

Defining the idea of a University

From what, you may well wonder, does the university need defending?

There is now widespread consensus across the educational and political worlds that the Irish university system is in some sort of crisis. There is also a new wisdom emerging around the remedies that are called for. These include a much closer link with industry/business/enterprise -- whatever you wish to call it -- and a call that students will need to pay the full economic cost of their education eventually. Is that the only or the best alternative?

Barely a month ago, a meeting of academics and university support staff at Dublin City University (DCU), launched a Charter in Defence of the Irish University (defendtheuniversity.ie).

The campaign very rapidly spread across the university system in Ireland and further afield and quickly gathered over 700 signatories and impressive statements in support of the principles enunciated in the charter. The two main unions organising staff in the universities - Siptu and IFUT -- lent their support. But this was not a typical trade union campaign around pay and conditions. Rather, it was engaging in a battle of ideas on what a university is, or should be.

For those lecturing, researching or providing support for those functions, there are many areas of concern in today's Irish university. The Employment Control Framework is creating serious strains on the teaching side and will, inevitably, lead to a diminution in quality, quite apart from reducing student choice.

The drying up of research funding cannot really be replaced by private sector investment, which is inevitably focused on very particular needs, and expects a subsidy from the university sector.

The increasing turn towards outsourcing for the support services a university requires will diminish the knowledge base and create divisions among staff.

Everyone who works at a university understands that the institution does not exist to keep academics in a job, contrary to popular misconceptions. Most would believe it exists to generate knowledge, help tackle the social problems we face and produce educated, dynamic and inquisitive graduates. What we see, instead, is a narrowing of this mission and a turn towards a much more instrumental role, serving only private sector research and personnel agendas.

The big issues seem to be fading away. We seem to have a new model university creeping in by default, with no real debate or even understanding of the underlying issues.

University management seems to be turning more and more towards the law to stifle dissent and keep its staff in line with the new order. In 2010, the universities gave employers group Ibec EUR 389,543 in membership fees alone to help them fight staff claims.

Since 2006 the universities have, in addition, paid out an average of Euro 2.7 million per year in legal costs and two thirds of this was spent in cases against their own staff. In February 2013, *The Sunday Business Post* revealed that the seven universities had spent more than EUR 12 million on legal fees in a four-year period.

University staff are promoting a charter outlining ten basic principles which lay down key markers to help develop a new shared understanding of what the Irish university is, and is not.

It starts by exploring what it means to be a "public good" like health or culture. It questions whether our students should be seen as "customers" or "consumers" rather than as educated citizens. It considers the value of collegiality, sometimes forgotten in the era of the new managerialism.

The basic question it poses is whether we all -- higher education professionals, but also concerned citizens -- think the university can be run according to the same business logic as a profit-making enterprise, or whether we should seek to follow a public service or social accountability model and logic for the university. The choice is quite stark; the consequences of the debate for our students are incalculable.

We could just go along with the new wisdom, and its vain chase after dubious rankings at home and abroad. Or we could go back to basics and ask what a university should be about.

It would be a rare business, indeed, where those in the business and who have the expertise -- academics in this case -- were not the drivers of that (re)visioning exercise. That is, arguably, the key task of the day in Irish higher education.

We need a free and open debate beyond the narrow parameters currently on offer. Debates have opened up online around key issues such as managerialism, the funding of research, online teaching and casualisation.

This will lead to a national conference in the new year at which all the alternatives to a status quo which is not delivering will be considered. The charter promoters are asking the university presidents and the Irish University Association to subscribe to its basic principles, and to join in an open debate on the future of the Irish university.

"Technology is not in the driving seat; people are. Institutions and stakeholders have options". This was the conclusion of a recent British report, Horizon Scanning: What Higher Education Will Look Like in 2020, in terms of the strategic choices we now need to make. There are always alternatives.

Ronnie Munck is a lecturer in DCU. The Defend the Irish University campaign will be launched by Jens Vraa-Jensen, Chair of the European Higher Education and Research Standing Committee, at Buswell's Hotel, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2 at 11.30am tomorrow