

OPENING STATEMENT OF PAUL JOHNSTON IUA DIRECTOR GENERAL

15th October 2026

OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE FOR FUTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION,
RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE



STATEMENT BY PAUL JOHNSTON, DIRECTOR GENERAL, IRISH UNIVERSITIES ASSOCIATION
15th October 2026

Cathaoirleach, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Ireland's research-intensive universities have been central to our economic and social progress. As the Minister for Finance noted last week, Ireland now has 2.8 million people in work, almost three times as many as in 1972. Not unrelated to this, there are almost ten times as many people in higher education as 50 years ago. Student numbers have grown by more than 50% since 2008. The seven IUA universities admitted over 10,000 additional students in the last two years alone. 59% of Irish adults hold a tertiary qualification, compared with 43% across the OECD. Among 25 to 34-year-olds, it's 67%, against an OECD average of 47%.

But State funding per student is 34% less in real terms than in 2008. Ireland's spending on higher education at 0.5% of GDP is half the OECD average, placing us 35th out of 38 OECD countries.

Government has acknowledged the problem but not moved fast enough to address it. In 2022 *Funding the Future* identified a €307 million core funding gap and committed to closing it. Five Budgets later, the original deficit is down to around €130 million. But as we know in our own lives, household costs don't stand still as you pay down your mortgage. Unfunded pay costs and unfunded growth in student numbers have pushed the real gap above €250 million per annum.

Our pre-Budget submission thus sought €190 million in additional core funding this year and next to close that gap. Budget 2027 provided only €10 million in new core funding in the context of overall budget spending package of more than €6bn extra government spending.

We recognise the wider cost of living pressures the budget sought to address. Universities are facing these too, not least higher energy costs and wage costs over which we have no control. So, it's important to address the cost of learning issue and the opportunity cost of not investing in higher education.

Such investment is not an end in itself. It is about securing the skills, research and innovation Ireland needs to attract foreign direct investment, grow high-value indigenous enterprise and remain competitive in a more uncertain world. It is also about equipping our people with the skills needed to be responsible citizens in a world of increasing polarisation and populism, misinformation and disinformation, what Newman in his "Idea of a University" called "training good members of society". Ireland is one of the world's most highly educated societies. The choice is whether to allow that to erode or to put our university sector on a sustainable footing.

Thank you for addressing that issue today.