5 March 2021

A Chara,

I write to offer observations on the latest iteration of the state's plans for the reform of HEI governance.

The proposals are serious flawed, in the following respects:

a) They are framed as a 'one size fits all' solution to a range of institutions of varying scale, history, evolution and purposes.

b) They are framed entirely in terms of preparing the HEI sector for the future, and are supported by no observations, however carefully couched, on what existing and chronic weaknesses in governance and strategic management within the HEI sector require this radical and unilateral restructuring of governance across the board.

c) They fail to differentiate between the different strategic missions of the established universities, and of the former RTC/IT sector. The former, while mainly established to cater to regional interests – the Queens colleges in the 1840s, and the NIHEs from 1970 onwards – have long since become largely national and international in character and aspiration, but the representative character of their governing bodies remains pronouncedly local with high levels of local authority representation.

d) They address only by stealth a consequent problem which has beset the governance both of the former RTC/IT sector, and of the NUI colleges (and by inherited default also ██████████████████ ███████████). This was the unduly large number of seats provided for public representatives drawn from local authorities, the aim being to foster links between the institutions and their economic and social hinterlands. The results have frequently been undesirable (e.g. overruling of senior academic appointments and promotions in favour of lower ranked candidates), and sometimes notorious.

e) They do a great disservice to the former RTC/IT sector, which with few resources has been a key driver – I would argue more so than the

established universities – of regional and national economic development, and which have also lessened social disadvantage through enhanced access to third level education across the state.

f) They destroy one of the main benefits of the 1997 Universities Act, significant staff representation – administrative and technical as well as academic – on university authorities. Increased staff involvement in governance clearly maps on to the notable improvement in the functioning of the Irish universities, rather than the reverse. Why dilute what has been successful?

g) They greater increase the directive power of the HEA in terms not only of institutional governance and administration – vide recent troubles in ██████████████████████████████████ – but of research and academic inquiry. This is highly undesirable.

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