



IRELAND

## Irish university system starved of funds and ‘in danger’

**Brendan O’Malley** 01 February 2019

The Irish university system is one of just two in Europe categorised as ‘in danger’ due to falling funding combined with rising student numbers over the long term, according to figures from the Public Funding Observatory of the European University Association. The other country is Serbia.

The data findings were presented by Thomas Estermann, director of governance and funding at the European University Association – and a leading authority on how European countries compare for third-level funding – at a seminar organised by the Irish Universities Association on 29 January.

“The trend has been there from 2008, with funding continuously decreasing and student numbers continually rising,” Estermann told *University World News*. “They have been in this category from the beginning [since the data was first collected in 2008], but the gap has become bigger.”

In 2017 Ireland invested “a little more” than in previous years but “still needs a long time to catch up to the level before 2008”, he said.

Over the entire period 2008-17, funding fell from around €1.5 billion to €1 billion (US\$1.7 billion to US\$1.15 billion), while student enrolment rose from 160,000 to 200,000, Estermann said. “So despite funding going up again in 2017 by about €35 million or 3.5%, it is still very far away from the 2008 figure, yet there are around 40,000 or 26% more students in the system.”

He said it is a “very challenging situation” for Irish universities and the problem will not be shifted by offering just a little bit more funding.

“After a very long time of cuts and continuously increasing student numbers, I think it is very clear that to reverse the trend it takes a bit more.”

### **Open discussion needed**

Estermann said what is really needed in Ireland now is to have a very open discussion on what they want, because you can’t have increasing student numbers and decreasing funding.

“So you will have to say we will have less students going into higher education or you increase the funding. It is evident that something needs to be done, but the challenge is where does funding come from.”

He also presented figures which showed how Ireland is the second-bottom country in the European Union, ahead only of Croatia, for staffing autonomy, the independence of universities to make decisions on staff recruitment.

The seminar was also attended by, among others, Tibor Navracsics, European commissioner for education, culture, youth and sport; Mary Mitchell O’Connor, Irish minister of state for higher education; Catherine Day, former secretary general of the European Commission and chair of the University College Cork’s governing authority; Gemma Irvine of the Higher Education Authority in Ireland; and Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, professor of modern history at Trinity College Dublin and chair of the Irish Research Council.

Commenting on the figures, Jim Miley, director general of the Irish Universities Association (IUA), said: “We need to take notice of what is happening in other European countries and how Ireland’s universities system compares in a European context, particularly in terms of funding levels and autonomy.

“These figures illustrate just how out of step Ireland is with our European neighbours when it comes to funding third-level education and supporting the autonomy of our third-level institutions.

“Despite the significant increase in third-level students, which now stands at an all-time high, the higher education sector in Ireland remains seriously underfunded.”

The IUA **launched** a ‘Save Our Spark’ campaign in October, urging the public to support increased funding to protect Ireland’s third-level education system, where, it said, funding at €5,000 per student is “barely half of what it was a decade ago and a fraction of what it is in other similar-sized European countries”.

This is despite Irish students paying €3,000 per annum in fees, the second-highest in Europe, although less than a third of fees in England.

‘Front runner’ systems, as categorised by the Public Funding Observatory, include Finland with spending at €20,778 (2015 figure), Sweden at €19,749 (2016) and Norway at €16,942 (2016).

At the seminar, Miley said the government and the *Oireachtas* or legislature must prioritise the reform of the funding model for higher education as recommended by the Cassells Report, the government-appointed expert group that reported almost three years ago.

### **Possible impact of Brexit**

At the seminar there was a lot of discussion about the likely impact of Brexit, which is due to

go ahead on 29 March.

European Commissioner Tibor Navracsics said that Brexit may present "a window of opportunity" for Irish universities, since continental Europe would be looking for good-quality English-speaking universities and Irish universities "may make a breakthrough". He said Irish universities may benefit from a pool of students who want to study science and humanities subjects in English.

Estermann told *University World News* that Irish universities may also feel that Brexit would open up opportunities for them to become a bigger player in EU research programmes, taking some of the programme coordinator roles the UK has held for instance, but also attracting talented academics and students who might otherwise have been drawn to the UK.

But he warned that there are some key problems that would need to be overcome.

"There are opportunities out there for Ireland but without major investment in the system, I doubt they will be able to take them," he told *University World News*.

"The challenge Irish universities face is that their capacity to hire academic and admin staff has in the past decade been restricted as a consequence of stricter employment regulations established when the economic crisis hit Ireland, including stricter rules on hiring public servants that made it more difficult for universities to hire, and therefore less competitive."

The outlook is not entirely gloomy, however, as Irish universities, in adapting to cuts, have made themselves more efficient and more effective and "have done a lot of things to improve the teaching and learning environment", Estermann says.

"As a small country, Irish universities have made and can make a great contribution and Ireland benefits from the knowledge economy, so this is the sector to invest in. But the system does need a reinjection of money; that is very clear."

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