"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 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’ books, 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 telly in the evening.

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

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 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 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 €138.9 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 €236 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
inake of those lucrative non-EU students through the likes of joint-degree courses with Chinese universities and the arts and humanities degree it is currently working on with Columbia University in New York.

But for Prendergast, the solution to Trinity’s financial situation — and to the problems of the Irish third level sector generally — is for the state to pump more cash into colleges.

“There was a time ten years ago when 70 per cent of our income was coming from the state. Now 43 per cent is coming from the state,” he says, and he expects that to fall further in years to come.

Today, Prendergast sees his main job as redressing that balance and convincing the government to spend more money on third level education to account for the major demographic shifts in Ireland.

“We’re one of the lucky countries in the world to have an expanding young population. We’re going to have something like 20 per cent more people coming into higher education by 2028 than we have now,” he says. “That’s 20 per cent more on an already underfunded system. They’re Department of Education and Skills figures — those kids are already born.”

Such a surge in student numbers is going to put Trinity and other Irish colleges under severe strain.

“We’ve already maxed out now on how we can use the current infrastructure. Lecture theatres are full, labs are full, they’re working into the late evenings and early mornings.”

To account for that, Trinity is in the middle of a major capital spending drive, building its new business school, as well as a new docklands technology and enterprise campus that he expects will cost the college around €300 million.

“It’s ideally located on Grand Canal Dock with all the American technology companies nearby — the Google, the Twitter, the Facebooks, and the Dropbox,” he says.

The new unit will focus on engineering, energy and environmental research and is likely to also have a creative arts and research team, he says, and its main focus will be to foster engagement between industry and academia.

“The overall aim is to have the best site in Europe for industry-academic engagement. We can deliver this in Dublin if we plan it properly. It’s just a question of how to find the money.”

One of the ways that the government can free up the funding necessary is to change the way it funds student fees.

In short, on foot of Peter Cassells’s report earlier this year on funding third level education, most Irish university presidents — including Prendergast — believe that students need to start taking out loans.

That, he points out, is likely to frighten the life out of an awful lot of people in Ireland. Parents and prospective students are likely to look at the most obvious example of a debt-funded college system — the US — and worry about loading such large volumes of debt on young people.

“I resist the slippery slope argument — the idea that if we introduce small income-contingent loans then it becomes like the American system overnight,” he says. “It doesn’t have to be like that. We can have relatively modest loans taken out that can be paid off when your income goes above a certain threshold.

“The main thing about these loans is that they’re income contingent,” Prendergast says. “You don’t pay back until you get earning at a certain level.

“What I’m advocating is that a proper balance be taken between the public good and the private good,” he says, and points out that Cassells proposed an implementation group to see just how it might work.

“Students or parents are borrowing this money anyway on a non-income-contingent basis from credit unions or banks to pay the fees,” he says, and he believes grants should stay in place for students from lower-earning families.

“There may be better ways to spend our money than what we’re doing at the moment,” Cassells is fairly strongly telling us that there is.

“We should have the courage to face up to the fact that our funding model can be improved,” he says. “Rather than pretending that we can go on as if the problem doesn’t exist.”

Student accommodation is another major problem — especially with that 20 per cent jump in the number of college-aged students in the country. Prendergast believes the market is likely to fix the problem. He has had conversations about possible collaboration between the colleges.

“We’ve got to create more student accommodation and we’ve had discussions with DIT on how we’d collaborate,” he says. “We could do it to do that. I think that’s the sort of thing we should and could collaborate on.

But with the accommodation crisis just as acute as the funding crisis, why has no college yet done anything to address it swiftly and directly?

“We have to recognise there’s a lot of private providers in the market. So that’s helping to solve the problem,” he says, referring to student residences being built in a number of locations around Dublin.

Meanwhile, Trinity has its own plans to knock O’Higgins House opposite Pearse Street Garda Station — if it gets planning permission, having already been turned down once — to build a 250-bed student residence on the site.

“Many of us are doing what we can do. We understand many other universities have student residences in the pipeline, but you’re right to flag up perhaps that there could be more collaboration,” he says.

Prendergast has different ideas on how the state should spend its money on Irish third level education.

“I would prefer to see the state spend its money on capital infrastructure for new teaching and research accommodation and labs of the kind we’re talking about with the technology and enterprise campus,” he says.

CV: Patrick Prendergast

Age: 50

Family: three children

Lives: Dublin

Hobbies: travel and theatre

Favourite book: Ulysses or collected poems of WB Yeats