



Networking by universities will lead to expertise

OPINION

A form of competitive collaboration builds critical mass and excellence



JIM BROWNE

AT THE Global Irish Economic Forum in Dublin last weekend, Peter Sutherland, chairman of Goldman Sachs, advocated more investment in universities, specifically in "a single institution which would be able to compete with some of the best in the world".

We need more investment in Irish universities, but I have serious concerns about the proposal to focus that in a single institution. This proposal is rightly driven by a commitment to excellence. But it seems informed by a misunderstanding of the international university ranking systems, which are about as useful a guide to policymakers and potential students as those of Irish banks were to investors in the mid 2000s.

Critically the proposal flies in the face of the reality of the Irish system. The universities have been transformed by 10 years or more of major investment, through the Programme for Research in Third Level (PRTL) and the various programmes of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI). Almost €2.5 billion has been invested across the sector in focused centres of excellence.

These investments were made

following competitive processes. All involved international peer review. There was no *a priori* or politically influenced "divvying-up" of funds between institutions; no allocation of funds based on a notion of entitlement or "equity". All proposed centres competed, and were assessed against criteria which reflected the highest international standards. The results are interesting; there are centres of excellence in all of the Irish universities. A recent Enterprise Ireland analysis of the take-up of research funds from the EU Framework 7 programme paints a similar picture.

Irish universities are a rather homogenous group, compared to UK or US institutions. We share a common entry system, attracting students with similar levels of achievement. We work under the same funding regime and are subject to similar external examiner systems. Staff work to the same contracts.

In recent years a culture of collaboration has developed. New partnerships have emerged through the series of successful collaborative research bids to SFI, PRTL and other agencies.

Formal strategic partnerships, eg [NUI Galway - University of Limerick](#) and the [UCD-TCU](#) alliances, highlight the willingness to work together. Why not build on this? What I suggest is a form of competitive collaboration that builds critical mass and excellence. I'm not advocating a protected public-sector monopoly. Rather I argue for critical mass and excellence by developing a strong

network of collaborating universities each of which aspires to excellence in particular areas.

A university cannot effectively meet the needs of its various stakeholders unless it operates at the level of excellence on a global scale. If [NUI Galway](#) is to support the development of the medical devices industry or the ICT sector it must create and sustain excellent research and teaching programmes in these areas.

Public policy should encourage a network of universities, each of which develops excellence in selected, complementary areas appropriate to society's needs.

Peter Sutherland is correct: Ireland cannot fund the creation of seven world-class universities each of which seeks excellence in every discipline. We must however create a network of collaborating universities each of which is clear on its priority areas and how it will sustain excellence in them. The funding of these priority areas should be unambiguously premised on achieving and sustaining excellence. Take UCC's research reputation in pharmaceutical, food and microelectronics, or TCD's strength in nano-science and key bioscience areas, these are national assets, not proprietary claims in higher educational terms.

The selection of complementary priority themes in line with the changing needs of society implies reduced resources for some disciplines: a willingness to recognise that another university occupies the high ground in that discipline and to encourage colleagues and research students to collaborate with a partner university. In the long run there is only one sustainable competitive advantage – excellence. It is not the preserve of any one institution.

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