

19th September 2016

**Mr Richard Bruton TD
Minister for Education and Skills
Department of Education and Skills
Marlborough St
Dublin 1**

Funding of our Universities

Dear Minister,

We are writing to you in relation to the submission of the Irish Universities Association made in the context of Budget/Estimates 2017 and in follow up to our meeting with you earlier this year. As you will see, our submission emphasises the need for urgent action on both the recurrent and capital funding of the sector.

This need for urgency arises from the many years of cutbacks in exchequer current funding and the virtual cessation of capital funding in 2008; both taking place against a backdrop of a continuous increase in student numbers.

Despite this, we have been pressing forward. We have strongly driven economies and cost savings and reduced our dependence on the exchequer by increasing income from a range of sources. We continue to innovate, both in the field of research, in the structure of curricula and modes of delivery. Under the aegis of the National Strategy for Higher Education, the HEA's strategic dialogue process and System Performance Framework have enhanced institutional transparency and accountability. All of these matters have been examined by the Expert Group on the Future Funding of Higher Education over an extensive period and resulted in the group's conclusions in regard to the need for increased national ambition and associated funding for our higher education system.

The vision expressed by the Cassells group is complemented by the vision and ambition which we and our governing authorities have for our individual institutions and which is reflected in our statements of strategy. While there are, and should be, diverse perspectives, there is also a strong core which unites us. This is in our ambition to continue to build a university system that delivers a quality and richness of experience which meets the aspirations of our students and society for prosperity and wellbeing; now and into the future.

That prosperity will not be built on the success of any one sector or technology, but through the diffusion of a wide range of expertise, skills, competencies and understanding throughout the economy and society. Today's graduates will experience many waves of change over their working lives. Our task is to ensure that they have the underlying capacity to embrace and profit from that change, drawing on their student experience as graduate, postgraduates and lifelong learners.

Unfortunately, as we strive to move forward, our resourcing and regulatory system has been moving backwards. While acknowledging their limitations, there is an essential truth underlying the universities' decline in the international rankings, linked to a failure to invest. This failure at national level, and consequent decline in our position, is in sharp contrast to the ambition which many of our competitors show for their universities. Our decline is already damaging the credibility of Ireland's capacity to compete for investment based on access to talent, both in universities and the wider economy. The emphasis by our diaspora on these concerns at this year's Global Irish Economic Forum underscores this.

We need to be frank: it is simply impossible to deliver an internationally competitive educational experience with a funding and regulatory model which is structurally unsound.

In its essence, we need to repair the foundations of our higher education system by rebuilding its staffing base and consequently improving the student to staff ratio. This is not an end in itself - it is the means to the end of improving quality by facilitating smaller group teaching, enhanced pastoral support and increased practical work and experiential learning and more and better research.

We also need to begin rebuilding the physical foundations of our institutions and making the capital investments which complement enhanced human capital.

The Cassells group has scaled the required investment in higher education: €600 million by 2021 in core recurrent funding and €5.5 billion over the next fifteen years in capital funding.

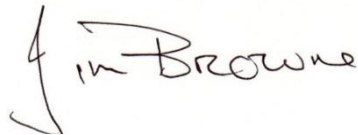
An immediate start is needed to tackle the problem. In that regard, we propose an injection of €75 million in recurrent funding for universities and the instigation of a new capital investment programme, consistent with the above findings. Urgent investment of a further €30 million is required in 2017 for refurbishment, health and safety, infrastructural improvement and upgrade works which can proceed immediately, with major capital investments to follow in future years.

Too much time has already been lost and we urge you, Minister, to act promptly in securing the necessary resourcing.

Yours sincerely,



Prof. Don Barry,
President, University of Limerick, Council Chair



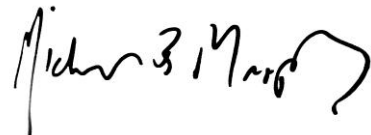
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