

# A Transformative Year in Higher Education in Ireland

## Introduction

Investment in higher education is a commitment to support the country's future economy and society. I write this overview article for *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2024* in the immediate aftermath of Budget 2025, during which the welcome news of a €50 million increase in annual core funding of higher education for 2025 was announced, with this to rise to €150 million by 2029 under *Funding the Future*. This additional funding goes towards closing the funding gap that was originally identified by government in 2022 and will help ensure that universities can effectively support student success and thus produce quality graduates to meet the needs of industry and society.

## Future skills

The relationship between universities and the labour market has been a focal point in recent years. Irish universities continue to liaise closely with industry partners to align educational programmes with the needs of the modern economy, particularly in high-growth sectors such as technology, biotechnology, and the green economy. Initiatives like the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) aim to future-proof graduates by equipping them with the skills needed for the jobs of tomorrow. The *2023 National Skills Bulletin* reports that an increase in the supply of skilled workers will be needed in areas such as engineering, science, and healthcare over the coming years.

The demand for apprenticeships in higher education, to serve national priorities such as construction and renewable energy, continues to grow, with over 27,400 apprentices currently contributing to Ireland's skilled workforce. The voice of industry, via Ibec, in supporting the call for investment into higher education via the National Training Fund (NTF) in its pre-Budget submission, strongly reflects the importance of the skilled



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This overview article reflects on trends in higher education in 2024 and comments on Budget 2025's implications for the sector. Progress has certainly been achieved, with commitment from government to digital transformation, research excellence, partnership with enterprise, and internationalisation. For the trajectory to continue, Irish universities must play an ongoing role in addressing social mobility, national competitiveness, and the global challenges of the 21st century.

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talent pipeline for many enterprise sectors across Ireland and the criticality of workers who possess specific skills and knowledge alongside digital and green literacies.

One specific national skills deficit, recently identified, is in veterinary medicine, given Ireland's buoyant agri-food sector, pending retirements in the veterinary profession, and the numbers of students studying veterinary medicine outside of Ireland. In September 2024, Ministers O'Donovan and McConalogue announced during the National Ploughing Championships that South East Technological University (SETU) and Atlantic Technological University (ATU) would each provide a new degree in veterinary medicine. As president of SETU, this was certainly a moment of great celebration, but it also reflects an endorsement of the technological universities (TUs) and, most importantly, a step towards ensuring sufficient places for prospective students with the passion and aptitude to study veterinary medicine in the south-east and north-west regions as well as in University College Dublin.

## Technology

The rapid evolution of digital technologies such as generative artificial intelligence has been to the fore in universities this year as the associated challenges and opportunities have been explored. The GenAI: N3 project, funded by N-TUTORR, is a national project involving the technological higher education sector and is an example of a collaborative initiative that is supporting students and staff in the applications of GenAI, including in the context of assessment frameworks.

Technology in the classroom continues to stimulate innovation in teaching, learning, and assessment practices. The blending of online and face-to-face learning allows students to access materials at their own pace while benefiting from in-person tutorials and practical workshops. This flexibility is particularly beneficial to students who are also working adults and part-time students, aligning with Ireland's commitment to lifelong learning. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring equal access to technology for all students and addressing the digital divide.

## Access and inclusion

Ensuring participation in higher education remains a national priority under the *National Access Plan 2022–2028*. Significant progress has been made, with more institutions offering scholarships, mentorship programmes, and support services tailored to the needs of marginalised students. Technology has also played a role, with digital learning tools making education more accessible to those with physical or learning disabilities.

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Several degree programmes are now available through a new further to higher education access and progression route administered by the National Tertiary Office aligning to the unified tertiary model. Now in the second year of intake, the insights from the pilot phase, including the student experience, will provide an informative evidence base. Sarah Sartori's article in this edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* will share her perspectives and experience with this new access scheme.

One key area of concern in access to higher education remains the availability and cost of student housing. The rising cost of living, particularly, has placed a strain on students from lower-income backgrounds. While the government has committed to building more affordable student accommodation, supply has not kept pace with demand, making it difficult for some students to fully engage in university life. Addressing these challenges is critical if Ireland is to fulfil its goal of creating a truly inclusive higher education system.

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## Research and innovation

In August 2024, Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland came into existence as Ireland's new research and innovation funding agency, with a central role in realising the ambitions of *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*.

Irish universities are strong research hubs, contributing to advances in fields ranging from the sciences to the humanities. Irish institutions play a pivotal role in global research networks, with an increasing emphasis on research that addresses societal challenges such as climate change, health disparities, and digital transformation. *Quantum 2030*, Ireland's first national strategy for quantum technologies, was launched in 2024, and Ireland also joined CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research. These developments demonstrate the key role that Irish research must play in technological advancement.

One component of *Impact 2030* relates to the new TUs' contribution to the research and innovation ecosystem. This is to be enabled, in part, by the TU-RISE scheme, launched in 2024, with a focus on capacity-building and research in support of enterprise.

It is important to also recognise the importance of humanities and social sciences in addressing societal challenges. As Ireland faces complex issues such as migration, political polarisation, and a rise in mental health problems, universities have a role in contributing to public discourse and engaging in research that informs policy decisions. Universities are increasingly adopting open-access policies, making research more widely available to the public and contributing to a broader culture of knowledge-sharing. This shift reflects

Ireland's commitment to fostering an inclusive and democratic research environment, where knowledge is seen as a public good.

## Global perspectives

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* identified internationalisation as a key priority, and by 2024, Irish institutions have strongly embraced this vision. The launch of *Global Citizens 2030: Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy* aims to position Ireland as the preferred destination for international learners, researchers, and innovators. Most of Ireland's higher education institutions (HEIs) are already members of vibrant partnerships in the European University Alliance, a flagship EU initiative to build a European Education Area. A global perspective is essential for a flourishing Irish higher education environment by creating opportunities for student mobility, collaborative research projects, cross-border academic networks, and joint programmes that collectively enhance Ireland's global profile.

Irish HEIs' deep engagement in the European University Alliance creates immense opportunity for our students and staff. As part of *EU-CONEXUS*, the European University for Smart Urban Coastal Sustainability, students from SETU recently developed a seawater drone in Ireland and brought it to the coast of Spain for prototype testing in partnership with students and staff from other universities in a European University Alliance. Relationships were formed, pan-European perspectives were shared, and an applied research project was advanced!

## Outlook: opportunities and challenges

Much has been achieved in higher education in 2024: a new national research agency; allocation of funding from the NTF; the unified tertiary system; expansion of human and animal healthcare programmes; the European Universities; ongoing development of the TUs; and focused effort on inclusion, lifelong learning, and skills – to highlight a few.

As we look ahead to the future of higher education in Ireland, several opportunities and challenges stand out. The sector is well positioned to continue its trajectory of development and innovation. The commitment to digital transformation, research excellence, partnership with enterprise, and internationalisation provides a solid foundation for future success. The increasing focus on inclusion, lifelong learning, and sustainability ensures that Irish universities will play an ongoing role in addressing social mobility, national competitiveness, and the global challenges of the 21st century.

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Significant challenges must also be addressed. Student housing, the digital divide, and adequate investment into the higher education system are critical issues that will require ongoing attention. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, Irish higher education must navigate the complexities of globalisation, ensuring that it remains competitive while safeguarding the values of equity and access.

The developments in Irish higher education in 2024 reflect a sector that continues to embrace innovation, inclusion and belonging, and global engagement. Irish universities are at the fulcrum of preparing students for the challenges of tomorrow and shaping a more equitable future for all.

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### **Anna May McHugh awarded honorary doctorate by SETU**



Anna May McHugh, managing director of the National Ploughing Association (NPA) and a trailblazing advocate for the Irish agricultural industry, was awarded an honorary doctorate by SETU at a ceremony at the Kilkenny Road Campus in Carlow on Friday, 1 November.

This honorary doctorate, the most prestigious accolade a university can bestow, was presented to the Laois-native in recognition of her exceptional contributions to the agricultural community and her leadership in promoting the industry.

Anna May has dedicated her career to enhancing the visibility and viability of agriculture in Ireland. Under her stewardship, the NPA has expanded its reach and influence, transforming the National Ploughing Championships into one of Europe's largest outdoor events, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. This event not only showcases Ireland's rich agricultural heritage, but serves as a vital platform for education, innovation, and networking within the industry.