

“Investing in National Ambition: a Strategy for Funding Higher Education, Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education”

Dr. Michele O'Dwyer, Associate Dean, Director MBA Programmes, Kemmy Business School,
University of Limerick.

As a member of the Dept. of Management and Marketing in the University of Limerick, I teach entrepreneurship, innovation and marketing to undergraduate, postgraduate and executive students. Education in this context is characterised by the saying “running to stand still”, with dynamic inputs such as evolving learning styles and technologies on one hand and changing employer demands and industry opportunities on the other hand. This combination of evolving inputs demands continuous innovation demands continuous resource renewal.

The reduction in funding of the third level sector in recent years has impacted third level students, graduates and Ireland in many ways, three of which I would like to highlight today:

First, the Student Experience: Minimising the impact of resource reduction on the Student Experience has been fundamental to University activities and practices during the past decade. Increased student numbers and correspondingly worse staff-students ratios have resulted in a number of inevitable consequences, some of which include larger classes; reduced numbers of tutorials; reduced time to devote to individual students; reduced programme offerings such as electives and specialist modules; and reduced introduction of new programmes to meet new economic, technological, scientific, social, and regulatory imperatives. These challenges impact both the current student experience and the ‘future proofing’ of student learning.

Second, Research Impact: An increased workload results in academics having less time to devote to translational research which addresses scientific, industrial, technological and societal issues; it starves innovation and stifles knowledge transfer. This affects academics in their individual/professional capacity, which in turn affects the reputation of Irish universities as has been reflected in the recent university rankings. Irish universities have become less attractive for international investment and funding opportunities; less attractive to leading international academics; less attractive to international students; and with less opportunity to locate cutting edge companies beside research centres of excellence.

Third, Ireland's Future: The funding challenges of the past decade have curtailed maintenance and development of what was an adequate hard and soft third level infrastructure. Lack of investment/reduced investment in technology and other learner supports has affected teaching, making it much more difficult to innovate pedagogically in

line with our students' environment. Students are working with facilities, equipment and technologies which are neither world class nor best in class. In addition, insufficient funding limits faculty engagement in current debates in international settings. Their absence at the forefront of developing knowledge and technology means that although they can facilitate learning for today, they are not sufficiently equipped to facilitate learning for tomorrow. This directly impacts the competitiveness of Ireland, influencing our ability to attract FDI and our economic stability.