“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.

The traditional home of the provost of Trinity College, since it was built in 1759, 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 jelly in the evening.

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

There is one problem, though, he says: buskers.

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 remonstrate with the musicians, but he tells me 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 afflicting 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
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"For scarce state resources, top things that the private market won't do is more important," he says. "That's really the critical issue."

This year, Trinity got a punch in the gut when the results were announced in two of the major global university rankings. In the British QS World Rankings, Trinity fell from 61 to 98, while in the highly regarded Times Educational Supplement it fell out of the top 200 colleges entirely.

All college rankings have their critics, especially about the methodologies they employ, but just how much importance does Prendergast place on them?

"They're probably not an absolute measure of the quality of the college. But so many people look at them around the world, particularly parents who might be outside thinking [if they] will they send their children to Trinity," he says. "Likewise, industry coming into Ireland often ask the question, 'What are the highly ranked universities in this country?' And if they find there are none they quite rightly draw the question: what is the quality of the talent pool in Ireland?"

"I've seen one-page summaries about Ireland as an investment destination where they ask about tax and the rest, and one of the boxes is about education. You can't bury your head in the sand when it comes to the rankings."

Trinity most certainly didn't bury its head, but it appeared as if it had gotten its wires crossed when it emerged it had dropped out of the Times ranking because of its communications with its alumni.

"I think they thought that we were gaming the system," he says, when it was merely the wrong formula of words in an email to alumni, who are often asked to vote in the survey.

"This was a complete misunderstanding all around as far as I can see and straight away we got into dialogue with them and resolved the issue."

He got better news last month, when Trinity was accepted into the League of European Research Universities, the first Irish institution to be included alongside 23 top European universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, University of Zurich, and Imperial College London.

Though he hasn't made up his mind whether he'll run again for the job of provost, Prendergast has a model for the college he wants Trinity to be: Stanford, the California university consistently in the top three in the world rankings.

"It's an old university, and it has strength in the humanities and social sciences. It's got old squares, and yet it is known for innovation, entrepreneurship, for driving activity in the Valley, and I see Trinity fulfilling that role in Dublin," he says.

Such lofty ambitions don't come cheap, and plenty of parents might be looking at the future cost of college and getting worried about growing fees funded by loans that'll be docketed from their wages and private rented accommodation that can rise with the whims of the market.

"They'll get a great education. I point out, but it might well cost them.

"That all depends on the balance of public and private to be honest," Prendergast says after a pause. "The thing that's really crucial is that they get a great education."

The aim is to have the best site in Europe for industry-academic engagement.
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