



# If universities' slide isn't halted, economy will be next

Sustainable funding system needed to make Irish colleges more competitive, writes **Patrick Prendergast**

**L**AST WEEK, the Irish Universities Association convened a symposium on the state of higher education in Ireland, featuring prominent national and international experts. The message coming out was clear: our institutions of higher education deserve great credit for their resilience during austerity, but they've now reached the limit of what can be achieved without sustainable funding. Something has to be done — and quickly. By coincidence, two days after the symposium came the latest *Times Higher Education* rankings with their grim tidings: further slippage down the rankings for most Irish universities.

The rankings hammered home the conclusions of the symposium in a way we could have done without. But if they get much-needed urgency into the debate then it's a good thing. RTE News led with the story. The station's instinct was right: a declining higher education sector affects our economy, our competitiveness, our society and our graduates' employment opportunities at home and abroad.

Many feel the rankings tell an incomplete story, but they can't be dismissed. They are global standards which everyone consults — students deciding where to study, academics deciding where to teach and research, global industries looking for research partners, foreign investors deciding which countries have the necessary quality education and skilled graduates.

At the moment, we still have a higher education system well respected round the world. If we jeopardise this, we're in serious trouble because our economy is based on a reputation for high-quality education. Higher education impacts

on everything else as well as jobs. In order to address issues such as health care, education, the environment, societal integration, the role of the arts, communications among other areas, countries look to high-level research and excellent graduates.

We are lucky with our model of higher education in this country. Irish graduates enjoy the highest income return on their degrees of all OECD member states. And, although it's dismaying to slip down the rankings, we shouldn't forget that having any universities in the top 300 is a massive achievement — there are over 20,000 universities in the world, and ours are not competitively funded. If we were ranked on revenue alone we wouldn't have any universities in the Top 300. We are performing above our budgets.

To put it in perspective: Ireland has just one company in the top 300 of *Forbes' Global 2000* list of world companies — and barely (it's at 299). There are few, if any, sectors in this country performing as strongly as higher education.

However, this won't continue, as the rankings last week confirmed. We've come to the limit of our resourcefulness and of the efficiencies we can make. What last week's QS tables, revealed was that on many criteria our universities actually increased their scores, but this wasn't enough for them to increase, or even to hold, their places, because of fierce competition from Asian universities which are now massively resourced by their governments.

Phil Baty, editor of the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, put it this way: "Key East Asian nations have emerged as powerhouses in global higher education

and research, while traditional leaders including the UK, Canada and the US, risk losing significant ground in the global knowledge economy."

All Europe is facing this, but there's particular urgency in our case because we're one of the few EU countries with increased student demand. For most member states, declining birth rates mean fewer students. This isn't happening here, which is a good thing, but increasing demand coupled with decreasing funds can only bring crisis. Our plunge could be far worse than other member states.

So what to do? Luckily — and it's an enormous plus — we don't need to fix the system. In my address on Monday, I characterised our model of higher education as: diverse, competitive, collaborative, research and education-oriented, supportive of academic freedom and good governance, and publicly and privately funded (with private funding coming from commercial revenue, industry research contracts, philanthropy, and indeed fees — the so-called 'student contribution' is an unhelpful euphemism).

It's a good model — the new Asian universities are copying it. We don't need to reinvent, or even hugely amend it. We just need to tackle two issues — governance and sustainability. Responsible academic governance allows universities set their own education and research agendas and manage their own affairs. The world's top-ranking universities are characterised by such autonomy.

In the past five years academic governance in this country has come under threat. I don't believe regulations like the Employment Control Framework represent

an ideological shift towards a more *dirigiste* style of higher education; I think they were circumstantial. But we need to call a halt, remembering Edmund Burke's warning: "The true danger is when liberty is nibbled away, for expedience, and by parts." We should prize the strength and autonomy of our model and not compromise it.

And we need to create a sustainable funding system through which we can continue to run this successful model. We aren't unique in facing a funding crisis — other countries have faced it and found workable solutions. In July the Government appointed a group to examine the issue. This is hugely welcome. But the group isn't due to deliver the final module until the end of 2015, and that is, frankly, hugely worrying. We don't have the luxury of time, and on the current schedule the report will be coinciding with the run-up to the general election, so it could get lost and overlooked.

With every delay, we could continue to slip down the rankings until we have no universities left in the top 300. If that happens we will no longer be recognised globally for the quality of our education, and we could lose the international interest of mobile students, employers, investors and industrialists.

If we fall into this vicious circle it will be extremely difficult to get out of it. To safeguard the future for our young people and our country we need to act now to protect the reputation and quality of all our higher education institutions.

*Dr Patrick Prendergast is Provost of Trinity College Dublin and Chair of the Irish Universities Association*



**EDUCATION LEADER:** Patrick Prendergast, **Provost of Trinity College Dublin**

'In the past  
five years  
academic  
governance in  
this country  
has come  
under threat'