Provost warns Trinity may be forced to cut student numbers

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The Provost of Trinity College Dublin has warned that it may have to cut its student numbers to recover its position in the international rankings.

In an interview with the Sunday Business Post, Dr Patrick Prendergast accused the government of failing to fund third-level institutions when there were “red flags up all over the place” such as Trinity’s recent fall in the international rankings.

He said Trinity had been discussing whether it needed to reduce its current student population, which has gone up from 9,000 in the 1980s to 18,000 now.

“We have to ask ourselves now, what are we going to do? Are we going to shave back numbers? If we do, then we will reduce our student-staff ratio and that will help us in providing high-quality education and the rankings,” he said.

Prendergast said these were strategic questions that were facing all Irish universities, when state funding was down from an average of €39,000 per student a decade ago to €5,000 now.

“Maybe we cut Irish student numbers by 5 per cent a year over the next ten years. But it would be terrible to have to do that in a way because we are here to serve all our students,” he said.

Earlier this month, Trinity College dropped by more than 40 places in the prestigious Times Higher Education Rankings, to 16th position in the world. Prendergast said a “big reason” was the staff to student ratio of 1:10, which was “way out of kilter” compared to ten to one in the top universities. “That’s why our staff have to work so hard to deliver because they have more students on the books. A lot of university education is one to one, people writing essays and getting feedback from the lecturer or doing project work,” he said.

Prendergast’s comments come ahead of the budget on October 8, as universities are putting pressure on the government to increase funding for the third-level sector.

In the Dáil last week, Fianna Fáil TD James Lawless criticised the fact that Ireland had won only one out of 400 European research grants. He said there had been a “deliberate sidelining” of basic research over the last decade by the government.

Prendergast said the grants for individual research investigators from Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) had been cancelled for the last three years, with all the money instead going into SFI’s “big industry centres”.

“We need a proper balance. We need 50 per cent going into the industry centres and another 50 per cent going into blue sky research and diverse disciplines. Every other country in Europe has these. We have thousands of untapped investigators in this country,” he said.

He said the Department of Business was directing money to industry research, leaving universities as the “poor relation”.

“It’s like as if the industry is piggybacking on the universities, sucking resources out of the education mission. There are many advantages the industries have locating in Ireland and it’s quite right they have these advantages. But I don’t think we should be using our limited education budget also in that direction,” he said.

Prendergast is in favour of having an income-contingent student loan scheme, so that students would start paying back college fees down the line once they earned a certain amount. “It would open up university to more people. Many of our students are doing part-time jobs, which takes them away from their studies. If they had access to an income-contingent loan system, they might prefer to do that rather than lose study time,” he said.

This was one of the options in the third-level funding report by Peter Cassells, but it has been left gathering dust for three years due to public and political opposition to increasing the annual student fee of €3,000.

“You’d have to ask – are we still a country that is prepared to invest in education?” said Prendergast.