"We have to design a system that suits the Irish situation"

The provost of Trinity College, Paddy Prendergast, believes his main job is to convince the government to spend more on third level education.

Barry J Whyte

Number One Grafton Street is the city centre's most exclusive residence. The traditional home of the provost of Trinity College since it was built in 1739. Its current resident is Paddy Prendergast, who took the job in 2011.

It’s no mere complimentary apartment, though. The university’s centuries-old walls hide its Palladian grandeur and the huge scale of the rooms and corridors inside. It feels like a stately home that’s been turned over to the state for tourists, complete with visitors’ book, while paintings of his predecessors hang on the walls along with an extensive art collection.

Earlier this year, it was the place where the current government negotiated its confidence-and-supply arrangement with Fianna Fáil.

It’s hard to imagine his young family sitting down for Rice Krispies and cartoons here on a Saturday morning, or settling down for a cup of tea and some scones in the evening.

“You get used to it,” Prendergast says bluntly.

There is one problem, though, he says. Buses.

Just a few hundred yards from the front rooms of his house - above the constant clang of the Luas cross-city construction work - buskers play through a constant routine of outdoor classics like Galway Girl, Wagon Wheel, With or Without You, Blowin’ in the Wind and a cacophony of other badly played songs.

Prendergast confesses that he has bought a device to measure decibels and occasionally goes out to demonstrate with the musicians, but he tells me that he often stops in case he comes off like a crank.

And, as he says during our interview, he’s got bigger priorities.

There’s nothing better than a P&L. Prendergast chuckles, opening up the profit and loss page of Trinity’s annual report. Prendergast is just one of several university presidents around Ireland who are calling on the government to do something urgently about the funding crisis they say is affecting third level education in Ireland.

The Trinity balance sheet tells a story. The university’s income has grown steadily since 2011 when it was €312 million to more than €321 million in 2015. That’s come from a combination of student fees (up from €111.9 million to €128.9 million), research grants (up from €78.5 million to €85.2 million) and commercial revenue (up from €21.2 million to €29.1 million).

Meanwhile, though, the college’s state grant has plummeted from €66.7 million in 2011 to €44.5 million in 2015, and its costs have risen. The staff bill has gone from €219 million to €230 million contributing to a total operating expense in 2015 of €325.2 million - up from €303.9 million in 2011.

For Prendergast, the college is punching above its weight in winning research grants and it expects to be able to increase its commercial revenue to €50 million by 2020. It will also be generating more money by boosting by 50 per cent its...