

The Case for Publicly Funded Higher Education

2026 Edition

*By the ICTU Group of
Further and Higher Education
Trade Unions*





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Foreword

The Case for Publicly Funded Higher Education 2026 builds on the important work first undertaken in 2020 by our esteemed and much-missed colleague, Macdara Doyle. Macdara's original report provided a clear, evidence-based and principled argument for sustained public investment in higher education, grounded in a deep understanding of the sector and an unwavering commitment to fairness, access and quality.



Frank Jones,
IFUT General Secretary

Since the publication of the 2020 report, many of the challenges identified have not only persisted but, in several respects, have intensified. Issues of underfunding, precarious employment, growing student numbers, and increasing pressures on staff and infrastructure continue to place significant strain on the sector. At the same time, the role of higher education in supporting economic development, social progress and democratic engagement has become ever more critical.

This report sets out, once again, a clear and compelling case for a properly funded, publicly accountable higher education system. It emphasises that investment in higher education is not a cost but a necessity—one that delivers substantial returns for individuals, communities and the State. A well-funded system is essential to ensuring equitable access, high-quality teaching and research, and sustainable career pathways for those who work in the sector.

The ICTU Group of Further and Higher Education Trade Unions remains committed to working constructively with Government, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and all relevant stakeholders to realise this vision. We believe that a strong, publicly funded higher education system is central to Ireland's future and must be treated as a national priority.

While many have contributed to the development of this report, I wish to express particular thanks to Tom Sheppard in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Rory McGann in Mary Immaculate College, and Brendan Palmer in University College Cork for their valuable contributions and for the expertise they have brought to this report.

I commend this report to policymakers, stakeholders and the wider public as a timely and necessary contribution to the ongoing debate on the future of higher education in Ireland.

Frank Jones
General Secretary

Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT)
Chair, ICTU Group of Further and Higher Education Trade Unions



Executive Summary

Six years ago, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions published *The Case for Publicly Funded Higher Education (2020)*. The report outlined significant challenges facing the Higher Education sector due to the cuts sustained following the financial crash.

The 2020 report was produced by Congress's Education Sector Group, comprising affiliated unions representing staff across all levels and areas of education: INTO, ASTI, TUI, IFUT, Forsa, SIPTU and Unite. All shared a common concern at the precipitous decline in funding and the potential harm if left unaddressed.

This report examines the trends outlined in the 2020 report and finds that the crisis identified in that report not only persists but, in several respects, has intensified.

The 2020 report warned that a declining public investment threatened quality, access, research capacity, and Ireland's long-term social and economic development. By 2026, many of the pressures have either intensified or remained unresolved:

- Demographic pressures have intensified, as predicted
- Student enrolment numbers have continued to increase significantly
- Staff numbers have not kept pace with growing demand
- The housing crisis has materially worsened conditions for staff, and access for students
- Precarious employment has become systemic across the sector
- Public funding remains below international norms with no long-term funding solution in place

IFUT's 2023 research (*Precarious Employment in Higher Education*) confirms that the staffing crisis is now systemic, pervasive, and damaging across every Irish university. The funding options outlined in the Cassells Report (2016) remain under consideration, yet no long-term funding solution has been implemented. A funding shortfall of €307m in the sector was identified in the Future Funding Report in 2022. This shortfall, too, is yet to be met in full.

The Irish higher education sector is now characterised by structural underfunding, among the highest student-staff ratios in the OECD, increasing dependence on private and non-EU fee income, rising student costs and a deepening crisis of precarious academic employment. These challenges are further compounded by declining international global rankings and continued policy inaction since the publication of the Cassells Report in 2016.

Our 2020 report warned of the challenges this sector would face unless action was taken. As successive governments have failed to adequately address those challenges, the sector has now reached a point where the warnings of 2020 have become immediate operational risks. It is therefore imperative that decisive action is taken to finally address the systemic challenges facing higher education in Ireland.



Background

The Funding Crisis: 2008–2026

The current funding crisis has its roots in the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent austerity measures. Between 2008 and 2015, core government funding to higher education was reduced by approximately 30% in real terms, even as student numbers continued to grow.¹ While some funding has been restored since 2015, it has not kept pace with demographic growth, cost inflation, or international benchmarks.

The Cassells Report (2016) clearly identified the scale of investment required and outlined funding options, however a decade later, no long-term funding model has been implemented. The sector still remains roughly €190 million short of the inflation-adjusted equivalent of the original Cassells target, and has been sustained through year-on-year incremental adjustments that create uncertainty and inhibit long-term strategic planning.

The underfunding of the sector is recognised by all, with only the quantum being argued.

Demographics and the Funding Crisis

Inadequate long-term funding has coincided with significant shifts in Ireland's demographics. Ireland had the highest proportion of children in the EU in 2023 at 23.4%, compared to an EU average of 18%.² Annual population growth in 2023 and 2024 averaged approximately 88,500 per year, driven by natural increase and inward migration.³

According to the Higher Education Authority (HEA), there were a total of 278,880 student enrolments across all modes of study in 2024/25. This represents a 4.9% increase from the 265,905 student enrolments in 2023/24 and is the largest percentage increase since 2020/21.

Since 2007/08, when HEA records first included all HEA-funded universities, technological universities, institutes and colleges, student enrolments have increased 57.1%.⁴

These trends indicate sustained growth in demand for further and higher education and make continued underfunding impossible to justify.

1 Parliamentary Budget Office (2020). Financial Implications of COVID-19 for Ireland's University Sector. https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2020/2020-09-02_financial-implications-of-covid-19-for-ireland-s-university-sector_en.pdf

2 Eurostat https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table?lang=en

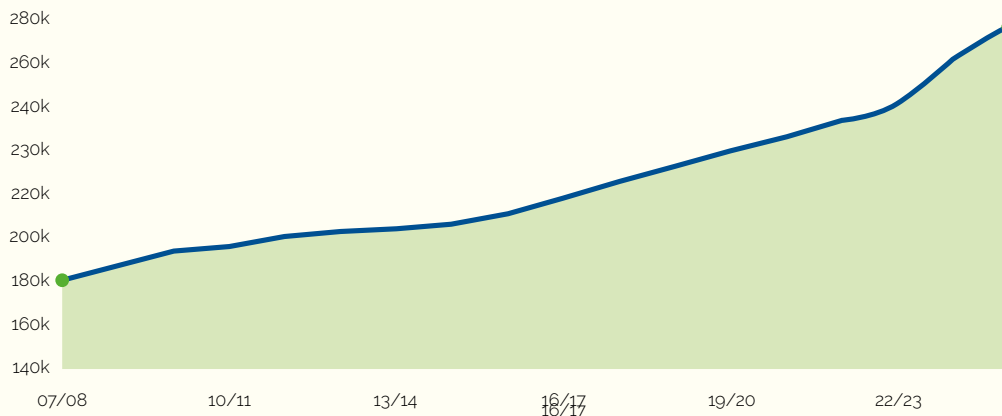
3 Central Statistics Office, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-pme/populationandmigration-estimatesapril2025/keyfindings/>

4 Key Facts & Figures for Ireland's publicly-funded Higher Education Institutions, <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures-report/>



Student enrolments in Irish higher education, 2007/08 to 2024/25

Source: Higher Education Authority Key Facts & Figures



Since 2007/08, student enrolments have grown by 57.1% – from approximately 177,600 to 278,880 in 2024/25. The 2024/25 intake represents the largest single-year percentage increase since 2020/21

Public and Economic Benefits of Higher Education

OECD data indicates that Irish tertiary graduates aged 25-64 have employment rates of approximately 86–88%, substantially higher than those with upper secondary education (73-75%).⁵ Graduate unemployment rates remain consistently lower across all age groups and economic cycles. This employment premium translates directly into higher tax contributions and reduced social welfare expenditure.

The economic returns to public investment in higher education are substantial in Ireland. OECD analysis shows that the public net financial return of a man attaining tertiary education in Ireland is approximately \$369,000, compared with an OECD average of \$148,000. For women, the public return is \$143,000 compared with an OECD average of \$77,000.⁶

In 2020, Irish evidence showed that a typical undergraduate degree generates a net Exchequer benefit of €62,000 per graduate, rising to over €116,000 for PhD graduates, while doctoral graduates earn on average €130,000–€177,000 more than Level 9 graduates over ten years.

As of 2026, analysis by the HEA and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) indicates that each typical graduate now generates a net benefit to the Exchequer of approximately €72,000 (up from €62,000); the benefit to the state for a PhD graduate has risen to over €140,000; the Doctoral graduates (Level 10) currently earn an average of €145,000–€190,000 more than Masters (Level 9) graduates over the first ten years of their career.⁷

⁵ Higher Education Authority. Graduate Outcomes Data and Reports. <https://hea.ie/statistics/graduate-outcomes-data-and-reports/>

⁶ OECD (2025) Education at a Glance 2025

⁷ <https://hea.ie/statistics/graduate-outcomes-data-and-reports/>



Beyond individual outcomes, higher education institutions serve as anchor institutions in their regions, providing stable employment, supporting local economies, and acting as hubs for innovation and knowledge transfer. The higher education sector's contribution to Ireland's economic model - particularly in attracting foreign direct investment through a highly educated workforce - is significant.

ICTU cited OECD evidence confirming that educational attainment improves labour market outcomes, health and social cohesion. As Professor Tom Collins, who served as President of Maynooth University and later chaired the expert group that produced the Cassells Report (2016) on the future funding of higher education in Ireland has pointed out: *"Investment in higher education pays off in a multitude of ways: increasing employment prospects; enhancing learning potential; better health and life expectancy and improved educational prospects for children"*

Ireland's continued ability to realise these benefits is increasingly constrained by shortages of staff, funding instability, and a system that remains dependent on precarious work.



"Investment in higher education pays off in a multitude of ways: increasing employment prospects; enhancing learning potential; better health and life expectancy and improved educational prospects for children"



Unequal Access

Socio-economic divide

According to the HEA, in 2020 approximately only 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas for every 10 students from affluent areas attend higher education.⁸ This fundamental inequality has proven resistant to change, with 5.3 students for every 10 students from affluent areas now attending.

There are entrenched inequalities in access, as evidenced by the HEA study showing that children from affluent areas are 10 times more likely to score high CAO points and have their pick of prestigious third-level courses.

Inequality in terms of access is, in 2026, exacerbated by severe student housing shortages, rising living costs, and insufficient SUSI supports.

Students from affluent areas remain significantly over-represented in the high points brackets. While 2024 data suggests the disparity has narrowed marginally, students from affluent areas remain approximately 7 to 8 times more likely to achieve top-tier scores (600+ points).

Roughly 24% of students scoring between 150-300 points come from disadvantaged backgrounds. This contributes to a self-perpetuating cycle where socio-economic background determines not just access to higher education, but access to the most prestigious courses and institutions. According to the HEA Socio-Economic Profiles, 34% of those studying economics are from affluent backgrounds, compared with 4% from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Institutional Divide

Graduates of Technological Universities (TUs, formerly Institutes of Technology) are significantly more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than graduates from the established universities. The proportion of students from DEIS schools in TUs has increased from 15% in 2020 to 18% in 2024, reflecting the critical equity function these institutions serve.⁹ Yet recent 2024 HEA data shows that non-progression rates are still highest among DEIS graduates in these same institutions, approximately 16% compared to 8% for non-DEIS students.¹⁰

8 Higher Education Authority. Widening Participation for Equity of Access: Socio-Economic Profiles. <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/widening-participation-for-equity-of-access/socio-economic-profiles-2021-22-2023-24/>

9 Higher Education Authority. Widening Participation for Equity of Access.

10 Higher Education Authority. Non-Progression by Student Characteristics. <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/progression/report/hea-non-progression-by-student-characteristics/>



The contrast with the established, or traditional universities, is stark. Students from fee-paying schools are more than twice as likely to attend an Established University than a TU. In UCD or Trinity, fee-paying graduates still make up nearly 25-30% of intake, while in some TUs they account for less than 4%. Over half of students enrolled in Technological Universities receive a SUSI grant, compared with 35-45% of Traditional University students.¹¹

These figures underline the central role of the technological sector in widening participation. Yet funding models do not explicitly recognise this equity function, nor do they account for the additional support these students require to complete their studies successfully. The higher dropout rates among DEIS students in TUs also suggest that financial pressures and inadequate support structures are forcing students to abandon their studies.

Costs, Student Debt and Housing

Irish students face a convergence of multiple cost pressures, including rising costs and inadequate financial support. The €2,500 annual student contribution, which has recently been reduced from €3,000, is only the beginning. Accommodation costs, particularly in Dublin, have reached crisis levels that effectively price many students out of higher education or force them into unsustainable debt and part-time work that compromises their studies.

Purpose-built student accommodation in Dublin now costs €300-400 per week, translating to €15,600-20,800 annually.¹² Private rental markets offer little relief, with general housing shortages affecting students as severely as other population groups. Meanwhile, the maximum SUSI maintenance grant stands at €5,915 per year (approximately €114 per week), covering barely a quarter of typical Dublin accommodation costs.

When the student contribution fee, accommodation, food, transport and books are totalled, a student living away from home in Dublin faces annual costs of €23,600 - €30,800. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, this is simply prohibitive. The correlation between housing costs and the 16% dropout rate among DEIS students in

Technological Universities are difficult to ignore.

These cost pressures do not affect all students equally. Students from affluent backgrounds can absorb accommodation costs through family support. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds face impossible choices: accumulate debt, work excessive hours that compromise study, or abandon higher education entirely. This illustrates how inequality in access can translate into inequality in outcomes, and how the promise of social mobility through education becomes hollow for those who need it most.

¹¹ Higher Education Authority. Widening Participation for Equity of Access.

¹² Knight Frank Ireland (2023). Student Housing Report. <https://www.knightfrank.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Knight-Frank-Ireland-Student-Housing-Report-Final-Sept-2023.pdf>



Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are now a central pillar of publicly funded tertiary education. With the system expanding rapidly in recent years, the overall apprentice population was in excess of 29,700 at the end of 2024, up 63% since 2019. There were over 9,300 new registrations in 2024, and 78 programmes on offer across a wide range of sectors, including 16 at degree and post graduate level.

This growth reflects both learner demand for '*earn while you learn*' pathways and the economic value of apprenticeships as work-integrated learning, which the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science notes is a cornerstone of Ireland's tertiary education system and is critical to delivering national priorities, including major infrastructure needs across housing, transport, energy, and healthcare.

However, apprentices face real and rising costs, particularly travel and subsistence during off-the-job phases. The National Apprenticeship Office survey highlights financial challenges as a key barrier, with open text responses pointing to insufficient travel and subsistence supports, pay disparities, and low levels of pay contributing to financial hardship. Many apprentices also stated that their contribution justified being paid at least the minimum wage, a position shared with the ICTU Group of Further and Higher Education Trade Unions.

These realities strengthen the case for sustained public investment and a coherent funding model that supports participation and completion, protects the integrity of programmes, and ensures the staffing, facilities, and supports within public providers are adequate to meet increased demand, while maintaining strong national standards and public accountability as the breadth and range of apprenticeship programmes continues to expand.

Precarious Employment and the Workforce Crisis

IFUT's comprehensive 2023 research, *Precarious Employment in Higher Education*, confirmed precarious employment is now systemic, pervasive, and damaging across every Irish university.

IFUT's 2023 research documented:

- 36% of staff consider themselves precariously employed
- 32% of academic roles are fixed-term or hourly-paid
- 8% have no written contract
- 60%+ report unmanageable workloads
- Permanent academics work 11+ unpaid hours weekly
- 61% of hourly-paid staff receive no pay during non-teaching periods
- Precarity is strongly gendered: 66% of precarious posts are held by women
- Precarious employment "is a deliberate business model" used to fill core functions



It concludes that precarity is now structural, pervasive, and harmful to educational quality, and should be considered an urgent national priority. The sector has rapidly become a less attractive place to work. The continued growth of managerialism is having a detrimental impact on academic freedom, which is a fundamental pillar of a thriving higher education sector. As a consequence, the sector is becoming increasingly less attractive to those considering careers within it.

Some concerning facts that emerged from the IFUT research are that those within the sector see no real improvements over the past six years:

IFUT 2023 vs 2025 surveys

Question	2023 (n = 548)	2025 (n = 687)
	Response	Response
Do you have a written contract of employment?	No = 7.4%	No = 6.8%
Do you consider yourself to be precariously employed?	Yes = 36.4%	Yes = 28%
Do you consider precarious employment to be pervasive within the Higher Education sector?	Yes = 94.5%	Yes = 87.8%

39.3% of respondents in 2025 indicated that they were working for 4 or more years on temporary/fixed-term contracts within Academia before becoming permanent. More worryingly, 8.5% indicated that they were employed for 10 or more years before being made permanent.

IFUT, in its Pre 2024 election call 'Zero Precarity Full Potential', reiterated the following demands that had previously been made and shared by some of the unions operating within the sector:

- Abolition of the Employment Control Framework (ECF)
- Pathways to permanency
- Sector-wide collective bargaining
- 650+ new staff annually for 10 years

Impact on Quality and Morale

Precarious employment damages educational quality in tangible ways. Staff on short-term contracts have reduced capacity to develop sustained academic relationships, contribute to curriculum development, or engage in the governance and planning essential to institutional health. The constant insecurity affects morale, productivity, and the ability to plan research programmes. Most critically, it makes Irish higher education less attractive to talented academics who can find more secure positions elsewhere.



Ireland in the International Context

Underinvestment in education

International comparisons make clear the extent of Ireland's underinvestment crisis.¹³

Ireland spends 2.8% of GDP on education, less than half the OECD average of 4.7%. At tertiary level specifically, Ireland's spend of 0.8% of GDP compares poorly with the OECD average of 1.0%. This places Ireland at the very bottom of international league tables for public investment in tertiary education.¹⁴

Even when using GNI* to remove any distortionary effect from GDP, educational expenditure is only in line with the OECD average at 5.1%.

While Ireland's public spending per higher education student may be close to the OECD average in absolute euro terms, this comparison does not account for the higher costs of delivering education in Ireland. When adjusted for purchasing power and cost of living, Ireland's investment falls far short.

The Funding Model: Public vs Private

Ireland has shifted dramatically toward private funding sources compared to European peers, with 68% of tertiary funding coming from Government sources, compared to Nordic countries maintaining public funding at 90% or higher of total higher education expenditure. Even the OECD average shows public funding accounting for approximately 65–70% of total higher education investment.¹⁵

Ireland's growing dependence on student contributions (currently €2,500 annually) and Non-EU fee income represents a fundamental departure from the public good model of higher education. This shift places unsustainable burdens on students and families while creating dangerous vulnerabilities in institutional finances tied to international student recruitment.

Student-Staff Ratios

Ireland's student-staff ratio is among the worst in the developed world, approaching 20:1 or higher in many institutions.¹⁶ This compares poorly with the OECD standard of 15:1, and significantly higher than Nordic countries, which achieve ratios of 12-14:1. The United Kingdom, often cited as a comparator, maintains ratios of approximately 16-17:1.

13 OECD (2025). Education at a Glance 2025: Ireland. <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primary-Country=IRL&treshold=5&topic=EO>

14 Ibid.

15 Stapleton, L. (2025). Industry Funding of Irish Universities. Public Policy.ie. https://publicpolicy.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Industry_Funding_of_Irish_Universities_2025.pdf

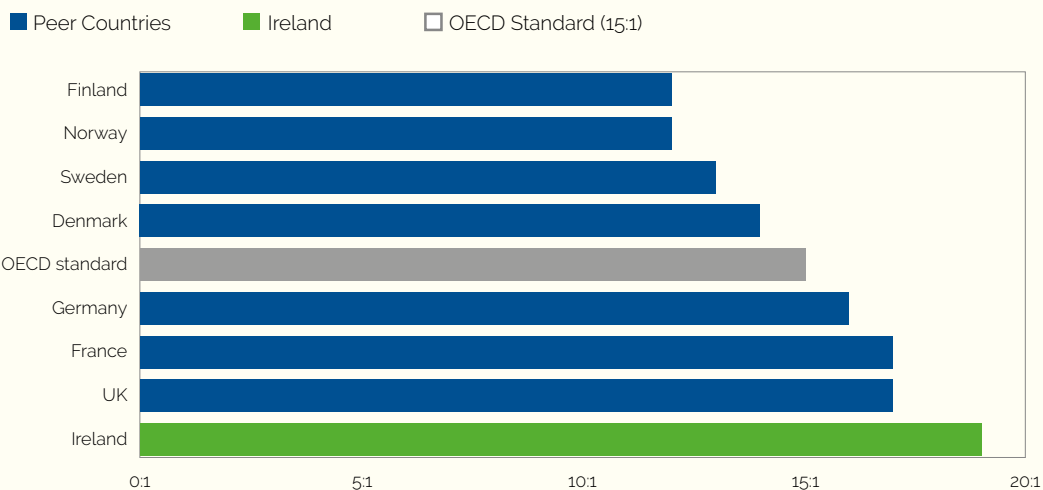
16 Oireachtas Debate, Question 270, 6 February 2025. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-02-06/270/>



These stark differences have real consequences. Higher student-staff ratios mean larger class sizes, less individual attention for students, reduced capacity for pastoral care, and heavier workloads for academic staff. To achieve the OECD standard 15:1 ratio, Ireland would require approximately 6,500 new academic posts.¹⁷

Student-to-staff ratios in tertiary education

Source: OECD Education at a Glance 2025 • Oireachtas Question 270, 6 February 2025



Ireland's student-to-staff ratio of approximately **19:1** is among the worst in the developed world. Reaching the OECD standard of 15:1 would require approximately **6,500 new academic posts**.

Administrative Staff

OECD reporting does not include the administrative staff-to-student ratio across countries, which does not fully capture the essential contribution of administrative and support staff in relation to the operational requirements and student supports in Higher Education.

While the focus has been on academic to student ratios, the necessity to have appropriate staffing levels to support the sector in achieving its full potential is critical. Staffing shortages/minimal staffing, lesser prioritisation within the sector and an Employment Control Framework mean the professional, management and support services ecosystem is under pressure to match the demand and requirement, to ensure a quality professional service is provided to all stakeholders.

Clearly defined comparable structures across the OECD within the following staffing structures of administrative, management and technical staff will provide clear statistical data to provide an appropriate baseline for support to the sector. As with the academic to student ratios, these figures will highlight best practice and investment and will allow for identification of funding needs and highlight pressure points across participative states.

¹⁷ IFUT (2024) Zero Precarity Full Potential



The lack of any international comprehensive, comparable statistical recording of administrative, management and support services staff, suggests that the vital role these partners play in the provision of Higher and Further Education in Ireland, and indeed Europe, is not understood, or captured.

Loss of International Standing

Chronic underfunding is now visibly damaging Ireland's international reputation. Irish universities have experienced mixed fortunes in the major global league tables over recent years. While rankings should not be the sole measure of quality, they matter for Ireland's ability to attract international students, recruit talented researchers, and compete for research funding and partnerships. In 2025, three-quarters of Irish universities experienced a fall in the Global 2000 list.¹⁸

The decline in rankings reflects the compound effects of inadequate investment: deteriorating student-staff ratios reduce teaching quality scores, precarious employment undermines research output and continuity, and ageing infrastructure becomes less competitive.

Research, Innovation & Employment

In 2026:

- Research output remains high *per capita*
- Quality, continuity, and career development are increasingly undermined by fixed-term and "project-to-project" employment
- IFUT's 2023 report confirms that only 15% of researchers are on permanent contracts, with 85% dependent on sequential fixed-term grants.
- The absence of structured collective engagement between Research Ireland and individuals funded through its programmes is undermining the attractiveness of pursuing research careers within the higher education sector.

This level of insecurity jeopardises:

- knowledge creation
- innovation capacity
- Ireland's competitiveness
- the feasibility of long-term research agendas
- climate and digitalisation research needs

The research talent pipeline is now at risk of collapse.

The Competitive Disadvantage

Ireland's economic model depends heavily on attracting international talent and investment. A declining higher education sector undermines this model directly. When multinational companies consider Ireland as a location, the quality and capacity of the higher education system factors significantly in their decision-making. Similarly, Ireland's ability to attract international postgraduate students and researchers depends on institutional reputation that is now being eroded by sustained underinvestment.

¹⁸ <https://www.thejournal.ie/three-quarters-of-irish-universities-fall-in-global-rankings-6718665-Jun2025/>



Expanding Reliance on Private Income

The 2020 ICTU report warned of a pattern of “creeping privatisation” within higher education, noting that private income had surpassed public funding across universities. Since that time, the consequences of this privatisation for both students and academic staff have become increasingly evident.

A recent and illustrative example of these practices was observed at BIMM Music Institute Dublin, a specialist college providing contemporary music and music-industry degree programmes validated by Technological University Dublin. In this case, academic staff were employed on significantly inferior terms and conditions of employment than those of comparable staff within the validating institution and were subsequently faced with the prospect of further deterioration in their conditions as part of a so-called “cost-saving exercise”. This led to an industrial dispute between BIMM and IFUT which, while ultimately resolved with a satisfactory outcome for the staff involved, highlighted the vulnerability created by such employment models.

In the absence of adequate public funding, institutions have increasingly turned to alternative revenue sources. Particularly concerning is the growing dependence on international student fees, which creates financial vulnerability and risks prioritising revenue generation over educational mission.

Since 2020, this trend has intensified:

- Non-EU student fees continue to rise. Non-EU fees have moved from a supplementary income stream to a critical financial pillar.
- Universities increasingly rely on commercially financed student accommodation. In Dublin, 56% of all student beds are now held by private commercial operators, increasing to 64% in Galway and 82% in Cork.¹⁹
- Private borrowing is now structurally embedded in campus development
- The sector is incentivised through off-balance-sheet accounting to expand private income²⁰

¹⁹ <https://www.knightfrank.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Knight-Frank-Ireland-Student-Housing-Report-Final-Sept-2023.pdf>

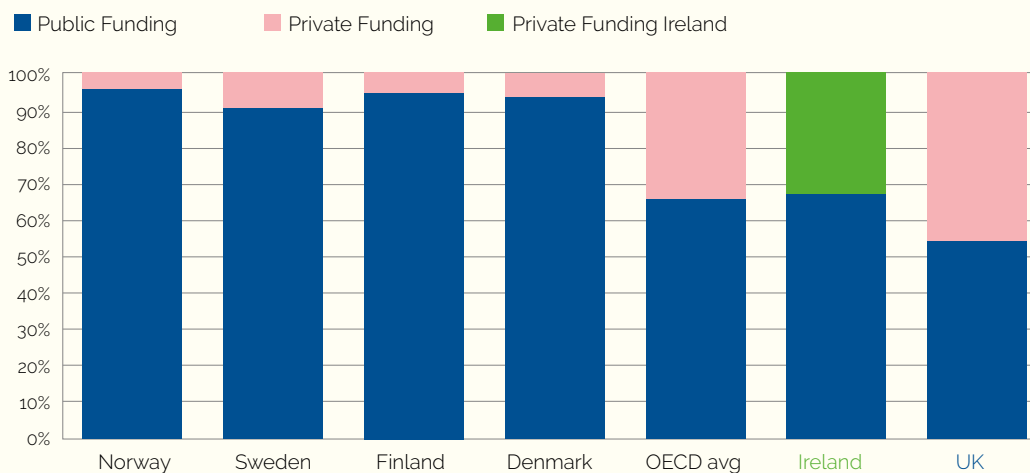
²⁰ https://publicpolicy.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Industry_Funding_of_Irish_Universities_2025.pdf

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2020/2020-09-02_financial-implications-of-covid-19-for-ireland-s-university-sector_en.pdf



Higher education funding: public vs private share

Source: OECD / publicpolicy.ie Industry Funding of Irish Universities (2025)



Ireland has shifted dramatically toward private sources compared to European peers. Nordic countries maintain 92–97% public funding; Irelands 68% public share reflects a structural reliance on student contributions and non-EU fee income.



The Way Forward

Now in 2026, all the pressures identified in our 2020 report have intensified. The scale of investment required is now urgent and substantial. Ireland requires significant expansion in capacity and capability to meet economic and social needs: new green skills for climate transition, AI and digitalisation expertise for technological transformation, scalable upskilling and reskilling pathways for workforce adaptation, expanded research capacity for innovation, and secure academic careers to retain talent.

The Cassells Report's (2016) funding options remain on the table. No long-term funding model has been implemented in the decade since that report. ICTU in 2020 called for education to be treated as an essential public good. That call is even more urgent in 2026.

In 2022, the then Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris, determined that Irish higher education faced a core funding deficit of €307 million. This conclusion emerged from the Government's *Funding the Future* policy, published in May 2022. In presenting the policy, the Minister described the €307 million figure as effectively settling "the question" of the funding gap, and positioned it as the basis for a multi-annual plan aimed at restoring system capacity, improving staff–student ratios, and addressing the legacy of underinvestment arising from the post-2008 austerity period. From a trade union perspective, however, there was a clear concern that €307 million would not be sufficient to address the full scale of the sector's underfunding challenge.

Subsequent delivery has been partial and uneven. While additional allocations have been made in successive budgets—including approximately €192 million across 2023–2024, of which only around €60 million was directed towards core funding needs such as staffing—this remains significantly below the identified requirement. The State has therefore not yet closed the core funding gap. Much of the additional expenditure has been absorbed by rising costs, pay adjustments, and targeted initiatives, rather than providing the sustained, baseline investment required to stabilise and strengthen the higher education system.

The ICTU Group of Unions calls for meaningful collective bargaining across the entire sector, removal of the Employment Control Framework to allow institutions to hire according to need, guaranteed pathways to permanency for all academics, accurate staff data reporting, and an end to reliance on casual labour. These are fundamental to building a sustainable, high-quality higher education system.



Election 2024 Pledges

In the run-up to the 2024 general election, IFUT secured commitments from politicians across multiple parties on key issues affecting the higher education sector. These commitments provide an important policy foundation and demonstrate broad political recognition of the challenges identified in this report.

These include commitments to:

1. **Increase Investment in Education: Commit to substantially increasing investment in education at all levels.** This includes bringing expenditure per student up to the average levels of peer countries over the medium term, reducing class sizes, resolving teacher supply issues, and creating a more inclusive education system.
2. **Implement Recommendations on Precarious Employment:** Fully implement the recommendations from the IFUT Report on Precarious Employment. This involves creating clear pathways to permanent contracts for all staff, ensuring fair and equitable working conditions, and addressing gender disparities and inequalities within the academic workforce.
3. **Align Staff-Student Ratios with International Standards:** Commit to achieving staff-student ratios that meet or exceed international best standards within the term of the next government. This requires significant investment in hiring additional academic staff to reduce the burden on current staff and improve the quality of education.
4. **Remove the Employment Control Framework (ECF):** Eliminate the outdated Employment Control Framework (ECF) to allow universities the flexibility to hire according to current needs, rather than being restricted by employment levels that are no longer, and maybe never were, relevant. This change is essential to address the pressing issues of staff shortages and precarious employment.
5. **Establish a Sectoral Engagement Forum:** Create a dedicated forum for sectoral engagement within higher education. This forum should facilitate structured dialogue between trade unions, representing academic staff, and employers to collaboratively address issues such as employment conditions, funding strategies, and workforce planning, ensuring alignment with EU Directives on collective bargaining.
6. **Advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Actively promote and implement policies that advance the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Commit to adhering to these goals within the proposed timeframes and strive to achieve these objectives ahead of schedule where possible.



Policy Priorities and Recommendations (2026)

The following recommendations build on the commitments already given and respond directly to the structural challenges identified throughout this report. Together, they set out a coherent framework for restoring sustainability, equity, and quality in Irish higher education:

1. Funding Reform

- Increase public education expenditure from 2.8% of GDP toward the OECD average of 5.7%, with tertiary education expenditure rising from 0.5% to at least 1.0% of GDP within the lifetime of the government
- Implement a long-term, sustainable funding model for higher education
- Rebalance funding toward public sources of investment
- Reduce and/or reverse the sector's dependence on non-EU student fee income

2. Workforce Reform and Employment Conditions

- End precarious employment through the implementation of IFUT's 12-point action plan
- Establish a 10-year staffing plan to deliver approximately 6,500 new posts
- Remove the Employment Control Framework to enable responsive workforce planning
- Develop clear, sector-wide pathways to permanency and strengthen collective bargaining mechanisms

3. Student Access, Affordability and Equity

- Reduce student costs, including the reduction and regulation of student rents
- Expand SUSI supports, reduce student fees, and address socio-economic barriers to participation
- Strengthen access and equity across the higher education system, with particular attention to disadvantaged groups and institutional inequalities

4. System Capacity and Quality

- Achieve the OECD standard 15:1 student-staff ratio
- Expand public and local authority housing provision for students and staff
- Strengthen administrative, technical, and support staffing capacity across institutions

5. Research and Innovation Capacity

- Protect research careers by replacing precarious project-based employment with sustainable research pathways
- Strengthen long-term investment in research capacity aligned with national priorities, including climate transition and digital transformation



Conclusion

The evidence presented in this report demonstrates that the underfunding of Irish higher education is no longer a cyclical challenge but a structural condition with significant implications for equity, quality, and national development.

Ireland now stands as a clear outlier among developed nations in terms of public investment in higher education. The consequences of this position are evident across the system: widening inequality of access, growing financial pressures on students, a workforce characterised by precarious employment, declining international competitiveness, and increasing strain on institutional capacity.

The recommendations set out in this report provide a coherent and achievable framework for reform. They build on existing political commitments and align with international benchmarks, offering a pathway to restore sustainability, strengthen equity, and enhance the quality of provision across the sector.

The choice facing policymakers is clear. Continued incremental adjustment will not address the scale of the challenge. A decisive shift toward sustained public investment and structural reform is required.

The ICTU Group of Further and Higher Education Unions remains committed to working collaboratively with government and stakeholders to advance this agenda. A properly resourced, publicly funded higher education system is essential not only for the sector itself, but for Ireland's broader economic resilience, social cohesion, and capacity to meet future challenges.





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