



If we want to invest in our future, we have to invest in our young people

Trinity College has a reputation, but its **provost** isn't willing to rest on that, and has plans to spread the college's influence around the world

Martha Kearns

One of the first tasks Patrick Prendergast had when he took over as head of Trinity College Dublin was to choose new wallpaper for one of the dining rooms at the Provost's home, Number One Grafton Street.

"I shouldn't really be doing this, I suppose," he says with a grin as he shows me the wallpaper and the rest of the house that has the most prestigious address in the country. But, true to the Wexford man's style, he plays down the opulence and later admits that he was only given one choice of wallpaper, but was still proud to have rubber-stamped the decision.

When Prendergast took over the role on August 1, 2011, he was the college's youngest Provost in 250 years. "I'm still young," he says with a laugh. "Well, if you can call 47 young. I think it's important to have the experience to do the job, but relative youth can be good."

Born in Enniscorthy, Prendergast is the eldest of six children and was raised outside the town in Oulart where his late father, John, ran a haulage business. The last time we met, just before he took over the role, he insisted on being called 'Paddy' and said that he did not have a "posh or elite" background and was elected

Provost not "for any snobby reason".

I wonder have the trappings of the job got to him over the past two years. "They call me Paddy the Provost now," he says, his down-to-earth attitude slightly jarring with the austere setting of the house. But he seems at home here. "I'm privileged to live in this house. Provosts have lived here for 250 years and I'm happy to continue on that tradition."

When we finally sit down in an annex off the library, Prendergast tells me he has just arrived back from "circumnavigating the globe for only the second time in my life". He has spent the past two weeks in "non-stop meetings" in Abu Dhabi, Seoul, Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, San Francisco, Seattle and New York.

Some of those meetings were with prospective students and more were with alumni groups, which the university has spent a lot of time setting up over the past two years. Other were with potential benefactors.

Selling Trinity abroad is one thing; selling Ireland is another. "It's on people's minds," he says, when asked if Ireland's economic situation is a deterrent to those thinking about donating to, or coming to study at, Trinity.

"They do ask about it; they ask about how that's affecting the funding and the quality of the education. We try to reassure them that Trinity, like other Irish universities, is keen to make up the shortfalls in government funding."

This brings us on to a recurring topic throughout our interview: government funding, or lack of it. At the moment, Trinity's public funding is 50 per cent of its total spend.

"Cuts in government funding have been worse than anyone expected. It's not just shortfalls, government funding is now set at a lower level from here on out," he says. "It has forced me to examine how the university can continue to provide globally competitive, high-quality education in a situation where there doesn't seem to be any way out in terms of increases in public funding. While some parts of the Irish economy have started to turn a corner, those parts that are in the public sector - whether it be education or health - are not turning any corner."

He said the college had to make up the funding shortfall in other ways, including through post-graduate and international student fees, philanthropy and other commercial activities.

In terms of philanthropy, his recent trip has already borne fruit. Dr Samuel Lam, a former Trinity medical student from Hong Kong, confirmed to Prendergast that he would

fund a professorship in Chinese studies, which will allow students to take Chinese as an option in a joint-honours degree from next year.

"The funding allows us to develop activity in Chinese studies, which we have wanted to do. Many universities around the world have been able to do this using public funding. We have to find a way to do it using private funding."

Around 1 or 2 per cent of the university's total spend is from investment income. Some €150 million, built up since Trinity's foundation in 1592, produces an income of around €3.5 million every year. Prendergast has plans to grow this.

"Many American universities, public and private, would have significant endowments. In some, 20 or 30 per cent of their current annual spend comes from their endowment. This is not a tradition in European universities, but I think it is going to have to be. You might get funding from an individual and you have to decide: am I going to spend it or put it into the endowment? Putting it into the endowment secures the future, spending it there and then fills a hole in the budget," he says. "These are the choices we now have to make."

Most of Trinity's 17,000 students are Irish undergraduates, whose fees are set, and paid for, by the Irish state. These students are being effectively subsidised by the postgraduate and international fee-paying students.

This brings us to the thorny subject of the re-introduction of third-level fees. While there was an appetite by former Fianna Fáil education minister Batt O'Keeffe to bring in some sort of student contribution system, the issue seems to have fallen off the radar for this government.

"Well, it's not gone off my radar, that's for sure," Prendergast says. "We have put forward proposals and the Higher Education Authority [HEA] is looking at the sustainability of the sector so, in principle, it is up for analysis."

"We have to look at undergraduate fees. It's the elephant in the room of Irish higher education. It doesn't have to be that everyone pays the maximum fee. There can be a system where the very wealthy pay the full fees, the medium-wealthy pay a lower fee and those that can't pay at all get completely subsidised."

He suggests the introduction of a grant system for those who can't afford to pay and a loan system where students can borrow the tuition fee and pay it back when their income goes above a certain threshold. This is a system similar to that in place in Australia and other countries. It was the one favoured by Batt O'Keeffe before his plans were scuppered and he did a U-turn on the issue.

"It's not trite to say that if we want to invest in our future, we have to invest in our young people. They are the ones who will be making the money, creating the businesses and providing the employment of the future. Educating them to secure our future: what could be more important?"

He says that while this government seems to be happy to leave the issue unaddressed, it

was going against the international trend, especially when public funding was reducing. "We will damage our third-level education system if we continue to reduce public funding and constrain universities on how they spend the public funding they do get," he says.

Of course, inadequate funding has knock-on effects; one of those is the college's rankings. When we last met, Trinity was doing well in international rankings lists and his aim was for it to climb higher.

Just a few weeks ago, the Times Higher Education rankings were released and showed that Trinity had fallen back 19 places while University College Dublin and University College Cork both showed gains. While it still retains its place as the country's highest-ranked university (at 129th internationally), it had been in the top 100 two years ago. Earlier this year, the QS rankings put Trinity at 61 in the world, up from 67 the previous year.

"Rankings are a bit of an emotional rollercoaster for university presidents because you go up in some and down in others. You have to take a philosophical approach to it all," says Prendergast, who is quick to point out that he is not dismissive of rankings.

"There is no doubt that rankings are important to a global university like Trinity. Some universities in Ireland dismiss the rankings, but I think we can criticise them if we like, but we can't dismiss them if we want to play on a world stage. In many ways, the rankings are becoming a kind of a surrogate for the country's education system, and the fact that there is not one Irish university in the top 50 of the QS or 100 in the Times Higher is something that people do say about us. Parents around the world will ask about the rankings," he says.

One of the other things parents will ask about, inevitably, is what kind of future their child will have after graduating from Trinity. The college is undergoing a brand review as there is the perception

- Prendergast admits it himself - that Trinity is an old university steeped in history but not exactly at the cutting edge of innovation.

However, the college now accounts for a fifth of all spin-out companies from Irish higher education institutions and is collaborating with eight of the top 10 ICT exporters in the country and eight of the top 10 medical device companies.

"It's important that we work with industry and this has progressed strongly," says Prendergast. "Trinity is about educating young people not just to be the employees of the future but to be the employers."

Last year, the university entered 100 research agreements with industry and over the past two years, eight Trinity spin-outs or licensees have attracted almost €58 million in venture capital investment.

Later this month, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Richard Bruton, will launch the college's new Innovation and Entrepreneurial Strategy which the Provost says will "further propel Trinity as a driver of innovation".

"There are many facets to the strategy, but it centres around educating our students that have a grá for it to become entrepreneurs and job creators. To take the commercial and social value out of our research and turn it into impact for society. Dublin has become something of a hub for the tech, cultural and scientific industries. It presents an opportunity for real innovation and I believe we can become a global hub in the creative and innovative space."

This, he said, was the type of activity needed to "dig ourselves [as a country] out of the hole that we are in, in economic and social terms".

There will be a physical home for the centre, but "it's not about one building. The whole college is a creative space. I want the whole college to be an incubator."

Already the college has an incubator for undergraduate start-ups, called Launchbox, which has seen ten Trinity

alumni put €10,000 each into seed funding for the initiative.

"When I was an [engineering] undergraduate in the 1980s, we thought then about either emigrating or getting a job in one of the big companies like Bord na Móna or ESB. We didn't think about starting business. Now students are beginning to think in those terms and are far more alert to the opportunities. There are more role models now, people who are pathsetters."

Another area of growth is online learning and the college recently appointed an associate dean of online education. Next year, Trinity will offer its first online course, 'Ireland in Rebellion 1798-1916', in partnership with Semester Online, a consortium of prestigious global universities.

"We have to ensure that we fully benefit from new technology to increase access to education. One way to do this is over the internet. We want to do this in a way that is compatible with our reputation. It has to be high-quality, it can't be just anything thrown up on the internet," he says.

Paddy the Provost has come a long way since his time in a dustier and darker office as vice-provost but he still has more to do. "I think we have achieved a lot over the last two years and we have more challenges to face. As I get into the job more, I've got more confidence to square up to the challenges," he says.

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Patrick Prendergast CV

Role: Provost of Trinity
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Age: 47

Family: three children:
Eimear (15), Ellis (13)
and Pierce (9)

Lives: Number One
Grafton Street

Car: walks to work

Last film: Elysium

Currently reading:
Higher Education in
America by Derek Bok

Interests: Cinema,
theatre, reading,
Wexford hurling

