

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Sean O'Driscoll, Chair of the Governing Authority, University College Cork

15 October 2026

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

As Chair of the Governing Authority of University College Cork, I am conscious of our responsibility to ensure that UCC remains strong and sustainable for future generations. That responsibility requires us to be honest about a growing gap between the contribution universities are expected to make and the resources available to support that contribution.

Much has already been said about the national funding challenge confronting higher education. I would like to focus instead on the experience of UCC and what a widening gap between ambition and investment means for the long-term capacity of universities to deliver education, research and innovation at the scale the country requires. Funding Universities is not just another part of public expenditure, they are critical national infrastructure that produce the graduates, researchers, entrepreneurs and innovators that underpin economic growth.

UCC is a major national and regional asset, contributing approximately **€ 1.2 billion** annually to the economy and supporting **21,000** jobs across Cork and the wider South-West. We are educating more students than ever before, with student numbers increasing by **23.3%** over the last 8 years to **26,988**.

However, the funding model has not kept pace with that growth.

While student numbers have increased by **23%**, Core State funding, adjusted for inflation has only increased by **€28m** over the same period.

To maintain our teaching, research and student services, UCC has become increasingly reliant on non-Exchequer income, philanthropy, international student recruitment and commercial income.

UCC's internationalisation strategy has helped diversify income streams. However, recent Government policy developments affecting visa arrangements, while outside the

control of the higher education sector, are having a material impact on recruitment from key international markets, with an estimated financial impact of **€3.7 million** for UCC for 2026/27.

From a governance perspective, our concern is the growing misalignment between national ambitions for higher education and the resources available to realise them. Universities can and should embrace change, innovation and growth, but these must be underpinned by a sustainable funding model.

I therefore ask the Committee to support four key measures:

- a multi-annual plan to address the funding gap in higher education;
- full funding of demographic growth and nationally agreed pay awards;
- strategic investment of National Training Fund resources in higher education; and
- a review of visa policy and processing arrangements to support Ireland's higher education and skills objectives.

The challenge for UCC is not one of demand or ambition. It is ensuring that the funding model keeps pace with the role universities are being asked to play in Ireland's economic and social development.

Thank you.