Irish universities will continue to suffer until the way research is funded changes

Patrick Prendergast

Trinity’s rankings are in the Government’s hands

The Irish Times

Revenues

In Trinity, as in other Irish universities, we try to make up the shortfall in State investment by staff working harder and by our entrepreneurial and commercial activities, as well as other revenues. But it’s clearly not enough.

It’s not just a shortage of money. Ireland doesn’t have a research strategy to help universities flourish. Public money previously used to fund original research is now used to support industry research and job creation. We should certainly use some of the research budget for this, say 50 per cent, but we should put the remaining 50 per cent into universities to be driven by individual researchers on a competitive basis.

At present, we tend only to fund what’s deemed to have industrial application with short-term goals. It’s a superficially attractive strategy. Who does not want research with impact? But this focus on industry research will reduce innovation and job creation in the long run.

Take William C. Campbell, the Trinity-educated scientist who was awarded the Nobel prize in 2015 for discoveries that prevented millions of people from going blind. This great Donegal man made his discoveries by following his interest in parasites while in Trinity and then in the United States. Most people would agree that we need more Bill Campbells - men and women driven by a passion for discovery of new knowledge. Instead, as a nation, we have largely stopped funding individuals like Campbell.

The failure to back individual researchers has, inevitably, caused a negative effect on university reputation and rankings.

Ireland has funded only a dozen such grants in three years – all by the Irish Research Council. These grants are welcome but 25 is entirely and shockingly inadequate. For thousands of Irish researchers, trained in a world of competitive scholarship, there are no national grants to compete for and that, in turn, greatly inhibits their capacity to compete for external funding.

It’s from these individuals and from their research that all else grows: the larger-scale initiatives with industry, collaborations with civil society, tackling of grand societal challenges and industry start-ups. Without the basic raw talent and the ideas that come from that, there is nothing. Ireland’s reputation in science, and Trinity’s, has dropped for this reason.

Innovation

Ireland has used tax advantages to attract investment for the past three decades, but such advantages will be eroded in the years ahead. Our talent and our capacity for innovation will, therefore, become ever-more critical to our future competitiveness as an economy.

One measure of Ireland’s slippage on research and innovation is contracts won from the European Research Council. Six out of seven Irish researchers awarded these prestigious grants in the most recent round are working in foreign universities. This shows Ireland is losing competitiveness in research.

The batteries have been run down.

There is a solution: we must radically revise our education/research strategy and commit to excellence above all else. No ifs or buts. The system must change to back universities.

The good news is that this is possible. Many countries in Europe and elsewhere have done it. Germany took action 13 years ago to reverse a decline in the rankings with a so-called excellence strategy that provided highly competitive funding for universities. And it worked, there are now eight German universities in the top 100 and 23 in the top 200.

This is not a criticism of present or past governments. Unimaginably difficult decisions had to be made over the past decade. Education was particularly hard hit – but there was suffering everywhere. Governments did what they had to do. But the world has changed again. Ireland needs to recognise that. It is time to work out a plan, integrated across several government departments, to reverse the decline in Ireland’s reputation.

Universities cannot do it all on our own but we are more than willing to work with government on a viable way forward.

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