Don’t take independence of our universities for granted

Patrick Prendergast

Colleges are exceptional sources of vitality for society and a pillar of our democratic society

The great Renaissance humanist Erasmus said he preferred to be a citizen of the world. I’ve always liked that quote because it sums up so much of the university ideal. Universities have been reaching out into the world for centuries — something that benefits both the institution itself and the country as a whole.

I cannot think of any institution in Ireland that are more connected to the outside world than our universities. Most academics are continuously exchanging ideas with researchers in other countries, and universities make their work available worldwide through teaching and publication. There really is nothing to compare with universities.

Our universities are independent and free of government control. They decide what to research, how to develop, and how to teach — but we should not take this freedom for granted. It does not exist everywhere and it is not preordained that it should always exist in Ireland either.

In the early days of my own university, Trinity College Dublin, the curriculum was a State-approved theology plus a narrow set of topics that served mainly as a matter of status among society’s elite. It has taken time for the independence of our universities to be established. It has led to a flourishing of university teaching and research, making universities an exceptional source of vitality for society and a pillar of our democratic society.

Their independence makes universities the first port of call when people outside a country want to know what is going on in Ireland. Universities are often the first port of call when people outside a country need to understand what is happening elsewhere.

My own university was recently named as the eighth most international university in the world based on our research and the make-up of our teaching staff and student body. Between them, our staff and students speak hundreds of languages and communicate with every corner of the globe on an almost daily basis.

Why does this matter? It matters because universities are a small nation that will flourish only by exchanging talent and ideas with the rest of the world. We must remain connected through global research networks. Seeing universities through a national lens only is a major failure of understanding. Universities are part of networks that increase Ireland’s influence — perhaps bigger countries believe national networks are sufficient but we can harness disillusionment. We need to be international in how we work and meet challenges and seize opportunities presented by new thinking and new technologies. We have to understand the world not from our own standpoint but through the language and cultures of those living far beyond our borders.

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For a small country such as Ireland, exchange of the mind can unite the entire world through universities. The EU’s decision to lead the European Union to be a regional club but at least 10 universities are remaining as part of EU research networks. In fact, in the bid to remain in the EU network, the universities in Ireland put pressure on the government to keep the EU team pushing to stay in the EU. The network is recognized for its value.

In return for a contribution to the EU budget, the UK will get the new Horizon Europe research programme which will spend £5 billion over the next seven years. The effort to make the UK a stable foundation for global research networks speaks volumes about their importance.

The areas where UK citizens will lose out is the European research programme, which allows EU students to study abroad for a year. In 2019, 3,414 students and staff from the Irish higher education sector undertook study visits, traineeship in European businesses, teaching and training visits in the EU. A number of 40,000 Irish students have travelled abroad on Erasmus since its foundation in 2007, while 190,000 students have travelled here.

In Trinity we are propelling to create a new research institute called E3RI that is looking for solutions to the world’s mounting problems through new thinking, along three dimensions: environment, production, resources, data, wellbeing and communities. A multidisciplinary research institute that aims to find balanced solutions for a better world cannot be created by one university alone. It can only be done by all universities working together.

The new institute is the University of Oxford, Trinity College Dublin and the London School of Economics. It will have three main areas: health, climate and data.

This is only one aspect of these academic networks that are so vital to our country. Universities are about producing joint degrees. In Trinity, we now allow students to study with us and Columbia University in New York for a joint degree. More joint degrees are coming with European universities such as Barcelona, Budapest, Montpellier and the rest under the European universities alliance called CHARM.

These networks can last for decades sometimes centuries. They are networks that will flourish and have a long-term impact for the benefit of society.

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