

# STRATEGY



# 2026-2030

**IRELAND'S ADVANTAGE**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# The Irish Universities Association represents Ireland's seven leading universities — research-intensive, enterprise-focused, socially engaged, and globally connected:

Together, these institutions educate more than 155,500 students, including over 8,600 PhD candidates, and employ more than 20,000 people. Collectively, they contribute over €9 billion annually to the Irish economy.

What sets our universities apart is the seamless integration of world-class research and world-class teaching. Research-informed teaching deepens learning, sharpens critical thinking, and enhances graduate employability. By bridging academic theory with real-world application, our universities generate new knowledge that drives better public policy, advances healthcare, addresses climate challenges, and fuels innovation through spin-outs and job creation.

This impact is reflected nationally: in 2024, Ireland's research investment reached €880 million, with IUA universities accounting for 76% of that activity and producing 84% of spin-out companies. Our research ecosystem has been central to positioning Ireland as a globally respected hub for innovation and discovery.

While rooted in strong traditions, our universities are firmly focused on the future – one defined by both significant challenges and transformative opportunities for higher education and for Ireland as a whole.

Given geopolitics, economic and digital change, demographic trends and the downsides of globalisation, more than ever Ireland needs to produce world class research and a highly educated population. As the voice of the sector, the IUA will advocate forcefully for the conditions, resources and wider support our universities need to be the dynamic motor of Ireland's future success.



**Paul Johnston**  
Director General

## CONTEXT

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**Ireland has prospered in recent years as an open economy and, just as important, as a diverse and inclusive society, underpinned by a highly educated workforce and sustained investment in skills, research and innovation.**

Large parts of the world appear to be turning away from globalisation and even basic respect for a rules-based international order. Reducing birth rates, here as in many developing countries, will mean a smaller future workforce supporting an ageing population. AI will fundamentally change how we work and live. The climate imperative is getting less traction than it deserves, but remains central to our shared future.

Thus the “four Ds”—demography, digitalisation, decarbonisation and deglobalisation—will be challenges and opportunities which will reshape our social and economic model. In the lexicon of Control, Influence and Accept, there is a limit to what Ireland can influence and much that we have to accept, but what we can control is how

much we choose to invest in our nation’s key resource—our own people—and their education.

So against this uncertain backdrop, in the years to come, our people will be our biggest national asset, and therefore world class education, skills, research and innovation are critical national priorities. That’s because a thriving, reforming and well-resourced higher education sector will be integral to a resilient and sustainable society and economy, where opportunities exist for all and talent, curiosity, creativity and hard work are encouraged and rewarded. A well educated and informed population is also critical to navigating a world where mis and dis-information, populism and polarisation are on the march in so many countries.



## CONTEXT

The IUA is clear that our future prosperity and competitiveness depend on our developing a cutting-edge knowledge economy, with a world class research and innovation ecosystem that translates knowledge into impact, and for that we need an ever more highly educated workforce.

No less important, we need informed and capable citizens, enabled to navigate a world of complexity, as part of a society that is open, inclusive, outward-facing and tolerant, and which promotes and protects diversity, debate and democracy itself.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR UNIVERSITIES?

We need to preserve and protect our values, enabling excellent teaching and research and supporting student success, whilst adapting to meet the challenges of the future.

#### WE NEED TO SERVE OUR:

- **people** (students, researchers and staff) by anticipating and embracing the radical changes **AI and the digital revolution** are bringing to society and the economy, in *what* we teach and *how* we teach, by providing opportunities for research-led learning and innovation and enabling world-class research and the opportunities of international engagement and cooperation;
- **economy** by responding to the realities of a **changing world of work**, not least the increasing need for **lifelong learning**, evolving our institutions to support learning throughout and across careers, and deepening

**collaboration with enterprise** to drive research translation, knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship, at home and internationally;

- **society** by equipping and **empowering citizens** with the skills and knowledge they need to understand the world around them, to deal with mis- and disinformation, to think critically and be curious, and by **generating independent high-quality research** to inform public policy and societal debate.

This is the challenge and the opportunity facing Ireland's universities in the decade ahead. This is the mission – to **serve our people, economy and society**-that will be at the heart of the work of the IUA in the years ahead. We will harness the energy and ideas across our seven universities to produce ideas, initiative and challenge, for and to, government and business. We will make clear what we need and what Ireland needs to thrive in an increasingly challenging future.

# IUA'S ROLE

We will support our member universities by representing, assisting and challenging them through three core functions:

## 01

### ADVOCACY

our core function will be making the case for higher education and seeking to secure the policy, funding and regulatory conditions required for universities to thrive.

### SECTORAL REPRESENTATION

acting as the key interface between our member universities and stakeholders, including government, enterprise, and social and civic organisations, to shape policy and support coordinated action.

## 02

## 03

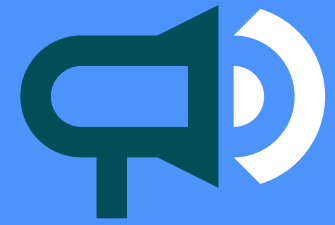
### CHAMPIONING EXCELLENCE AND THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

promoting high standards, sharing best practice, and fostering innovation and strategic foresight through our extensive networks across the sector and beyond.



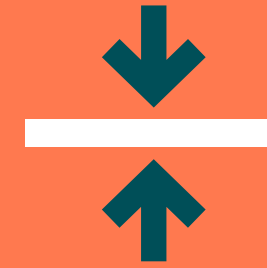
## STRATEGIC AREAS OF FOCUS

We will support our member universities to navigate the challenges and opportunities which lie ahead through a focus on the following priority areas:



### ADVOCACY

As our core business, we will strengthen public understanding of the crucial and growing importance of universities as a strategic national asset, to secure the conditions they need to thrive. We will do so through evidence-based advocacy, to government, business and across society, making clear what we need to succeed.



### ALIGNMENT

We will develop strong partnerships and coordination within the sector and with other sectors, not least business, in support of wider national and regional priorities. We will do so through public and private diplomacy, using a unified voice to make our case.



### AGILITY

We will work to help the sector evolve structures and practices to respond most effectively to changing demand, learner profiles, and to technological, scientific and geopolitical shifts. We will do so through convening expertise and international best practice.



### ACCESS

We will work to strengthen the role of universities as agents of social mobility, as well as academic excellence. We will do so by analysing and seeking to address inequalities and barriers to access and participation, while ensuring high standards.

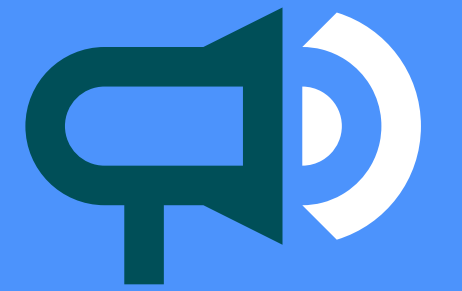


### ACCOUNTABILITY

We will defend the essential autonomy of our sector by promoting best practice governance and seeking a balanced and effective regulatory environment that optimises performance and delivery, thereby allowing universities to thrive and remain independent.

# ADVOCACY

The IUA's key function will be to strengthen public understanding of the crucial and growing importance of universities as a strategic national asset, and to secure the conditions they need to thrive. To this end, we will:



## 01

Build sustained public and political recognition of the **value** of our universities and their increasing relevance, through clearer demonstration of their role in supporting national and regional priorities, not least the need for research excellence and cutting-edge skills to be at the forefront of Ireland's future.

Develop and disseminate compelling evidence to demonstrate the need for ongoing **changes to the policy and funding environment**, including longer-term policy, funding frameworks and more joined-up approaches to support the reform and transformation required to maximise impact.

## 02

## 03

Champion the **role of research-intensive universities** and position their distinct contribution within the tertiary education system, articulating the added value of research intensity for driving knowledge creation, societal progress, global competitiveness and international reputation.

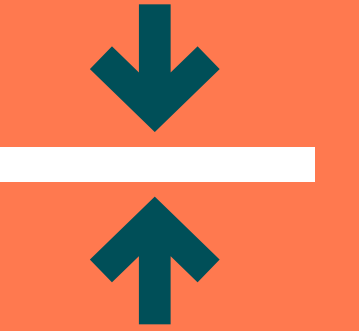
## 04

Strengthen and **extend partnerships and coalitions** to broaden the base of support for universities, across politics, business and civil society.



# ALIGNMENT

To ensure effective partnerships and coordination between the university sector and other actors in support of wider national and regional priorities, we will:



## 01

Position Ireland's research-intensive universities at the centre of national mission delivery by building structured, long-term partnerships that **connect research excellence to public policy, enterprise innovation and measurable societal impact**, strengthening coherence across Ireland's research and innovation ecosystem.

## 02

Deepen **engagement with employers, enterprise bodies, government and wider stakeholders** to better ensure that universities' evolution responds to and takes into account the changing skills needs of the public and private sector.

## 03

Work with government and other relevant stakeholders to promote balanced and effective immigration and employment policies that enable **Ireland's ability to attract and retain global student, staff and researcher talent**.

## 04

Support the alignment of university **EDI policies and initiatives** with national initiatives, including race and gender equality and the elimination of sexual violence and harassment, to support safe and inclusive campuses for all.

## 05

Ensure **international best practice is reflected in the sector's development**, through dialogue and collaboration with counterparts, particularly across the EU and wider Europe, including the UK, reflecting the increasingly important international dimension to our sector and Ireland's future, in policy, resource, network, security and competitiveness terms and the centrality of research-led institutions to all those challenges.

## 06

Engage constructively with Government, enterprise and international partners, on influencing evolving **European research and innovation policy and funding developments**, including in relation to economic and wider societal resilience, recognising the importance of scale and ambition in our response, and ensuring alignment with EU frameworks while safeguarding academic freedom, international collaboration and the core funding of excellence-driven research.



# AGILITY

To support our members to evolve their structures and practices to respond most effectively to changing demand, learner profiles and to technological, scientific and geopolitical shifts, we will:



## 01

Support the responsible **integration of AI** across teaching, research and university operations – protecting the human relationships at the heart of education – while strengthening Ireland’s capacity in frontier AI research and innovation, and contributing to national and European policy on AI in research.

## 02

Support the **mainstreaming of flexible, part-time lifelong learning**, including the necessary policy, structural, funding and internal reforms required to enable a step-change in provision and participation.

## 03

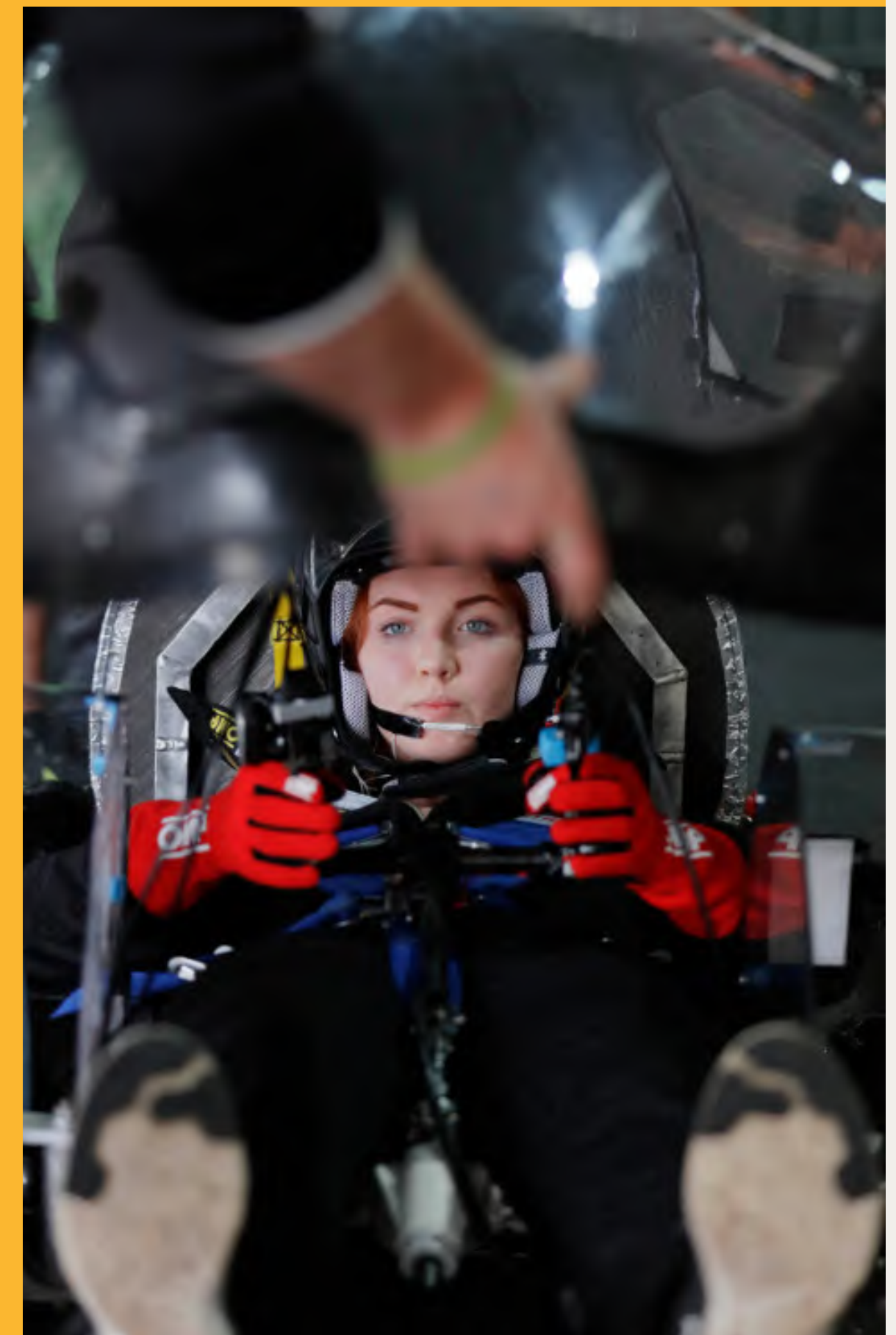
Advocate for the HR and operational policies, frameworks and flexibilities required to **support, develop and manage staff across the sector** as it adapts to an increasingly dynamic higher education environment.

## 04

Drive a more strategic, coordinated and future-focused **approach to national research infrastructure and capacity development**, advocating for sustained multi-annual investment, streamlined decision-making, and mechanisms that enable universities to respond rapidly to emerging scientific, technological and societal priorities.

## 05

Support universities in the **transformation of digital infrastructure and systems** by advocating for a significant programme of investment.



# ACCESS

To strengthen the role of universities as agents of social mobility, addressing inequalities and barriers to access and participation, we will:



## 01

Work with government and partners across the education and training system, to **improve access, transfer and progression pathways** and ensure smoother transitions between NFQ levels and sectors.

Continue to strengthen, simplify and **reform the DARE and HEAR schemes** to better target groups who have experienced genuine higher levels of educational disadvantage.

## 02

## 03

Support universities to embed and **expand flexible and part-time provision** – including through RPL, and micro-credentials – to widen access across all ages and stages of life.

## 04

Strengthen our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion in the university sector through continued **leadership and action on EDI** priorities.



# ACCOUNTABILITY

The integrity and effectiveness of the system depends on adequate resourcing, proportionate regulation and institutional independence. To build confidence in our institutions through excellent, modern governance and promote a well-balanced and effective regulatory environment that optimises performance and delivery, we will:



## 01

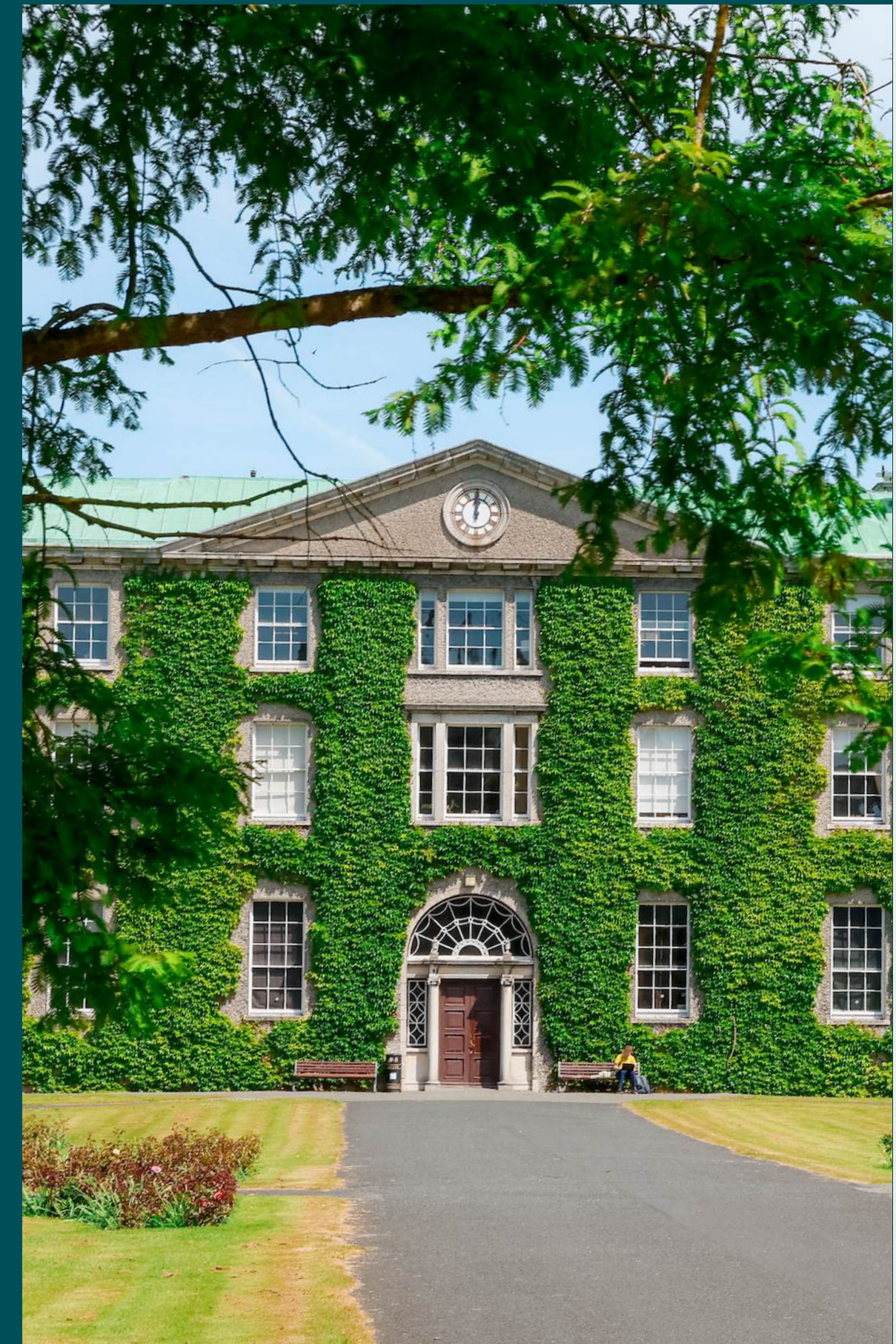
Support **continuous improvement in operational efficiency, governance and value for money** across universities, including in areas relating to research governance, integrity, security and compliance, drawing on international and private-sector best practice.

## 02

Advocate for modern, effective and **proportionate oversight** and an appropriate regulatory regime, drawing on best practice elsewhere, including internationally.

## 03

Advocate forcefully for the **autonomy of our universities** to be respected and upheld by all stakeholders as an essential enabler for excellence, innovation, responsiveness and accountability, and ensure it is fully protected in the legislation and governance frameworks for higher education.



## CONCLUSION

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**In an era of rapid change and increasing geopolitical uncertainty Ireland's research-intensive universities have never been more important to the success of our society and economy.**

Our national economic success depends on an internationally leading and responsive higher education system to address the changing skills requirements of Ireland's economy.

Furthermore, our research-intensive universities can bring world-class research, entrepreneurial talent and business together in a powerful symbiosis that can deliver significant societal impacts, including driving inward investment into Ireland and informing public policy.

Our universities are an asset that should not be taken for granted. Commitments have been made to resource the sector fully. These are yet to be fully realised, despite the exceptionally strong public finances the State has enjoyed. We are now at a crossroads, in terms of investment decisions for the future.

The extra money in 2025 for research infrastructure was necessary, but far from sufficient.

Increasing and sustaining funding of our higher education sector, in particular in the institutions delivering world-class teaching and research, is essential for Ireland's long-term resilience and prosperity. The government itself has accepted that there is a substantial funding deficit.

It is clear to us that the extra resources required by our higher education institutions are a worthwhile, and ultimately cost-beneficial investment. The challenge has never been more complex, the opportunities have never been more exciting, and the case for sustained and strategic investment will never be more compelling.



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