

Royal Irish Academy Leaders in Higher Education Address 2016

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Title The relationship between the higher education and research sector and government – fractured but reparable





Tom Boland stepped down from the post of CEO of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on 1 August 2016 after 12 years in the post. Prior to his appointment to the HEA Tom held the post (1994–2004) of Director of Strategic Policy in the Department of Education and Skills, a post he combined with that of legal adviser to the Minister. He holds degrees in Civil Engineering, Criminology and Law and was called to the Irish Bar in 1989.

He has served on the boards of HEAnet (Chairman 2004–2013), the Board of the OECD's higher education programme IMHE (2005–2016), the Fulbright Commission (3 year term to 2009), the Central Applications Office (2004–2016) and Science Foundation Ireland (4 year term to 2012).

Introduction

From earliest days, a core object of the university has been to uncover new knowledge, promote knowledge and the value of knowledge in society and act as its guardian. As such, universities have long played a central role in the development of societies through their teaching, learning and research, especially societies based on respect for the rights of individuals and which promote the common good based on sound humanitarian and democratic principles. I put it to you this evening that we are now at a time when we need to turn to these essential founding characteristics of a university and renew our commitment to them.

Around the world we see populism and xenophobia offering extraordinary challenges to the rights and freedoms that are central to our democratic societies. We saw it in the Brexit campaign, when experts and expertise were derided by the 'Leave' proponents, who played shamelessly, and with no evidentiary support, on fears of immigrants. We saw it clearly in Michael Gove's remark in that campaign: 'I think the people in this country have had enough of experts.' We see the phenomenon of Donald Trump and the susceptibility to demagoguery of what many regard as the world's greatest democracy. I cite the Philippines and its president's active encouragement of vigilantism, France with the rise and rise of the Front National, and here at home a less virulent strain but nevertheless a growing disdain and disrespect for politics and politicians, leading to unprecedented fragmentation of our political party system.

Populism and xenophobia both feed on prejudice and evidence-free assertion. Actual evidence, knowledge and expertise are shrugged off as political correctness or 'establishment' thinking. Ruth Wodak in her book *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean*, has labelled the condition as 'the arrogance of ignorance'.

I believe it has special negative implications for the academy, by which I mean all academics. For a thoughtful piece on this I refer you to an article by John Morgan in the 3 November issue of *Times Higher Education*, entitled 'The problems of populism: tactics for Western universities'. I believe that now, more than any time in our recent past, Ireland and the rest of the world needs our universities, our institutes and other colleges; we need knowledge and respect for knowledge; we need the capacity for critical thought and analysis; we need higher education institutions and academics that are, as is guaranteed by law, committed to questioning and testing received wisdom, putting forward new ideas and stating controversial and unpopular opinions, and above all we need government and the institutions to work in a constructive way, mutually to support the common good and the democratic foundations of society.

At the outset I would like to contextualise my position by illustrating in particular the compelling need for such a constructive relationship in the economic arena. The value of higher education, of course, transcends the economic domain but, equally, economic success can be a foundation for development for both society and individuals. Ireland now faces extraordinary economic challenges. If we don't address these successfully the adverse consequences run the risk of diminishing our economic and social wellbeing. Our economic development model has to

address the consequences of the stressed relationship between the EU and the UK, the assault on our taxation policies as well as the changes to the international order flagged by the Presidential Election in the US. The quality of our well-educated work force is one of our key international comparative and competitive advantages.

It is because I believe in the centrality of higher education and research to our wellbeing, and because I believe that the relationship in Ireland is at present fractured in important ways and must be recalibrated, that I want to concentrate this evening on that relationship. When I speak of 'government' I encompass the political and the administrative arms. I speak as a private citizen, but also from the perspective of 38 years as a civil and public servant, 22 of which I have spent in the education system. I will dwell on three aspects of the relationship –

- the underlying attitudes to higher education held by government;
- the push for more regulation at the expense of institutional autonomy; and
- the absence of joined-up government when it comes to the teaching and research missions of the sector.

But although I will argue that the relationship between higher education and government is fractured, this lecture is not a counsel of despair. I will also focus on what I see as solutions to the problems I identify – some of which are actually already at hand, and have great potential if worked well. However, my final thought to you will be that it would be the height of folly for us, in this vulnerable moment, not to act.

Attitudes to higher education institutions and implications

It will come as no surprise to anyone here that I consider education, at all levels, to be one of the essential and overarching duties and responsibilities of government. It is through education that we can create a successful society, and the economy that supports the services we need, such as health, security and welfare support. It is education that gives people the opportunity to develop their skills and talents. Studies by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have repeatedly demonstrated that better educated people are healthier, and in general are more committed citizens.

While I see education at all levels as a priority, I want to focus on higher education and on the relationship between the political system, government and higher education institutions. I don't need to recount the number of government reports and white and green papers that emphasise the importance of higher education and research to Ireland's success, social and economic. You've all read them, at least the executive summaries. And many of you have even contributed

to their development. So, government gets it – higher education and research are good for us. For our people; for our society; for our culture and for our economy.

And yet it is my general experience that there is a major contradiction evident in, on the one hand, that general view of the key importance of higher education and research and, on the other, a sense of distrust of higher education institutions and their leaders. This sense is strongest with respect to our universities, where distrust often escalates to hostility among senior officials and politicians. I do not say that this attitude is universal, but it surely exists and it is sufficiently present to impact in many, negative, ways on the sector.

I'd like to explore why this is so and the evidence for what I claim to be the impact.

Somewhat fancifully perhaps, I speculate that a large proportion of Irish people carry a 'genetic memory' of universities as places for a rich and very privileged elite – places for 'them' and definitely not for 'us', notwithstanding the present high participation rates, thus creating an inbuilt prejudice which we all have to first overcome.

More practically, it is my view that prejudice and political convenience are very much at the heart of what I see as a widely prevailing hostility. For instance, university presidents and professors are often regarded as arrogant and self-regarding. It may be that self-confidence and assertiveness are misconstrued as arrogance, especially to the ear of a person who already has an inbuilt prejudice, or it may be that this is a handy ploy to dismiss valid viewpoints. But in any case, in my experience the presidents and academic staff are no more 'arrogant' than your average senior politician or civil or public servant, which I was myself until recently.

In exploring why there are negative attitudes to higher education institutions, quality – and especially the quality of the student experience – is hugely important. I will comment on three aspects. First it is relevant to note that just over 50% of those elected to Dáil Éireann at the last election had a university qualification. As the average age of Deputies is 50 years, the experience of many of them is some decades old. I was a contemporary of some, and if my own experience is a guide then I suspect that the experience left them unimpressed as to the quality of many lecturers and their perceptions of how lecturers use their time.

The second aspect I'd refer to is that, given their social and economic status, it is certain that the majority, probably the vast majority, of the children and/or grandchildren of these politicians have attended, or are attending, higher education institutions. What is their experience of the quality of engagement that they chat about in their homes?

The third aspect is anecdotal. I have heard some criticism from senior civil and public servants who attend at professional development programmes of the poor quality of what they experience. These are mature, sophisticated learners in a position to influence attitudes to higher education. Their bad experience is an avoidable own goal by the institutions, but a bigger concern is what does it say about quality more generally for all students?

I am confident that things HAVE changed for the better in terms of the quality of the teaching and learning experience of students since I was a student. Initiatives like the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning have made and continue to make an important contribution to this. But institutions must ensure a constant focus on the quality of the student experience, especially that of teaching and learning, and find ways to communicate effectively and demonstrate how academic staff resources are utilised to the full. Otherwise, the many prejudices are reinforced.

I believe that, in addition to ensuring the quality of the student experience and outcomes, the higher education institutions need to do much more than they are currently doing to combat ignorance and prejudice by demonstrating to their immediate community and wider afield the enormous contribution they actually make. It is a mistake to assume that, because Irish society generally has a high regard for education, this regard extends automatically to the education institutions. I see little or no evidence that universities particularly, and to a lesser extent other higher education institutions, have built the coalitions of support that most schools at primary and post-primary levels have.

In many ways, the institutions contribute to reinforcing prejudices. Probably the single greatest contribution is when they depart from agreed norms, terms and conditions. These departures are evident in the payment of unauthorised allowances, in promotions systems that are opaque even to the academics themselves, in the endowment of titles, in unauthorised pension payments which are widely regarded as wildly generous and in a consistent inability to demonstrate convincingly what academic staff do with their working time. I could go on, but I think you get the picture.

In each of the situations where issues like these arise, it is senior people in the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform who get to deal with them. Small wonder then if sometimes they feel that the institutions see public sector regulation as an inconvenience to be gamed and circumvented whenever possible. The sad irony of course is that such departures amount to but a tiny fraction of the activity of the institutions and an even tinier fraction of budgets – but we're talking prejudice and how it gets reinforced.

And the institutions play well to the prejudice that they are overly indulged bastions of privilege and inefficiency and that they are bottomless pits into which any amount of public resource can be poured with nothing to show for it but demands for more, self-serving competition and self-promotion. The universities in our close neighbour England seem hell-bent on proving this. Having hiked up college fees to an eye-watering £9,000, many of them seek more in the cause of 'quality'. It is very difficult to make any direct connection between the resources expended to educate a student and the quality of that education, although all will agree that there has to be a relationship. Higher education in the past did itself no credit by seeking an ever-increasing share of public resources. If the cuts to the higher education budgets in recent years have demonstrated anything, it is to reinforce a perception that quality higher education can be provided at significantly lower cost than before the recession – a position which would have

been vehemently challenged by higher education leaders in advance of the cuts. This attitude now plays all too conveniently into the hands of a government system that either cannot or will not make decisions about how we can sustainably fund higher education and research. Higher education, they assert, is 'over-funded', with an insatiable appetite for financial resources, and the institutions could not be 'trusted' with tuition fees if these were introduced.

I should add a footnote here. It is beyond any doubt that the cuts to funding pose an existential threat to some of our institutions.

The hostility I have spoken of, and the reasons for it that I have sought to explore, is not an abstract debating point. I am convinced that it has had, and continues to have, the most profound consequences for the sector. In a speech to the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) in September 2015 I pointed to evidence that appeared to show that higher education had been uniquely singled out among public services for the most swingeing funding cuts. I instanced then that over the period 2007/8 to 2014/15, there had been a decline in state grants for higher education of 38%, with overall funding of higher education falling by 13.5% while student numbers increased by 25%. This resulted in funding per student falling by 22% in a five-year period. As further evidence of disproportionality, real expenditure per student at second level in 2003 was 74.2% that of third level, but by 2013 real expenditure per student at second level had surpassed that at third level.

In the same period, approximately 2,000 staff were removed from the sector despite student numbers rising by 22%. As a result, the staff–student ratio decreased to 1:19, while the OECD average is 1:14. I then highlighted the approach to other sectors of the public service in terms of employment numbers:

While the commitment to reducing public sector expenditure has been resolute, a case has always been made to protect those on the 'front line' delivering those essential public services that will protect the nation's health, education and security. This has meant, for example, that while overall public sector employment numbers have decreased by 10% over the period 2008 to 2014:

- The number of active registered nurses has fallen by only 6%
- The number of doctors has remained relatively static, falling by only 1%
- The number of primary school teachers has actually increased by 5%
- The number of post-primary teachers has decreased by 9%.

And frontline academic staffing numbers were not protected. Again, I quote from my September 2015 speech:

This would be acceptable if the practitioners of higher education were protected within this cohort, with non-academic resources bearing the brunt of the cuts, in the same way as the doctors, nurses and teachers were protected within wider health and education budgets. However, this has not been the case, and we have actually seen an identical decline in the number of academic staff in the sector of 13%.

And the discrimination continues!

- In the continuing and damaging employment control framework.
- In the sometimes bizarre interpretations of pensions provisions.
- In the refusal by the competent Departments to recognise that allowances need to be paid in certain circumstances if colleges are to have any effective management structures (although I'm happy to note some movement on this recently).
- We see the continuing refusal to allow institutes of technology to borrow, even within a restrictive framework agreed with the HEA, even though we all know the benefit such a capacity has brought to the university sector to cope with several years of negligible capital investment in the sector.
- We see higher education institutions routinely shut out from negotiating national pay agreements and their interests ignored because it is expedient in getting agreement with other sectors, including other parts of the education system, who, quite frankly, can exercise more industrial relations muscle with government and sympathy with the wider public.

And instead of making a case for increased investment in higher education and research, politicians routinely demand more 'efficiency' and point to alleged extravagance and excess in the sector. It is no wonder that the same politicians can claim that there is no public appetite for more resources for the sector. There isn't, because politicians from successive governments, and indeed opposition parties, have refused to make the case for the sector and its needs with any sense of conviction.

I am reminded of the Brexit campaign. Having put it about for years that the EU was some monstrous bureaucracy with a net cost to the average British taxpayer, was it any wonder that the Cameron government failed in a few months to convince enough of the electorate that this was not so? If we are to find a way to fund our higher education system sustainably, people need to be informed of the reality and educated as to the options and the consequences. Absent the strong sectional interests, and broad community support, evident at primary and post-primary levels, this will require political leadership. I wish the work of the Education Committee well as they consider the Cassels Report, but ultimately the issue demands political leadership and the expenditure of political capital.

So, there are negative, even hostile, attitudes to higher education institutions and these attitudes have real consequences. The sector needs to know that and work for positive change. The institutions and their leaderships, including their representative bodies, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), need to do a great deal more to inform people of their value and their needs. At the same time, those at influential levels in the system of government need to review their attitudes and work to overcome the negatives.

Autonomy and regulation

I would now like to turn to what I see as the drift towards greater regulation of the higher education sector, with a concomitant weakening of institutional autonomy. I acknowledge that this is a trend in many countries, driven in large part by the central role higher education systems now play in successful economies and their closer engagement with government and stakeholders. However, there is I believe a driver very particular to Ireland, to which I will return.

As a matter of law, enacted by the Oireachtas, the governance of the higher education system rests on an interlocking structure of roles, responsibilities and accountabilities, with the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Committee of Public Accounts (PAC) at its apex. Each institution has a governing body, which is, as a matter of law, ultimately responsible for all the activities of the institution. Each has a president who is accountable to the governing body in the first instance but also to the PAC, as the accountable person for the financial management of the institution. Overseeing this system of institutional governance is the Higher Education Authority (HEA), with its accountability to the Minister for Education and Skills, and the PAC. It is the duty of the HEA to ensure that each institution conducts its affairs in accordance with the requirements of good governance and public sector good practice. To that end, the HEA has published detailed requirements and guidelines which the institutions are required to follow.

This infrastructure of accountability operates within a very particular legal and statutory context. In particular, the Universities Act 1997 provides that a university, in performing its functions, is *entitled* to regulate its affairs in accordance with its independent ethos and traditions and the traditional principles of academic freedom. It also provides that if, in the interpretation of the Act, there is a doubt regarding the meaning of any provision, a construction that would promote that ethos and those traditions and principles must be preferred to a construction that would not so promote. This right or entitlement is not without boundaries. The university has to have regard to, *inter alia*, the effective and efficient use of resources and its obligations as to public accountability.

These are no legislative window dressings or fine phrases. They are core to the relationship between higher education institutions and the government system. They are words that were hard fought for by the universities, with considerable public and political support at the time the Universities Act was being enacted. They go to the heart of one of the strengths of our higher education system – the autonomy of the institutions to manage their internal affairs, and the balancing accountability that comes with that autonomy. This structure of institutional autonomy, matched with accountability, was strongly endorsed in the National Strategy for Higher Education, 2015 – a Strategy initiated by one government and endorsed by its successor composed of different political parties. Any attempt by the HEA, or others, to curtail or undermine that autonomy is illegal and in practice it will do nothing to enhance public accountability. If institutional autonomy is to be diluted, and I believe it should not be, then this needs to be done following consultation and debate about the implications and by way of legislative amendment

to ensure full public accountability. It should not be made by creeping regulatory encroachment. I said earlier that I believe that there may be a driver of increased regulation very particular to Ireland. I characterise it as the impact of increased politicisation of the public accountability system. As I have said, the pinnacle of the public accountability system is the Committee of Public Accounts, known to all as the PAC – an acronym that can strike something close to terror into the heart of any sentient senior civil or public servant. Through the PAC, there is ultimate accountability from those entrusted with the allocation and use of monies provided by taxpayers for the stewardship of those monies. To be most effective, the PAC must operate with public accountability as its core, maybe its only, driver. Although it is formed from members of the Houses of the Oireachtas, it is not a political body in a party-political sense – reflected in the fact that the chair is drawn from the Opposition.

All too often in my experience, members of the PAC have either misunderstood or refused to acknowledge the autonomy of higher education institutions and the interconnected roles and responsibilities for accountability. Whatever the issue, they frequently have reserved their sharpest criticism and interrogation for the HEA and/or the Departments present at their hearings. In doing so, members have often adopted an interpretation of the regulatory role of the HEA that could be realised only through the HEA having direct involvement and management of the internal affairs of the institution. An outcome from this approach is that the government system reaches for more control of the institutions, more regulation, in the belief that this will prevent mismanagement and mis-governance and limit their future exposure to public criticism. In this they are wrong. In an enterprise involving annual expenditures of the order of two billion euro, things will go wrong. And when they do, the more control the HEA/DES have over the institution concerned, the more they will be held responsible. And so more regulation will be the response in a vicious cycle, gradually eroding the very autonomy that is such a strength of our system.

Everyone involved, from the political system, civil and public servants, the media and others, needs to respect and reassert the provisions of the law and, especially, their underlying informing principles and motivations. Higher education institutions must be held fully and constructively to account for their failings, as must the HEA where the failing is theirs. But we should avoid confusion of roles and responsibilities. Grandstanding at the PAC does not serve the interests of public accountability and is more likely to undermine the effectiveness of our higher education system.

A word of caution here to the higher education institutions, their leadership and staff. Do not seek to confuse academic freedom with institutional autonomy. No one is taken in, least of all the system of government, which bristles at what is perceived as academic snobbery and arrogance. And avoid the hazards of hubris. Institutional autonomy is a shield, not a sword. Its assertion must be honestly expressed in the interests of the institution, and it must be cognisant of circumstance and consequence – for the institution itself and for the entire higher education sector.

Research and teaching missions

The third issue I want to explore is the relationship between the research and the teaching missions of higher education. A 'whole of government' approach is a phrase much employed in the public sector to ensure greater effectiveness and efficiency. It is my view that it is sadly lacking in the case of research and the higher education institutions.

By common consent the most valuable – and by far the largest in number terms – outcome from higher education is the educated graduates. Each year the vast majority of graduates are from level 7 and 8 programmes. In 2015 almost 38,000 graduated at levels 7 and 8, while just under 13,000 graduated at levels 9 and 10, of which 1,429 were PhD graduates. So, three-quarters of the graduates from our system are from undergraduate programmes. These, overwhelmingly, are the people with the skills needed to attract foreign investment, empower indigenous companies and give reality to positioning Ireland as a high value-added economy. As such they should be the priority focus of government – all of government – but especially with the departments entrusted with policy for jobs, education and training. There are two key departments, the DES and Jobs Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI). And so, one would expect a harmonious bipartisanship between them. That is not my experience.

For instance, given the importance of graduates to the jobs, enterprise and innovation agenda, it has been a surprise to me that I've seen no evidence that DJEI has given consistent and impactful support to the resource needs of higher education, at either official or political levels. Their support could be crucial, and it would serve their own mission and objectives. But of course, given the siloed character of the public finances, they have no responsibility for higher education funding – that's the job of the DES.

While I've seen no evidence of support for the teaching and learning role of higher education, I have seen evidence of policies and actions which undermine the very outcome DJEI should most seek. For instance, the inadequate financial overhead that accompanies research funding from agencies such as Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) means that more of the resources that would and should go to teaching are diverted to support research, thus further undermining the quality of the undergraduate experience and ultimately the quality of our graduates. And of course these are also the graduates who will form the backbone of the postgraduate and research missions of institutions.

And DJEI acts to promote the research mission over the teaching mission of institutions in more overt ways that would have perverse consequences. Year after year a case is made by DJEI, and has to be rebutted each time, that a significant part of the dwindling core grant should be diverted for research and into its budget. In addition, I have witnessed over the years a

recurring and concerted effort, with the apparent support of DJEI, to divorce research completely from the universities and institutes and hive it off to specialised research centres. In support of such moves, much is made of the connection between research and innovation and of the direct employment impact of research investment. Both are overstated and lack strong evidence. What cannot be overstated is that the primary return on the investment made in research in our higher education system is skilled graduates at both degree and postgraduate levels – the people who have the skills to fill jobs, to create new enterprises and to be in the vanguard of social and economic innovation.

A clear example of this departmental battle of wits was the transfer of the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTLII) to DJEI. For now, the worst implications of this are mitigated by the fact that the HEA still administers the programme.

I don't wish to appear a critic of the committed and talented people in the DJEI. The fact is that they are prisoners of a government system that says if I have responsibility for a function of government then I promote it with the utmost zeal, seek maximum funding from a stressed Exchequer and leave others to worry about consequences across those government activities that are THEIR responsibility.

If the tug-of-war over research and the resources applied to it was just a source of irritation to my colleagues and me, and clearly it has been to me, it could be shrugged off. But it is wasteful of time which could otherwise be put to better policy development use; it creates unnecessary and wasteful tensions and confusion within the Higher Education sector and between it and government; it further erodes the quality of teaching; and it undermines what should be, and could be, one of the strongest cross-departmental relationships in a 'whole of government' environment – that between the department responsible for education and training and the department responsible for employment.

The desired outcome is obvious. The departments need to work together in a shared, collaborative space. Even with the best will in the world this clearly is far easier said than done, and even the appointment of a Junior Minister for Research and Innovation with a base in each Department has not greatly eased the problem.

So, I am led to the conclusion that the answer is to combine higher education and research under one ministry. There are three options. The RIA has itself proposed a Minister for Higher Education and Research. The argument is sound and has many precedents internationally. However, I have a reluctance to break up what should be a continuity of education from pre-school to post-doctoral, and there is no guarantee that such continuity could be maintained through close collaboration between the DES and a new Department for Higher Education and Research.

Another alternative is to transfer responsibility for higher education to the DJEI. Again, this gives me a concern about a whole of education approach and the lack of effective cross-departmental collaboration, with a risk that it would extend what I see as a dysfunctional, but

currently limited, inter-departmental relationship across the entire education system. It also suffers, in my view, from the impression that higher education is primarily an economic imperative – it is that, but it is much more and our reputation internationally would not be enhanced by such a move.

The third, and my preferred approach, is to transfer responsibility for research, except for specialist areas, to the DES. I can anticipate the opposition. Education, as the alleged ‘Department of schools’, could not be ‘trusted’ with research. Well, in fairness to my old Department, it has done a pretty good job of our education system as a whole since the foundation of the State. And which Department, with the HEA, introduced the innovative PRTL, which not only began the programme of investment in research but also introduced such concepts, innovative at the time, as institutional research strategies and inter-institutional collaboration. The DES and the HEA also put in place the research councils for the humanities and science and technology – now the well-respected Irish Research Council (IRC).

The key issue is how resources within the education sector would be allocated in such a scenario, and the clear fact that at present, investment in primary and second-level education is prioritised over further and higher education. But this is as much down to political direction as it is to civil servants. It is hardly beyond the wit of the people concerned to find ways to ensure a fair allocation of resources or even to ring-fence certain resources to ensure that the higher education and research system receives an appropriate share of public funding. The transfer of responsibility for research, now residing in DJEI, to DES, as I propose, will ensure consistency in policy development and delivery; safeguard the key output from investment in education and research – the quality of graduates; ensure a continuum of education from policy and delivery viewpoints; and, once the rancour of the decision dies down (and civil servants are realists, so it won’t last long), there will be the capacity for a more fully collaborative, agenda-free relationship between two vital pillars of government, our society and the economy – the DJEI and the DES.

In this scenario it would be worth considering restructuring the DES. This is too big an issue to deal with in detail in this lecture, but some of the elements could be:

- A Tertiary Education Commission, as recommended some years ago by the OECD. This agency would combine all post second-level education and training under one national agency. This would address the important issue of continuity and balance between the further education and training system and higher education.
- Two major direct funders of research, SFI and the IRC, would operate in the same policy and accountability environment. It would be important to retain the current distinctive missions of both bodies.
- The capstone to the structure could be a Junior Minister with responsibility for post second-level education, training and research, with considerable authority and autonomy for this brief within government.

As a further reform I believe that government should look again at the combination of roles of Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government and Director General of SFI. There may have been arguments of economies in the arrangement during the time of fiscal crisis, but in my view they do not outweigh the argument that the present arrangements constitute a potential conflict of interests, which is not in the interests of the effective development of the wider higher education and research system. This should be done regardless of where responsibility for research policy and funding lies.

Strategic dialogue – a new dynamic

I would now like to return to what I see as the negative and damaging attitudes to higher education institutions and the encroachment on institutional autonomy, and offer a way to change the dynamic. It is the process known as 'strategic dialogue'. For the uninitiated, this is a process whereby the government on a periodic basis states the outcomes it expects from the higher education system. This is led by the DES and, through wide consultation with other Departments, a full menu of priority objectives can be developed. Once it is published, the HEA invites each Higher Education Institution (HEI) to set out in draft agreements what aspects of national objectives it proposes to address. The institution does so having regard to its core mission, its traditions and its current strengths. The draft includes the measures against which performance in the chosen objectives is to be assessed. On the basis of the drafts and the stated national objectives, the HEA negotiates a final agreement with each HEI, including the metrics to be employed to assess performance. Crucially, it is the responsibility of the HEA to ensure that the sum of all 30 or so agreements meet as fully as possible the full range of national objectives. The next phase of the process is annual review of performance against metrics, allocation of up to 7% of funding based on performance, and regular multi-annual renegotiation of the compacts.

Through this process the government has said what it wants from the overall higher education sector and the institutions know what government wants. This ends confusion, obfuscation and regular claims that the higher education institutions are not delivering what's needed and are just playing to their own agendas. To date the process has shown that the sector can deliver what government has asked for. I have been deeply impressed by the constructive and positive way in which the HEIs have engaged with this process. I do not know of any part of the public service which has so readily accepted and embraced the level of reform involved in this and in the restructuring of the sector. And they have done so at a time of deep cuts to their resources, financial and staffing.

The strategic dialogue offers an opportunity for a better relationship and a shared understanding between government and the higher education institutions, replacing anecdote and prejudice with clear demonstration of what the higher education and research system is delivering against government objectives. It gives an opportunity to government to formally guide the outcomes from the sector that policy has decided on, and it offers an instrument to drive improved performance across the sector.

The process is in its earliest days and care is needed. The objectives stated by government should be at an appropriate level and avoid prescriptive detail. They should be prioritised and not so all-embracing as to crowd out the other, and wider, objectives and activities – academic and otherwise – of the institutions. They are not mere instruments of the policies of the government of the day.

There is a risk that the process descends into form filling and gaming. I trust my former colleagues in the HEA to ensure this does not happen. But, of course, it is vitally important that the process of strategic dialogue be underpinned by a sustainable system of funding the sector, with multi-annual budgets coterminous with the compacts.

Conclusion

And so, to end where I began – the importance of higher education at this time of multiple challenges to our way of life. Another has spoken more eloquently on this than I ever could, and so I'm going to call in support of my argument the words of President Higgins.

On the occasion of the conferring on him of an Honorary Degree by the National University of Ireland in January 2012, President Higgins spoke on the theme 'The role of the university at a time of intellectual crisis'. His address is important. It is important for *what* he said, but also because of *who* was saying it, or more to the point what that person is, and was. He is our Head of State. But he was also a prominent academic in one of our universities and a politician of high standing who served as a Cabinet Minister.

Addressing what he saw as a crisis as great as or greater than that faced by Europe at the end of the 19th century, President Higgins concluded his lecture with the following:

To navigate successfully through today's troubled, uncertain and probably uncharted waters, now, more than ever before, we need vision, foresight and bold strategies; now, more than ever, an original and confident education system is needed, to help us achieve our social and economic objectives and to place us on a sustainable footing.

Since President Higgins spoke the waters have become even more troubled and uncertain. It's high time to reconsider and change attitudes; to recognise and value the treasure that is our higher education system; to act to repair the fractures in relationships so that the higher education system is all it can be, and should be, in support of the society we want to create and sustain.

My contribution this evening can be dismissed as partisan, or it can be taken as an honest perspective at least worth considering. And I am optimistic. Even if my years of experience have shown me where fault lines lie, they have also shown me that there are many fine people across government and in the institutions who are both capable of and committed to finding innovative solutions and working together in a joint enterprise to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to live and work. We have the commitment to education as a society; we have very favourable demographics; we have a high-quality higher education and research system with some of the best higher education institutions and the best academics and researchers in the world; we have dedicated and committed people in government and in the institutions; we have a higher education strategy in implementation to which there is a high level of commitment. There is a need for change, but we are in a good place and there is much to celebrate. But, as I said at the outset, my final message to you is that it would be the height of folly for us, in this vulnerable moment, not to act.

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