

It's All About the People

It was George Orwell who once said: 'Sometimes the first duty of intelligent men is the restatement of the obvious.' His wise words come to mind when considering the challenges and opportunities that our universities now face. There is a plethora of such formidable challenges, and substantive opportunities, that are shared across the leadership teams of Irish universities.

There is the knotty challenge of dealing with artificial intelligence and the great opportunities to advance knowledge that it might throw up. The ever-evolving advancements arising from digitalisation for both teaching and research. The shifting profile of students and their demands for greater flexibility. The growing appetite for lifelong learning and the role that universities will play in that. The existential challenges of the climate crisis and its implications for research, teaching, and universities themselves, not to mention the other major societal challenges such as housing, healthcare, and social cohesion.

On the face of it, these diverse challenges and opportunities may, in some respects, have limited shared dimensions. But, on closer analysis, there is a somewhat obvious common denominator in how universities respond to those diverse issues. That is their people!

People are at the very heart of everything that universities are about. Students, in all of their increasingly diverse forms, are at the epicentre of the university system. The thirst for knowledge, its creation and dissemination, is no less unquenchable than at any time in the past, albeit that the pace for sating that thirst may be accelerating. That thirst for knowledge is expanding well beyond the traditional undergraduate or postgraduate degree as we embrace the full thrust of lifelong learning throughout the lifetime of virtually all students and across all disciplines. Our universities are working hard to respond to these rapidly changing students' needs.



Jim Miley

Director General, Irish Universities Association

This overview of higher education in Ireland outlines the major challenges facing the sector and identifies some specific steps to progress. It centres on people, who are at the heart of everything that universities are about and must be given every opportunity to realise their potential and that of the nation.

The expansion of our research capacity, a crucial foundation stone for the creation of new knowledge and innovation, is, likewise, people-centred. Ireland has enjoyed a couple of decades of building a valuable base for our research and innovation capability. That now needs to be taken to the next level if we are to compete effectively with other knowledge economies in Europe and beyond. The new research agency – to be formed by an amalgamation of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland – provides a refreshed structure to enable future growth and development. But such a structure can only deliver if there is the appropriate investment in the people who are at the forefront of scientific discovery and research in our universities.

Our academic staff straddle both the teaching and research activities across the university system. Their track record in delivering world-class graduates and research has been quite remarkable, particularly in recent years. We're now approaching a 40% growth in student numbers over the last decade and a half. At the same time, the choice of courses available to students has been dramatically expanded. No other country in the world has experienced such a level of growth in both student numbers and variety of courses. And this has been delivered against considerable odds.

That is best exemplified by the worsening student–staff ratios in our university system. The latest OECD Education at a Glance report cites the Irish higher education student–staff ratio at 23:1, against an OECD average of 17:1 and an EU27 average of 15:1. In perhaps obvious terms, as Orwell recommended, this simply means that our students are not getting the care and attention that are needed to deliver and maintain an internationally competitive education.

Our dedicated staff have managed to keep up our standards to date, but we are at serious risk of losing our competitive edge for globally recognised talent if the current imbalance in student–staff ratios is not addressed. There are two clear pathways to delivering this.

Firstly, more investment is needed. In recent budgets, the government has made positive moves to redress the massive fall-off in higher-education funding between 2008 and 2015. Yet we are still in a position where the direct State funding per student in higher education is roughly €2,000 less than it was a decade and a half ago. The government itself has recognised this and identified what it needs to do to close the gap. This investment needs to be accelerated, not on the basis of the needs of universities as institutions, but because such investment is of fundamental importance to produce the talent and innovation to tackle our major national societal challenges into the future.

Secondly, the unnecessarily restrictive controls on universities under the Employment Control Framework need to be removed. The artificial limits imposed on universities to hire permanent staff take no account of the explosion in student numbers over recent years or of the increasing demands

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to expand courses and offer more flexible options to students of all ages. Indeed, it has resulted in universities having to hire more people on short-term contracts in order to plug gaps in resources in an effort to maintain a quality service for students. It is a crude measure originally introduced as a cost-saving instrument that has long outlived its usefulness. It has no role in helping our universities to deliver the much-needed talent of the future and should be scrapped forthwith.

Our future health and prosperity as a nation are wholly dependent on the capacity of our people. And, in turn, the capacity of our universities to support the delivery of major national priorities is totally people-dependent. Maintaining a relentless focus on those people – students and staff – will ensure that we, as generators of talent and innovation, can deliver for Ireland.

The government must ensure that its approach to supporting and developing higher education in Ireland is people-focused. If they do that successfully, they will, as another line by Orwell puts it, ensure that ‘we shall meet in a place where there is no darkness’.



STEM scholarships for women awarded at Trinity College Dublin

Emily Profir, Computer Science, Linguistics and Spanish (formerly St Oliver's Community College, Drogheda Co. Louth),

Neasa Nic Corcráin, Environmental Science and Engineering (formerly Loreto Convent Secondary School, Co Wexford),

Emma Burgess, Chemical Sciences (formerly Wesley College, Dublin),

Manpreet Kaur, Chemical Sciences (formerly Coláiste Chill Mhantáin, Co Wicklow),

Claire McCooey, Computer Sciences (formerly St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore, Tyrone, Northern Ireland).