



Running university is serious business for Trinity's provost

Patrick Prendergast is well aware of the importance of money in education and of having a good business model



Pamela Newenham

Educators often bristle at the thought of evaluating universities as businesses, and incorporating business models into higher education, but Trinity College Dublin provost Patrick Prendergast is different.

While he is quick to point out the main function of a university is to educate, he recognises the importance of money and having a good business model. Like other businesses, TCD must also analyse revenue and expenses, allocate money appropriately and balance its books.

"It costs €300 million a year to run the institution. Generally speaking that cost has been rising. We have had ruthless cost-cutting throughout the organisation and, with salary cuts, we have seen a dip in the total spend of the university."

Prendergast, who was a professor of bio-engineering at the college before being elected as provost, says half of Trinity's money comes from government, while the rest is private funding from student fees, investment income, philanthropy and alumni donations.

"Government investment in higher education has come under more pressure due to austerity. To maintain the quality of our education, we've had to find other ways to make up the difference in our income. Alumni fundraising and friends of the college is a big source of income, less than 10 per cent, but still important."

"Funding that comes indirectly from endowment, which is Trinity's investment fund, would be about 2 per cent of our annual recurrent spend. It is an important objective to increase endowment income because that's the way to secure the future of universities around the world and Trinity is no exception."

He says the Trinity endowment is vital to the financial stability of the college, as it reduces the university's dependency on State funding.

Fortunately, the market value of the endowment is on the rise, increasing from €120 million in 2008 to €144 million this year, achieving a total return of 11.7 per cent for the year to June 30th last.

Like every business, TCD is constantly monitoring its image and branding, and, in recent months, has been carrying out a review.

Prendergast says third-level institutions such as Oxford, Harvard, Yale and the Sorbonne all have global brands, but Trinity doesn't. The university is exploring tinkering with its historic logo and title, with any changes expected to be brought in before the launch of TCD's strategic plan next year.

"I personally think Trinity is a key word and a very successful name. One of the issues we face globally is that the word college often is used to mean secondary school. When we work in Asia, we have to emphasise University of Dublin as there is confusion."

Online education

"Nobody says Harvard University, they just say Harvard. Maybe Trinity should be the same. It's not something we are doing for the sake of it. We are doing it because it brings value to our students and to our country to have a university that's widely recognised."

Prendergast believes growth of online learning has the capacity to revolutionise how students learn, and to increase access to high-quality higher education.

The university is exploring the disruptive potential of online education, and has partnered with Semester Online. Through a live state-of-the-art virtual classroom, students can participate in discussions, attend lectures and collaborate with peers.

On the broader issue of university capacity in Ireland, he does not believe seven universities is too many for a country the size of the Republic, nor that Trinity should be

merged with UCD.

"The Minister for Education and Skills Ruairi Quinn said it was neither desirable nor feasible to do such a thing and I'm glad he said that because I think it isn't desirable."

Reputation for innovation

"The idea of a merger to create some sort of super university would actually be detrimental to the future of Irish higher education and wouldn't serve the students of the country well. The students of the country should have diverse institutions to attend."

"It is good to have competition between UCD and Trinity. That said, Trinity and UCD collaborate more than any two other universities in this country, as evidenced by joint projects, joint research papers, joint courses and joint awards. On the ground, there is extensive collaboration between UCD and TCD."

He says Trinity's next step is to build on its reputation for innovation, with the launch this week of the strategy for innovation and entrepreneurship.

"The strategy on innovation and entrepreneurship aims to support the creation of more than 160 start-up companies over the next three years. These start-ups will be a mixture spin-outs, spin-ins, and student and graduate enterprises."

"The university is the natural convergence point for the city's tech, cultural and creative industries, and we want to support their development, as well as to facilitate the emergence of new enterprises in these growth sectors."

"Trinity wants to do for Dublin what Stanford has done for Silicon Valley, what MIT has done for Boston, what Imperial has done for London."

He says it is very unusual to see well-established universities such as Trinity located in the centre of a capital city.

"This is a fortunate thing because many industries locate in the centres of capital cities. Trinity is located right by a hub of activity in the tech sector."

The university is contributing significantly to new business, with more than 20

per cent of all Irish spin-out companies now stemming from the campus.

"In the past two years, eight Trinity spin-out companies have attracted almost €60 million in venture capital investment," he notes. "One spin-out company was Identigen, which did the genetics that identified the horsemeat scare earlier this year."

The college also has an incubator for undergraduate start-ups, called Launchbox, which has received funding to the amount of €100,000 from 10 Trinity alumni.

Prendergast is also focussed on the financial future of the college, and recently hosted a Trinity Global Graduate Forum to get advice from alumni. He was very disappointed at not being invited to the Irish Global Economic Forum, and so decided to create a version of his own.

"I invited 100 of our top alumni from around the world to the college. They gave us two days of their time to give us advice on how Trinity can meet some of the major challenges it faces, particularly challenges relating to financing higher education and growth."

What does he think of Elon Musk's advice to Taoiseach Enda Kenny on fostering a digital economy? The billionaire founder of Paypal and Tesla Motors said Ireland should offer engineering courses to students from all over the world, tuition-free, as there is a shortage of engineers worldwide and it would be good to create a concentration of technical talent in the country.

"The great tech centres of the world, whether it is Boston or Silicon Valley, their universities are not offering free courses. So obviously it's not the secret. There are parts of Europe where higher education is free effectively, and they are not having tech booms," Prendergast says.

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CV Patrick Prendergast

■ Name: Patrick Prendergast

■ Position: Provost of Trinity College Dublin

■ Age: 47

■ Lives: No 1 Grafton Street, Dublin 2

■ Family: Three children

■ Education: St Peter's College, Wexford, and Trinity College Dublin

■ Something you would expect: "I circumnavigated the world on a recent mission to raise Trinity's overseas profile."

■ Something that might surprise: "I listen to Florence and the Machine on my early morning walk around St Stephen's Green."

€300m

Annual cost of running Trinity College

160

Number of start-ups Trinity's strategy on innovation and entrepreneurship aims to support the creation of

€60m

Amount eight Trinity spin-out companies have attracted in venture capital investment in past two years

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