



‘Irish universities have been resilient but it isn’t sustainable’

■ Trinity College provost Patrick Prendergast: “Many countries keep kicking the can down the road. It is the countries that invest in higher education that reap the rewards.” PHOTOGRAPH: NICK BRADSHAW

Despite a funding crisis, Trinity College Dublin has ambitious plans to expand towards Grand Canal Dock. The college's provost, Patrick Prendergast, spells out his vision and his concerns for third level



Carl O'Brien

Education Editor

The provost of Trinity College Dublin is studying a map of the country's oldest university.

"There's a lot happening, and a lot about to happen," says Patrick Prendergast. He traces Trinity's footprint eastwards, from its imposing College Green entrance towards the glass-and-steel office blocks surrounding Grand Canal Dock.

The hoardings have just gone up on the site of the college's new business school, funded mainly through philanthropy. A new student accommodation block is also due to be built, breathing much-needed life into the bleak and derelict south side of Pearse Street.

But the most significant development is arguably the least-known: the planned expansion of Trinity's campus towards the canal. Completion will see the 400-year-old university sitting at the heart of the silicon docks.

"So much of the tech industry is going on here," Prendergast says. "Google, Facebook, Twitter, Airbnb – and it's all right beside where we have our technology and enterprise centre.

"We have a big opportunity to expand there, as well as on the main campus, and expand the provision of places in engineering, computers and natural sciences."

Skills shortages

As tech firms increasingly complain of skills shortages, universities around the world have ploughed greater resources into new teaching and research facilities.

It is in its early stages, but the provost says part of the campus is likely to be home to E3, a new engineering, energy and environment institute. The idea is to crosspollinate disciplines such as civil, structural and environmental engineering with computing, botany, zoology and geography.

"We will have an opportunity to do research into the very important challenges we face in energy and the environment," says Prendergast, a former engineer. "When I was an undergraduate, there was no such thing as a carbon footprint. We designed almost assuming an infinite supply of resources. We need to lead the game here on sustainability issues.

"It would be great if Ireland could do that: educate engineers and scientists to be aware of these challenges."

Dramatic cuts

Finding the money for the planned development is another matter, however.

The college's planned expansion comes at a time when many in higher education say the sector faces a funding crisis. Rising student numbers, declining state funding and restrictions on staff recruitment mean that many have had to make dramatic cuts to make ends meet.

Trinity and some of the bigger universities have at least been able to plug many of the funding gaps with private income, such as international students' fees, research and other commercial sources.

Not for much longer, Prendergast says. "We have overcrowded classrooms. Our staff-student ratio is a way out of kilter. The universities have been very resilient; they have managed to keep going successfully. But is it sustainable? I and other university presidents don't think it is sustainable at current funding levels."

Still, is the word "crisis" overused? The fact that colleges have so far weathered the storm surely means there was fat in the system in the first place. Who is to say colleges can't continue to function on the kind of resources they have grown used to

over the past seven or eight years?

Prendergast, for one. He points to a "demographic bubble" that will see numbers at third level rise by up to 30 per cent over the next decade or so.

The wider higher-education system will need to expand to cater to the numbers. There is, Prendergast says, no time to waste. Our future prosperity could well be at stake.

"If we want a higher-education system that matches the best in the world, we need to think how we're going to invest in it to produce the talent that's needed to have a successful society and economy," he says.

"Many countries do keep kicking the can down the road, and it doesn't do well for them in the long run. It is the countries that invest in higher education that reap the rewards."

Where will the extra money come from? The State doesn't have an extra billion euro to spend on a growing higher-education

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University rankings 'We're not keeping pace with the global competition'

University rankings are considered vital to attracting international students and research funding.

However, Trinity, like many Irish universities, has slid down world rankings in recent years as it copes with an increase in students and a reduction in funding.

Last month, TCD found itself at the centre of controversy when one of the main ranking agencies, QS, accused the college of violating its rules by influencing academics involved in its annual survey.

The college had sent out "awareness" emails to academics, advising them of reputation surveys that would be sent out by the ranking agency. Many universities have done the same, according to senior figures in higher education.

In TCD's case, however, its activity

became the subject of a news story after QS issued a strongly-worded statement criticising the college for its "campaign". Despite the threat of a potential suspension, no further action followed.

TCD said it regretted the letters to academics and said at no stage was the correspondence intended to influence the response of the recipients.

It said it regularly provided updates to the wider Trinity College community – including alumni, employers and academics with whom it has an ongoing relationship – on its successes and achievements.

In an interview prior to the recent controversy, the provost, Patrick Prendergast, acknowledged that while rankings were imperfect, they remained highly important in attracting students, funding and jobs.

"All Irish universities have suffered

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: the State, students and employers.

"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 lifetimes.

"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 that."

The unpublished Cassells 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.

relative to where they were before the economic downturn, he says. "There has been a steady decline in rankings. Our scores have remained relatively static, but others have passed us by, so we're not keeping pace with the global competition.

"If Ireland really wants to be an island known for the talent of its people, and have companies locate here, then we can't afford to have that one global indicator of the quality of education systems – rankings – decline.

"How many universities do we have in the top 100 in the QS rankings?" Prendergast said. "One. How many in the top 50? None. Singapore has three.

"I know it is simplistic, but people do make assessments based on these rankings, and we can't bury our heads in the sand about it."

– CARL O'BRIEN

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

Many families, he says, borrow from banks to send their children to college. Income-contingent loans would mean higher education is free at the point of access. In addition, it would mean students would benefit from low interest rates from the State and only have to begin paying back tuition loans when their earnings hit a certain threshold.

Is there a danger that colleges and universities would simply hike up their 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 cost down, such as a state regulator, rather than a "free-for-all" among universities.

Bold decisions

Despite all the talk of a crisis, there is every chance the next government will opt to kick the can down the road when it comes to how to fund third level. A minority government might not be willing to risk bold and controversial decisions.

Prendergast says a tipping point has been reached whereby politicians can no longer ignore the issue.

"This has the potential to have an economic impact if we don't sort it out," he says. "A few years ago we were all in a different place, thinking that if we could make savings it would get us out of the hole, so to speak.

"Now, there is a realisation 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 hitting home.

"It makes me optimistic that whatever government is formed will see the value of investing in education."