

Pre-Budget Submission 2026



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Executive Summary

A high-skill workforce has powered Ireland's growth model; that depends on a high-quality, adequately funded higher education system. Yet chronic underinvestment, rising student numbers, worsening student-staff ratios, and pervasive academic precarity now risk the system's quality and equity—contrary to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work).

Budget 2026 must: (i) bring core public funding toward OECD norms; (ii) reduce student-to-staff ratios; (iii) end academic precarity and remove the Employment Control Framework (ECF); (iv) establish a sectoral engagement forum; (v) align funding with Ireland's SDG commitments; and (vi) ensure affordable, not-for-profit student accommodation and replace reliance on student fees with public funding.

Who We Are

IFUT is Ireland's only trade union exclusively organising university workers. We represent thousands of university staff across Ireland—lecturers, researchers, librarians, tutors and academic-related grades. We represent our members at individual, collective-bargaining, sectoral and international levels (ETUCE, EI, TUAC/OECD, EU Sectoral Social Dialogue, BIGTU, ENETOSH), bringing best practice to Ireland.

Why Higher Education is a Strategic Investment

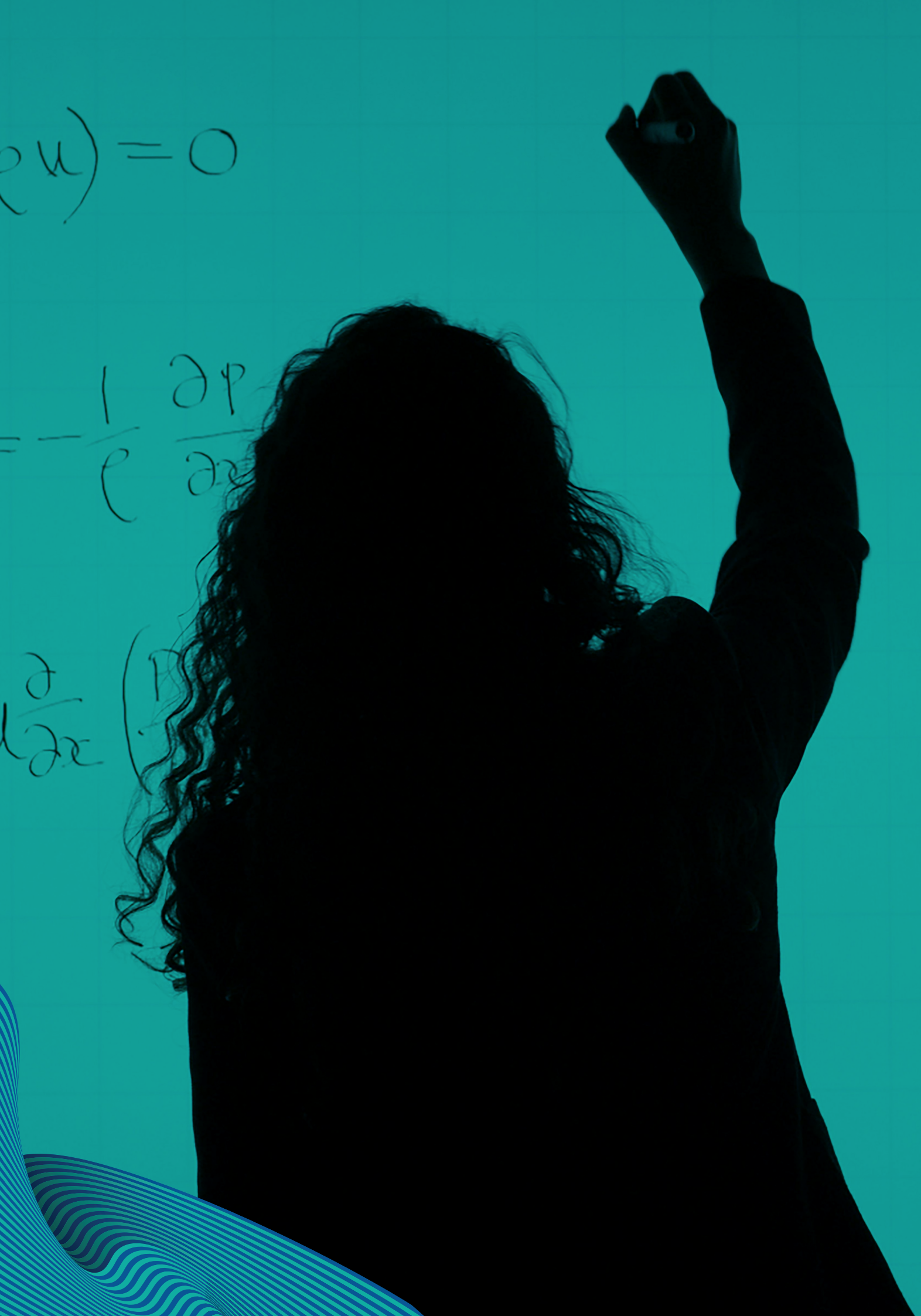
- Talent & attainment: 65% of 25–34-year-olds in Ireland hold a third-level qualification (highest in the EU).
- Growth & productivity: A third-level qualification yields an estimated 38–43% wage premium; over 90% of alumni report positive impacts on employment and productivity.
- Innovation & FDI: Universities account for c. 20% of total R&D spend; €631m in university R&D generates c. €1.5bn in output (with R&D spend expected to rise toward €1bn in the short term). The total economic impact is ~€8.8bn (Indecon): €2.8bn knock-on from non-research spend, €1.5bn from R&D, €2.6bn net graduate income, €1.6bn exchequer benefit, ~€0.4bn from overseas students.
- Self-financing returns: On Indecon's estimates, higher education spending fully paid for itself in 2017 via exchequer returns and spillovers.

The Funding Problem (and Why It's Getting Worse)

- Falling effort: Tertiary spending as a share of national income was broadly stable near ~1% until the financial crisis but then fell by ~40% (or ~38% on a demographic-adjusted basis) by 2019.
- Per-student cuts: Real spending per third-level student fell significantly between 2009–2016; partial recovery since has not reversed the reduction.
- Staffing pressure: Ireland has the highest student-to-teaching-staff ratio among comparator countries (~22.4:1), versus an EU average of ~15.6 and <10 in Sweden/Norway. Ratios worsened from 16:1 to 20:1 (2007–2018) even before recent enrolment growth.
- Funding mix drift: Latest indicative shares show HEI income increasingly reliant on non-exchequer fees (c. 35%) and exchequer student fees (c. 12%), with only c. 25% from state grants; research/grants ~20%, endowments/other ~8%. This over-reliance exposes the sector to volatility (e.g., international mobility shocks) and incentivises non-academic spending that does not improve educational quality.
- Administrative creep: Since 2012, non-academic staff have outnumbered academic staff across HEIs—eroding direct teaching/research capacity unless counterbalanced by funded academic hires.

Demography, Workload and Quality

- Student growth: Government scenarios anticipate up to 19% growth in student numbers over the next decade; CSO.
- Staffing need: To reach an OECD-typical 15:1 ratio, Ireland requires ~6,500 additional teaching posts overall, implying ~650 net new academic staff per annum for 10 years—a conservative estimate that also addresses quality and research-informed teaching.



Academic Precarity, Careers and Gender Equality

- Precarity harms quality: Insecure, short-term contracts undermine staff well-being, academic freedom, continuity of teaching, and student experience.
- Gender inequality: Women are disproportionately concentrated in casual/non-permanent roles; only about one-third of full professors are women despite more balanced lower grades.
- ECF constraint: The Employment Control Framework continues to block permanent hiring, entrenching precarity and high workloads.

PhD Graduates: A Broken Pipeline

- Mismatch: Annual PhD graduate output far exceeds the growth in third-level academic openings; volatile absorption intensifies insecurity.
- Outcomes: ~82.6% of research graduates (Class of 2021) are in full-time work nine months after graduation, but only ~16% are in post-doctoral roles; \leq one-third enter education roles (not all higher ed). Humanities/social sciences face weaker alignment between training and jobs; ~1 in 5 research graduates report their degree was of limited/no relevance to current work (rising to ~1 in 3 for arts/humanities).
- Completion pressures: The share of PhD graduates relative to total enrolments declined between 2016–2021 in several disciplines—potentially reflecting cost-of-living pressures, part-time trends, or discouragement from poor academic prospects.

Governance & Social Dialogue

- No sectoral forum: Higher education lacks a structured national forum for unions and employers beyond general public-sector arrangements—an outlier in the public sector.
- EU obligations: Ireland must expand collective bargaining coverage under the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages—another reason to establish a sectoral engagement forum.
- Oireachtas signal: The Seanad motion of 24 May 2023 (Higgins/McDowell/Mullen), unopposed by Government, urged urgent engagement with representatives of lecturers, post-docs and PhD researchers. IFUT remains ready to engage.

Budget 2026: Priority Measures and Costed/Operational Asks

Restore Core Public Funding & Replace Fees Reliance

1. Provide the full €307m annual core funding uplift identified by D/FEHERIS (Funding the Future) as the floor for quality, access and outcomes—on top of existing allocations with immediate effect.
2. Five-year trajectory to OECD norms in public per-student spend, with a clear multiyear ceiling uplift and automatic indexation for pay, inflation and demographics.
3. Replace reliance on student fees with public funding and deliver affordable, not-for-profit student accommodation, integrated with SUSI reforms to protect participation.

Reduce Student–Staff Ratios with Secure Hiring

4. Ring-fence a “Frontline Academic Capacity” line to fund ~650 net new academic posts per year for a decade (priority to research-informed teaching roles).
5. Abolish the ECF in higher education and replace it with a modern workforce framework that mandates open, competitive, permanent hiring by default (with narrow, audited exceptions).

End Precarity & Build Coherent Careers

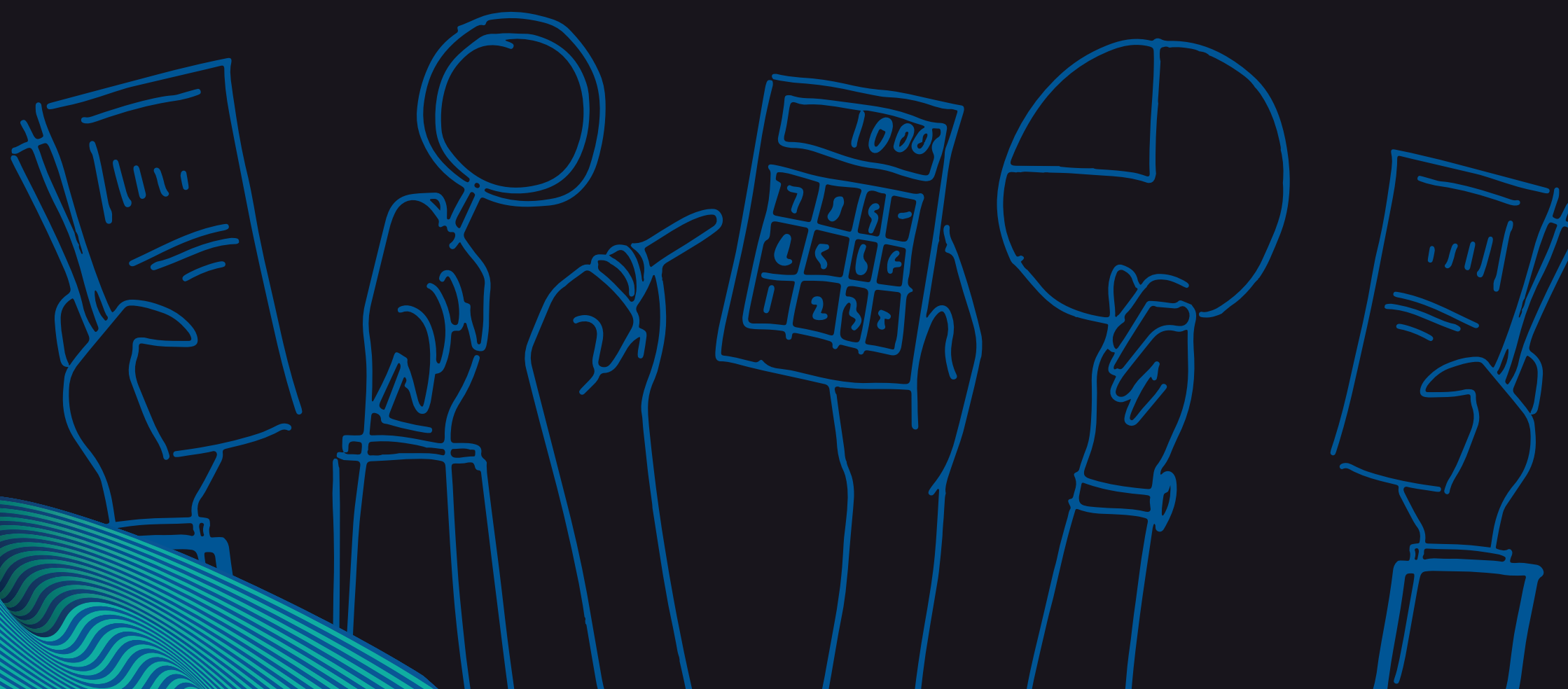
6. Implement IFUT’s Precarity Recommendations (2023): permanent-by-default, maximum caps on successive fixed-term contracts, and pro-rata parity for casual/part-time.
7. Create a National Academic Career Framework: transparent progression routes, tenure-track-style pathways, workload models that protect research/teaching time, and monitored gender-equity outcomes.
8. Fund structured post-doc and lecturer entry programmes (multi-year cohorts, fair pay, teaching/research balance, mentoring), with discipline-balanced places (not only STEM).

PhD Reform & Talent Retention

9. Raise funded PhD stipends/living supports to cost-of-living-viable levels; expand fee waivers and social protections.
10. Track outcomes: a national longitudinal PhD graduate survey at 5-year horizons by discipline, to align funded places with realistic academic/industry pathways.
11. Protect non-STEM fields with dedicated doctoral and early-career lines in arts, humanities and social sciences, recognising their education, culture, and public-value roles.

Sectoral Engagement & SDG Alignment

12. Establish a Higher Education Sectoral Engagement Forum (Govt–HEIs–Unions) with independent chairing, secretariat, data access, and authority to address employment, funding, workforce planning, academic freedom, and equality.
13. Embed SDG 4 & SDG 8 in performance frameworks for DFHERIS/HEA, with annual public reporting on access, quality, secure employment, and gender equity.



Affordability & Fiscal Space

The Summer Statements set out sizeable unallocated resources in the years to 2030. Prioritising the €307m core uplift and a ring-fenced academic hiring line are fiscally achievable, growth-enhancing, and yield strong exchequer returns via higher earnings, productivity, and innovation.

What Success Looks Like by 2028–2030

- Core funding restored to a path consistent with OECD norms; fees reliance reduced.
- Student–staff ratio on track from ~22.4:1 → ≤18:1 by 2028, toward 15:1 thereafter.
- Precarity reduced: permanent-by-default hiring in place; serial fixed-term usage curtailed.
- Gender equity improved: increased share of women in senior academic posts.
- Doctoral pipeline repaired: viable stipends, structured early-career routes, balanced discipline support.
- Sectoral forum resolving systemic issues, aligned with EU collective bargaining aims.
- SDG 4 & 8 integrated into budgeting and HEA compacts, with annual public reporting.

IFUT—The Ask

In Budget 2026, IFUT calls on Government to:

1. Deliver the full €307m annual core funding uplift and set a five-year trajectory to OECD norms.
2. Fund ~650 net new academic posts per year for a decade; abolish the ECF; rebalance staff toward academic roles.
3. Implement anti-precarity reforms and a National Academic Career Framework with gender-equity targets.
4. Reform PhD funding and pathways (living stipends, longitudinal tracking, lecturer-scholar bridges, protect AHSS).
5. Create a Higher Education Sectoral Engagement Forum and embed SDG 4 & 8 in higher-education budgeting and accountability.
6. Replace fees reliance with public funding; expand affordable, not-for-profit student accommodation.

Each student matters. Each staff member counts. Budget 2026 can restore capacity, quality, and fairness—securing Ireland’s knowledge economy and social progress for the next generation.

