anybody goes on to third level. It is not for the lack of ability, I can tell you. It is because the odds are stacked against them.

The brains of Ireland are in the flats. The brains of Ireland are in working class communities in every county. But too many look at the massive costs associated with going to college and the message they receive is - university is not for you.

That's not to say everybody must go to college. Trades and vocational training are every bit as important for those whose aptitudes and talents lie in those areas.

However, we cannot talk about education as the great leveler while embedded inequalities in access to high education persist. We have to confront this reality and we have to change it.

SUSI grants are the main policy tool for increasing access to higher education for low income families. Yet there have been no increases in the rates for a decade.

If SUSI is to stand any chance of mitigating socio-economic disadvantage it is vital that it takes account of the full spectrum of additional needs to ensure accessibility to all groups in society. That is why Sinn Féin would significantly expand SUSI.

Legislative reform and funding

Of course improving access to higher education and progressive, positive reform of the sector go hand-in-hand.

The HEA Bill 2021 will begin pre-legislative scrutiny this month. I welcome the opportunity for reform of governance of the sector.

We have to use this opportunity to ensure students and staff have a greater say in decision making, provide inclusive education

opportunities, deal with the issue of precarious work in higher education and vitally, we must protect and enhance academic freedom and independence.

The new legislation is also an important time to set a vision for the sector where higher education is inclusive and valued as a public good.

However, I believe it is a mistake to portray governance as the overriding problem in the sector.

The real and essential problem is underfunding.

The IUA has recognised that there has been a sustained period of disinvestment in higher education and the costs passed on to students and families. We can see that in the fact that we have the highest fees in the EU.

On a per student basis we are still far below pre-crash levels. Third-level institutions are given 50 percent less funding per student than they were in 2008

While private funding provides much needed revenue, the state has to step up and ensure that our higher education institutions are funded and directed for the public good.

The starvation of core and capital funding to the sector has to end.

While the government is waiting on recommendation from the EU analysis of funding options, Sinn Féin has always been clear.

We are firmly committed to option 1 of the three outlined in the Cassells report. This would mean, a predominantly state-funded system that Sinn Féin would aim to do over the lifetime of a government.

Reducing fees by 500 euro each year and replacing it with public funding alongside substantially increased core funding.

This is the best way to shape an inclusive, supportive and sustainable environment for Ireland's Higher Education sector.

Research

There is a general consensus that research and development is the tip of the sword in driving education, innovation and progress. However, the sad reality is that words have not been backed up with funding.

Governments have spent less on R&D as a percentage of modified Gross National Income every year since 2011. This has left us below the EU average.

It is incredible that successive governments have failed to grasp the importance of R&D when economic reports show that for every €1 invested in R&D more than €5 is returned to the economy.

It is a no brainer. We have to change things. Publicly funded research is essential to tackle the social and economic challenges we face and produce a sustainable economy.

The higher education sector must be at the centre of a transformed state policy that rejects the neoliberal stranglehold on research and instead unleashes the power of research for the public good.

Sinn Féin would ramp up and rebalance research and development (R&D) by increasing funding to the EU average. We would position research and development as the engine of economic growth and the creation of high-quality sustainable jobs.

The pandemic has taught us that we are at our best when the connections between the research community and social solidarity are strong. I believe this will also be essential as we move forward in tackling the climate crisis and as we explore ways of achieving a truly just transition.

Connectivity

Connectivity between Higher Education and society is key. The sector cannot be an island. Yes, it must be internally robust and vibrant - but it must also be outward looking and tethered to everyday world.

The American Journalist Sydney Harris once said that “the whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows”.

I think that is a good guide in how to renew the centrality of higher education and research for the road that lies ahead.

Connection to industry

This guide is one that I believe Irish CEOs want us to follow. We know they are far more concerned with skills deficits among the workforce than their counterparts in other countries.

Our economy has experienced persistent labour shortages in some sectors and an over reliance on international recruitment in others.

For example, last week government acknowledged that evidence within the healthcare sector tells us that despite increased efforts to recruit from the Irish and European labour markets we simply meet demand.

Sector deficits have been identified and some of these government will now seek to address through the employment permit system.

We all agree that investment in education and training, as well as the industries identified in the Critical Skills Review can address the gaps in the key sectors of our workforce.

All Island

It will not come as a surprise to you that I want to see a deeper cooperation between third level education on the island of Ireland.

The new Department has committed to advancing North South co-operation in third level in its statement of strategy and a commitment to increasing cross-border cooperation in the sector has been included in the current programme for government.

Similar commitments have been made by previous governments yet cross-border enrolment on this island remains low.

We know differences in admissions, funding and a general lack of collaboration and information between government institutions has limited student opportunities.

To gain a deeper understand of these barriers Sinn Féin's Further and Higher Education spokespersons north and south have launched a survey to look at how we can remove them to increase cross-border enrolment in third-level education.

I look forward to sharing these proposals with you all in the time ahead.

Conclusion

I opened my remarks by saying that I see higher education and research as being critical to shaping a better future for all the people of our island.

As someone who has benefited enormously from third level education, I want every young person regardless of their accent or their postal address to know that they too can have access to a higher education if that is what they aspire to.

As a decision maker I understand that access means investment, innovation and an interconnectedness with all sectors both public and private across the island as well as deepened relationships with our international partners.

I'd like to finish up by thanking the Irish Universities Association for inviting me to participate in this event, and to their team for all their work.