



Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills 22 November 2016

The **precipitous decline** in funding for Ireland's third level sector over the last ten years has been well-documented. As student numbers have risen by more than 30%, the sector has experienced a concurrent drop of 22% in funding, which has resulted in a real reduction in funding to third level of 40%. In the last five years, funding for third level students has continued to **drop below that provided for students in secondary education**. At my own university, Trinity College, 10 years ago we derived 80% of our funding from the Exchequer and have seen this cut to 40%. To combat this, universities have streamlined operations, reduced costs, and increased levels of funding from non-exchequer sources such as philanthropy. **This is not only unsustainable, but unacceptable if we as a nation are to value our not only our education system, but also our children's futures.** Moreover, this situation is set to deteriorate further in the coming years with student numbers expected to rise by a third by 2028!

As a nation we have always had a deep understanding of the **value of education**. And for good reason. Education, and third level education in particular, not only provides the **single biggest economic return** both to the State and to the individual¹, it provides the nation with its greatest resource – **a well-educated populace**. Ireland's future prosperity, our ability as a small nation to be recognised on the world-stage for our science, our art, our diplomacy and for our courage in expressing societal values is largely dependent on the **quality and breadth of the education** we provide in our schools and colleges. It is in our third level that our young citizens hone the skills of scholarship, enquiry and creative thinking and through the third level that we embody our potential as a nation for **innovation and societal transformation**.

Much is made of the relative caution with which we approach the metrics of **rankings**. We must accept, however, that even if imperfect they are the metric by which employers, investors and Irish and overseas students **judge the quality** of their potential interactions with the 3rd level sector. Prior to austerity Irish universities punched so well above their weight and were **truly world-class universities**. While rankings are imperfect and dependent on a large number of factors, however, many of these are within our control and there is an **indisputable correlation between investment in universities and performance**. Government policy, particularly since the economic downturn, has actively constrained the sector, the results of which are plain to see as our universities continue to slide down the international rankings. Newspaper articles have claimed that we should lower our expectations, but would we ask our children to lower theirs? **We might be a small country, but that does not mean we should have small ambitions.**

Universities are now recognised as **the engines of modern economies**; generating talent, engaging with enterprise, creating new ideas and the technologies of tomorrow. Universities are Ireland's frontline in an intense global competition for talent and ideas. Our national ambitions are embodied in Innovation 2020 which details the investment needed for Ireland to become **a technology leader**. The entire Innovation 2020 strategy assumes a well-resourced and fully-functional third-level sector.

Despite this, the years of austerity and crumbling infrastructure have brought the Irish university system to its knees – a crisis heightened by the emergence of protectionist ideologies in the nations that closely surround us. Given these uncertainties it is imperative that we create our own **innovation corridor**, bridging this divide with like-minded nations. As a small open economy we can only compete in an increasingly complex world and realise Ireland's global ambition by **fully developing our human capital** for both national benefit and to increase the urgent demand for Irish talent, skills and creativity in a globalised world. We must embrace open innovation, open science and remain open to the world. In order for this strategy to be successful, however, we need to ensure that we can **compete as equals**



and maintain our image as a dynamic, knowledge-driven, small but powerful nation. A country **worthy of collaboration**, not competing as the underdog. Without the requisite research infrastructure our researchers cannot compete, without excellence in teaching we cannot accomplish our mission to 'nurture' the creative mind. With our corporation tax advantage being eroded and the emergence of trade barriers jeopardising our position as a European hub, maximising the potential of our indigenous talent to innovate, to collaborate as equals across Europe in search of societal and technological breakthrough, this must be our core strategy. There is no plan B.

As parents we are heavily vested in primary and secondary education, taking active roles in schoolwork and extra-curricular activities. Not so for 3rd level. Admission to a University is often seen as the end of the journey, the culmination of hard work; rather than an important critical step on the path of life-long learning. The Public's unjustified confidence in the health of the 3rd level sector and a resulting failure to support it will have **profound and negative consequences for all of our children, even beyond those seeking a degree**. Consider our aspirations for children that may never complete primary or second-level? We hope for them to develop a love of learning regardless of level, to be valued, to reach their potential and to take their place in diverse, creative and self-reflective society, in a country that aspires to be first among equals. Irish universities have taken great strides in opening our university doors to **learners from all walks of life**. Without proper investment we risk reversing this trend turning 3rd level education back to being the exclusive **domain of the privileged**. It is the **creation of these societal foundations** that are the remit of the Universities, beyond degrees. The quality of our Universities, their standard of learning, academic rigor, capacity for transformative innovation, their ability for engagement and service to communities at every level is a **symbol of our societal health**. That we do these things well reflects our values as a Nation.

In continually failing to address these disconnects, we risk turning our universities into nothing more than degree mills, churning out **inadequate qualifications**. We have to ask ourselves the hard question of **what value we place on education in our society**. And then, we have to work to correct years of chronic underinvestment and ill-conceived policy decisions that have essentially crippled our third level sector before the damage is all but irreversible. What we need now is a holistic view of education, one that recognises the benefits it provides to the State and to the individual.

The 3rd level sector is in desperate need of investment, not additional funding. Investment means carefully examining the outcomes for individual students and the State. Investment means not rewarding HEIs based solely on student's numbers (as we currently do), but to include outcomes that reflect quality, for example, the levels of non-Exchequer funding, patents, licences and spinouts. For students the outcome needs to focus on the capacity to secure suitable employment. The Cassells' Report correctly recommends that a component of this investment should be in the form of income-contingent loans. Students will be required to repay loans only if they materially benefit for their undergraduate degree.

What investment do Universities require?

- At minimum, EU regional-levels of Research **Infrastructure** including digital infrastructure;
- Development of **human capital** to decrease the staff / student ratio, deliver increased student contact time and mentorship, for supervision and to deliver research-led teaching;
- Universities need to further **develop expertise** to support continuous renewal of curricula and assessment of competencies and we need new blood for the creation of ideas;
- Investment in physical infrastructure to accommodate the physical needs of students/ staff already in the system, during austerity our **buildings, labs and classrooms** have been degraded;



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- Considering the changing nature of learning we need capital investments that support participatory approaches to both learning and engagement and to improve the exposure of students to **high-quality modern** laboratory techniques.

Simply stated, without a completely new approach to investment in third level we will never reach our true potential as a people or as a society.

Vice President and Dean of Research

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