

Manifesto for Future Talent & Innovation

GENERAL ELECTION



Meeting the Challenges of the Future

Investing in higher education yields a substantial benefit to the State and to students and their families.¹ Ireland's ability to compete on a global stage for investment and economic advantage is intrinsically linked to the reputation and performance of its higher education and research sectors.

Our universities are key providers of the nation's high-skills talent pipeline and are engines of creativity through their research and innovation activities. Sustained investment in higher education and research will directly support the quarter of a million strong student population, underpin future development and growth and enable us to tackle the major national challenges in health, housing, cost of living and climate action.

¹ <https://www.iua.ie/ouruniversities/universities-impact/>



5 Big Priorities for Higher Education & Research

Provide an enhanced student experience, with more and better supports for students, by:

- 1 Delivering in full the **Funding the Future commitment to close the €307m per annum gap** in core funding and ensuring that government-controlled pay awards and cost inflation are fully funded. This will enable universities to bring **student-staff ratios** into line with the EU27 average of 17:1.

Build the national research and innovation capacity, so vital for economic growth, by:

- 2 Creating a new **Research Infrastructure & Talent Development Fund (RITDF)** of not less than €100m p.a. to drive research and innovation and to support research students. The last PRTL I fund for R&I expired in 2015.

Help deliver the National Climate Action Plan by:

- 3 **Investing €475m over the next 5 years** to enable universities to 'lead by example' in reducing the carbon emissions of campuses by 51% by 2030 - as outlined in IUA's detailed proposal to government.

Ensure that talent and innovation are prioritised in our knowledge economy by:

- 4 **Introducing new measures to utilise the National Training Fund**, now with a surplus of €1.5bn+, to address current and future skills needs.
- 5 **Retaining DFHERIS**, the Dept. of Further, Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science, with a full Cabinet Minister, to ensure that higher education and research remains a top priority to support investment and competitiveness.

Ireland's Talent Advantage

Ireland has built a dynamic and vibrant economy with world-class enterprises and skilled workers. Our talent and advanced skills are pivotal to the growth and development of our society and economy. The high-skills talent that underpins inward investment and our indigenous enterprises is rooted in a decades-long prioritization of education. Our universities are key enablers of the future talent pool, the workforce of tomorrow.

Innovation – A National Priority

Alongside talent, investment in research and innovation is one of the fundamental ingredients of Ireland's economic success. Our universities are core partners in creating the knowledge base and innovation capacity across a whole range of high-growth sectors – ICT, med-tech, biopharma, agri-food, digital life sciences and data science among others. These sectors are the powerhouses of regional and national development on which our current success is built and on which our future depends.

Responding to Major National Challenges

The country faces formidable challenges that must be overcome to ensure the continued growth and development of our economy and the health and well-being of our people. Universities have a critical role in helping to meet those national challenges.

- With population growth of up to 1 million by 2040, **investment in capacity** is needed to cater for the known expansion in student numbers.
- Growing skills shortages across all sectors, public and private, are a barrier to growth and limits service delivery. **Universities are key providers of current and future skills needs.**
- Future healthcare and social services needs will be underpinned by a sustained supply of professional skills. **Universities are willing partners for those essential services.**
- The **climate emergency** demands a coordinated national response. **Universities can provide the research and innovation capacity** to help solve these existential challenges.

Our universities are core partners of government, providing talent and helping solve major national challenges through research and innovation working with enterprise and third sector stakeholders. But they can only deliver on what's needed from them if the next government pledges support on the following top priorities.





Priority 1:

Underpin a quality education for students by delivering the €307m per year Funding the Future commitment and fully fund pay awards



Government has confirmed that higher education is underfunded by €307m per year. In May 2022, 6 years after the Cassells Report, it published Funding the Future, its definitive response on funding for higher education. Recognising historical underfunding, it concluded that:

“A figure of €307m (pa) has been identified and agreed between DFHERIS and DPER as representing the quantum of increase in core funding require...this does not take account of amounts required for future demographic increases, pension costs, implementation of future pay and industrial relations agreements and implementation of certain reform measures”

In 2023/2024, a total of €100m was provided in gross additional funding. However, almost all of this has been wiped out by nationally-agreed pay awards for which sufficient funding has not been provided to universities. This meant that **universities started 2024 with pay budgets €92m below what is needed to pay existing staff** in accordance with government pay deals.

- The incoming government should honour the Funding the Future commitment in full within its first two Budgets so that universities can continue to educate our students and produce graduates to the highest possible standards.
- Pay awards must be built into base Budgets in future as well as funds to cover cost inflation for energy and otherwise.

A funding programme such as this will enable universities to hire the necessary staff to cater for growing student numbers and to bring the student-staff ratio into line with the 17:1 EU27 average. The next government must also ensure that steps are taken to ease the cost-of-living burden on students, but not at the cost of investment in other areas of higher education.

We propose that:

- Priority investment is allocated through the SUSI grants and otherwise to improve access for socially disadvantaged student cohorts and for those with disabilities.
- Commit that any funding lost to universities from a reduction in student fees will be replaced by Exchequer funding

Key Ask:

We ask your party to pledge full delivery of Funding the Future, including pay awards, and to continue supports for access and living costs of students in accordance with need and to improve student-staff ratios.



Priority 2:

Create a Research Infrastructure & Talent Development Fund

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To retain its competitive advantage on a global stage, Ireland needs sustained investment in its research and innovation capacity. The Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTL) invested heavily in research infrastructure and research students over almost two decades. The last of five PRTL calls was made over a decade ago and expired in 2015. There is an explicit commitment in the National Development Plan to invest in a revised programme when it says:

“DFHERIS will scope out a successor to PRTL to direct new investment in research infrastructure to preserve and develop the progress achieved under previous programmes.”

It is a national priority that this commitment is now delivered. We propose that a new programme, the **Research Infrastructure and Talent Development Fund**, is launched with a funding commitment of **at least €100m per year**. Such a fund would:

- Develop the national capacity for a step-change in research and innovation activity and to make Ireland an ‘innovation leader’ in line with Impact 2030 targets.
- Build the essential research talent base by providing the necessary resources to attract and retain the best researchers in a competitive international market, including dedicated support for early career researchers.
- Enable universities to replace outdated research and laboratory equipment and to invest in new infrastructure to ensure that graduates are trained in facilities that are comparable to those of their prospective employers and to support Ireland’s participation in, and leveraging of, EU R&I programmes.
- Provide the necessary investment to increase PhD stipends for research students.

Key Ask:

We ask political parties to pledge to create a Research Infrastructure & Talent Development Fund to enable Ireland to remain competitive and to support the knowledge economy through research and innovation.



Priority 3:

Create a Sustainable Campus Fund to enable universities to lead the way for the public sector to meet carbon emission targets



Government has tasked the public sector to ‘lead by example’ in delivering reductions in carbon emissions by 2030. The eight university members of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) collectively are the 4th largest emitter of GHG in the Irish public sector. The concentration of facilities on campuses and the expertise of our estate managers provides an opportunity to deliver significant emissions reductions effectively and efficiently. A proposal has been submitted to government to provide a **€475m Sustainable Campus Fund** for IUA member universities.

Universities can lead by example as the nation grapples with meeting the targets set in the Climate Action Plan. The proposed Sustainable Campus Fund will:

- Provide universities with the capacity to deliver solutions at scale in their large campuses. Each university equates to a medium-sized town and can provide a quick win for government in the race to achieve climate action targets.
- Enable government to leverage the considerable expertise in the university sector that can then be used in other parts of the public and private sectors.

Key Ask:

**A firm undertaking is asked of all political parties to:
Provide a €475m Sustainable Campus Fund to enable universities achieve the 51% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030.**



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Priority 4:

Utilise the €1.5bn+ National Training Fund surplus to address skills shortages

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Ireland has an ever-growing skills shortage that straddles both the private and public sectors, yet the surplus in the National Training Fund (NTF) has grown to €1.5bn and is set to balloon to €2.5bn within two years unless new spending measures are agreed. This is money levied by government on employers that is being allowed to lie idle. The incoming government must urgently address this unacceptable anomaly.

We propose urgent new measures to utilise the NTF productively for our growing skills needs:

- Remove the NTF from the annual fiscal expenditure ceiling limits. This is entirely within the remit of government and should be a priority for the incoming administration.
- Expand the sectors / skills categories that can avail of NTF funding including skills for essential public services such as healthcare and education. (20% of the NTF fund is contributed by public sector employers.)
- Use the NTF to expand lifelong learning in line with the recommendations of the OECD Skills Strategy.²
- Support the much-needed, planned growth in PhD students in accordance with Impact 2030.³

² <https://www.oecd.org/skills/centre-for-skills/OECD-Skills-Strategy-Ireland-Report-Summary.pdf>

³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/27c78-impact-2030-irelands-new-research-and-innovation-strategy/>

Key Ask:

We call on political parties to invest the €1.5bn+ National Training Fund surplus on current and future known skills needs, including extra supports for lifelong learning.



Roinn an Taoiseach
Department of the Taoiseach

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Department of the Taoiseach

Priority 5:

Retain DFHERIS / Senior Cabinet Minister



The establishment of a stand-alone Department of FHERIS has provided the opportunity to give dedicated attention to the needs of tertiary education, research and innovation within a single Department. This has brought a number of advantages.

- The combined responsibility of the Department for higher education and research reflects the dual remit of universities and provides for a more coherent policy and operational framework.
- The DFHERIS model is in line with a growing EU trend where six member states⁴ have established ministries with a sole remit for HE and science and eleven others with ministry structures that more closely integrates education and research.
- DFHERIS has enabled the development of a more coherent tertiary education structure with key advances in apprenticeships and in improved linkages between further and higher education.
- The Department has overseen important legislative and structural changes with the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 and the Research and Innovation Act 2024 as well as the establishment of Taighde Eireann / Research Ireland.
- It has also overseen the launch of a number of important policies and strategies on research, international education, and skills among others.

DFHERIS has enabled an enhanced all-of-government approach for the support and development of the future talent, skills, knowledge and research needs of the country that, in turn, are pivotal to our future economic, social and cultural development.

⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/255909/ab6513ad-b9ed-4464-9b60-5a32c87b59a1.pdf#page=null>

Key Ask:

We ask all political parties to commit to the retention of DFHERIS, with a senior Cabinet Minister, in order to ensure that the future talent and innovation base, that is so essential for the knowledge economy, is secured.

iua.ie/elections

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Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

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OF GALWAY



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University
National University
of Ireland Maynooth



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