‘Irish universities have been resilient but it isn’t sustainable’
Despite a funding crisis, Trinity College Dublin has ambitious plans to expand inwards towards Grand Canal Dock. The college’s provost, Patrick Prendergast, spells out his vision and his concerns for third level sector. The public has little appetite for a hike in taxes.

Prendergast believes the answer might lie with those who benefit most from higher education sharing the burden of extra costs. He says, “I think higher education is a mixture of a public and private good. Society needs the engineers, doctors, dentists and social workers, who are all educated in university. But it’s also a private good in that individuals benefit from higher salaries over their lifetime.”

“If you accept that, you don’t need to go to an ideological extreme” for a solution, he says. “If we're good at anything, it's finding a balance. So let's find it.”

The unpublished Cassels report on the future of third-level funding presents the Government with a range of options, although it leans heavily on an income-contingent loan model for graduates as the only realistic way of generating funds.

Prendergast says this option, if designed properly, is a workable solution to keeping college costs down.

Many families, he says, borrow from banks to send their children to college. If, for example, the management of the bank were seeing high education fees at the point of access to the loans, it would mean that many families would benefit from lower interest rates from the State and only have to begin repaying their loans when their earnings hit a certain threshold.

Is there a danger that colleges and universities would simply hike up tuition costs?

Since the UK introduced a loan scheme in recent years, there has been a stampede of colleges to charge students the maximum fees allowed, about £9,000 (€11,200).

Prendergast says there should be safeguards to keep costs down, such as a state regulator, rather than a “free-for-all” among universities.

BOLD DECISIONS

Despite all the talk of crisis, there is every chance the next government will opt to kick the can down the road, with the coming of the new third-level funding. A minority government might not be willing to risk bold and controversial moves.

Prendergast says a tipping point has been reached whereby politicians can no longer ignore the issue. “There has been an emergent economic impact if we don’t sort it out,” he says. “A few years ago we were all in a different place, thinking that we could make it work. But today things would get us out of the hole, so we need to speak up.”

“Now, there is a realization that money which goes into education is an investment. You get it back. A well-educated generation can be more successful economically, particularly at a time of global competition for foreign direct investment. That argument is being made.”

“Most people are optimistic that whatever government is formed will see the value of investing in education.”

Carl O’Brien
Education Editor