



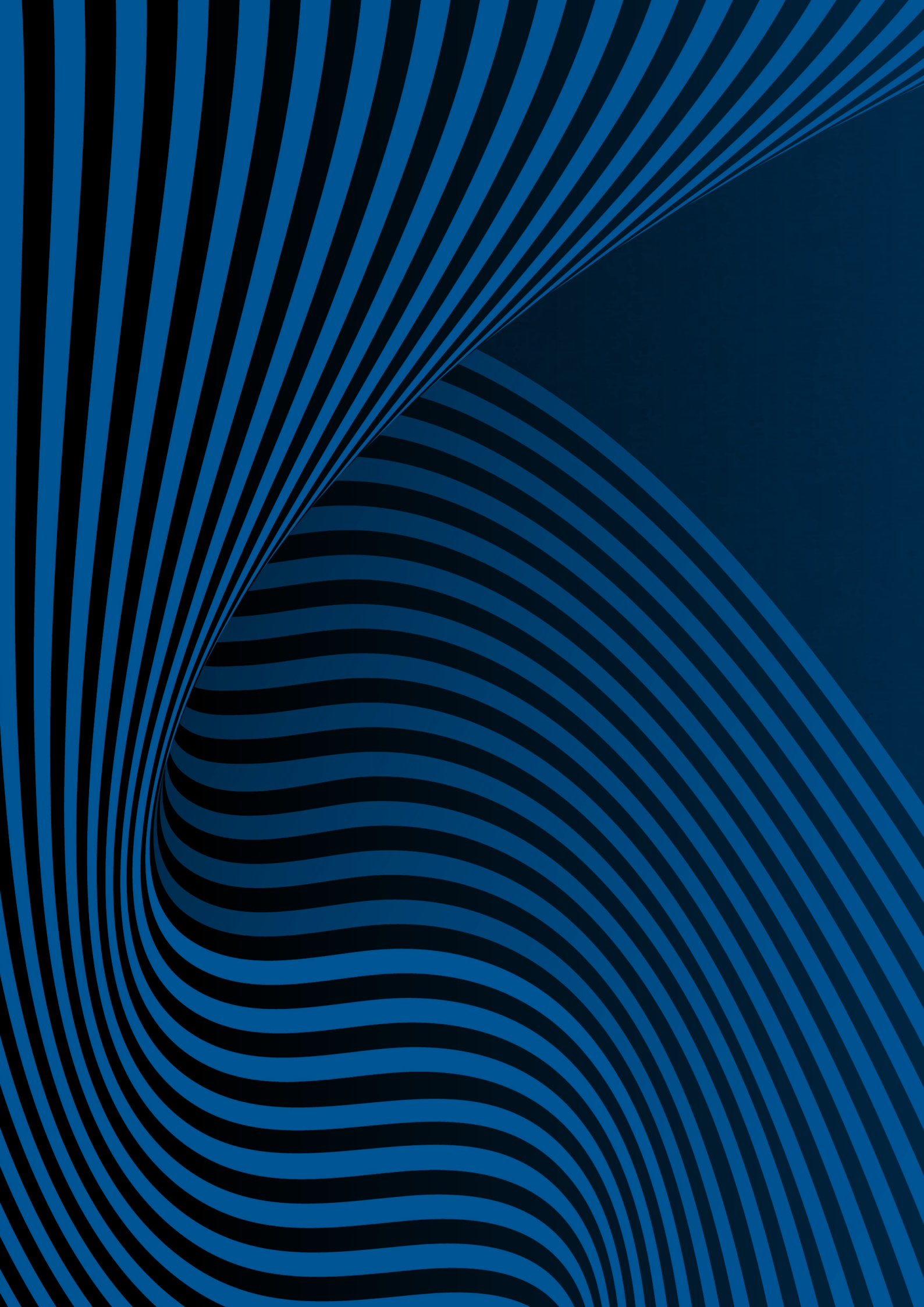
**IFUT**

Irish Federation of University Teachers  
Cónaidhm Éireannach na Múinteoirí Ollscoile



**Zero Precarity Full Potential**

**IFUT Pre Election Call**



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# IFUT's Call

This is a call from the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) setting out what commitments we expect to see in the election manifestoes of those aspiring to secure a part in the next Government. Should those individuals or parties expect our support, they must address the critical needs and priorities for higher education as outlined in this document. As the current government enters its final six months in office, the urgency to address these issues is paramount.

## Introduction

The Irish Federation of University Teachers (Cónaidhm Éireannach na Múinteoirí Ollscoile), or IFUT, is a trade union representing university staff across Ireland. We represent various grades across our branches, including Lecturers, Researchers, Tutors, Librarians, and other grades. IFUT is unique in Ireland as the only trade union exclusively organising university workers.

As a result of our unique position, IFUT not only represents members on individual issues and through collective bargaining but also lobbies and campaigns on broader issues affecting our members and the sector. These issues include protecting academic freedom, campaigning for greater investment in Higher Education, and advocating for respect and recognition of the importance of our members' work, not only to the students and universities themselves but to our wider and global communities.

In addition to our national advocacy, IFUT is an active participant in international educational trade unions and organisations, reflecting our commitment to global standards in education and labour rights. We are members of:

- The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), representing 123 education trade unions across 51 countries with over 11 million members.
- Education International (EI), a global organisation with 383 member organisations representing over 32 million education professionals in 178 countries.
- The Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) on education to the OECD and the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee on Education.

Furthermore, we are engaged with other international committees and working groups, such as the British and Irish Group of Teacher Unions (BIGTU) and the European Network Education and Training in Occupational Safety and Health (ENETOSH). These international affiliations allow IFUT to bring best practices from around the world into the Irish context, advocating for policies that ensure the highest standards of education and employment for university staff.



# The Purpose of this Paper

This document has been developed to clearly outline the needs and priorities within our sector. As representatives of a vital stakeholder group in the education system, we emphasise the necessity of prioritising and investing in the future of higher education to ensure its continued growth, quality, and accessibility. Our 3,000+ members, who work across universities in Ireland, influence their students and society. Understanding the positions of political parties and candidates in the upcoming General Election 2024 will help our members make informed decisions about who best represents the interests of Further and Higher Education.

## The Challenges

A central ingredient in the strong performance of the Irish economy since the 1980s has been our well-educated workforce. Of course, a well-educated workforce requires a well-functioning education system. While, by many metrics, Ireland's primary and secondary school education system is world-leading, for a highly developed, high-income economy like Ireland, a world-leading third-level education system is also required.

Unfortunately, due to low levels of state funding and high staff-to-student ratios, the Irish tertiary education system is not operating at the level it could be.

The Further and Higher Education sector continues to lack secure, stable, and adequate funding to address existing deficits. IFUT advocates for a publicly funded sector, with state funding reaching the OECD average within a clearly defined timeframe. This funding strategy must also address critical issues such as equitable student support and the ongoing crisis in student accommodation. Student accommodation should be provided on a not-for-profit basis and must be genuinely affordable for all who need it. Public funding should replace student fees.

There are several significant challenges facing the third-level sector: underinvestment, low teacher-to-student ratios, and rising student numbers, alongside precarious employment, gender inequality, and the lack of a comprehensive framework for secure, long-term academic careers. If the third-level sector continues on the path it is on, it threatens Ireland's successful growth model, which is based on having a highly educated workforce.<sup>[1]</sup> See Chapter 5 of *The State We are In: Inequality in Ireland 2024*.

### *A highly educated workforce*

It is worth highlighting that despite Ireland's underinvestment in third-level education, Ireland's population has one of the highest levels of education in the world.

62.7% of those aged 25-34 in Ireland have attained a third-level qualification, the highest proportion in the EU.

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 5 of *The State We are In: Inequality in Ireland 2024*.

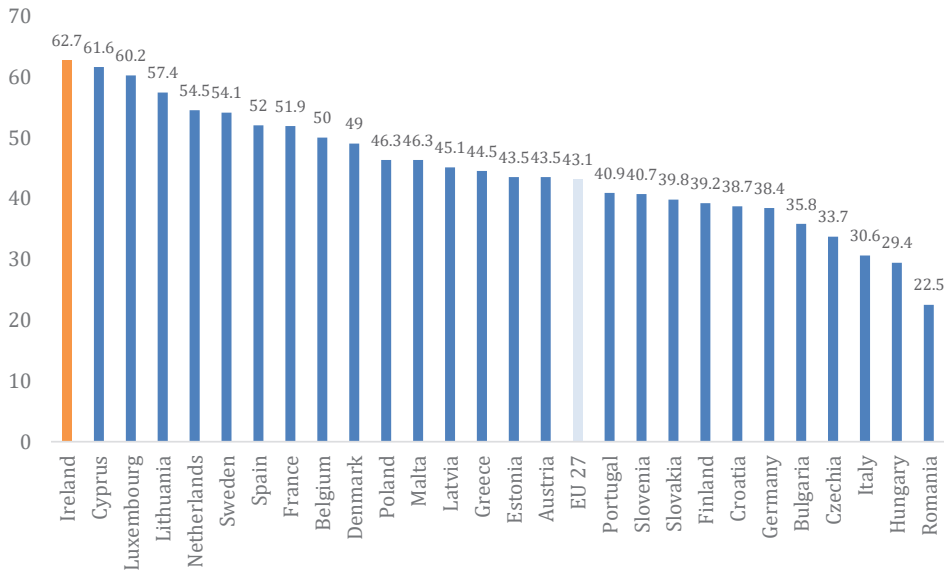


Figure 1: Tertiary educational attainment, 25 - 34 years, 2023, % of the relevant population. Source: Eurostat

59.4% of 20-year-olds are enrolled in tertiary education in Ireland, the third highest in the EU and only marginally behind Slovenia which has the highest level of enrolment at 62.1%.

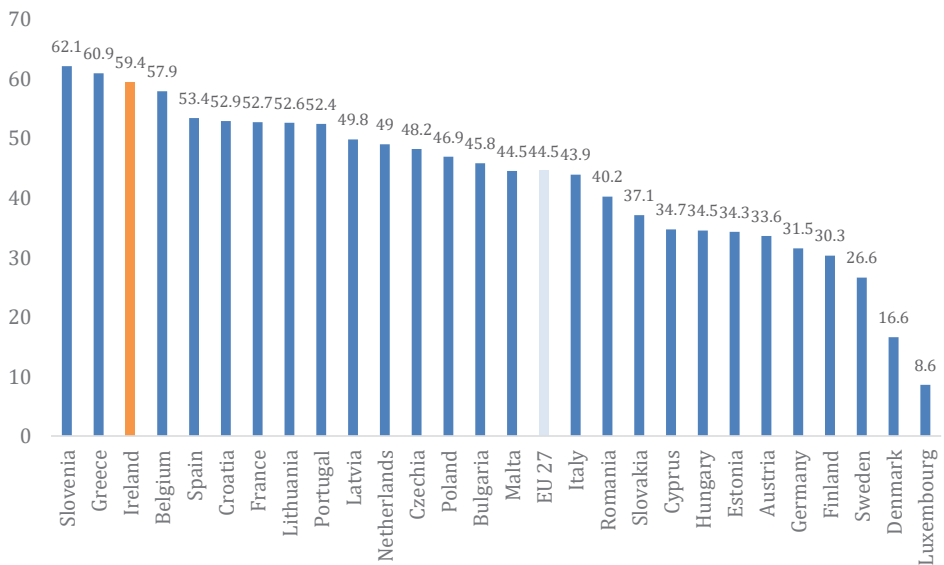


Figure 2: Tertiary educational attainment, 25 - 34 years, 2022 Enrolled in tertiary education, 20 years, 2022, % of the relevant population. Source: Eurostat

This high level of educational attainment is dependent on high levels of investment, which unfortunately have been sorely lacking in recent years.

## Low and declining investment

As a percentage of GDP, less is spent in Ireland on tertiary education than all other 35 OECD states, where data is available, bar one. Of course, Ireland's GDP figures are inflated, so this is perhaps a misleading figure. Figure 3 also shows Ireland's educational spending as a percentage of Modified Gross National Income (GNI) to address this. When educational spending is evaluated in terms of GNI, Ireland shifts from having the second lowest total spending on tertiary education to the 19th highest among these 36 countries.

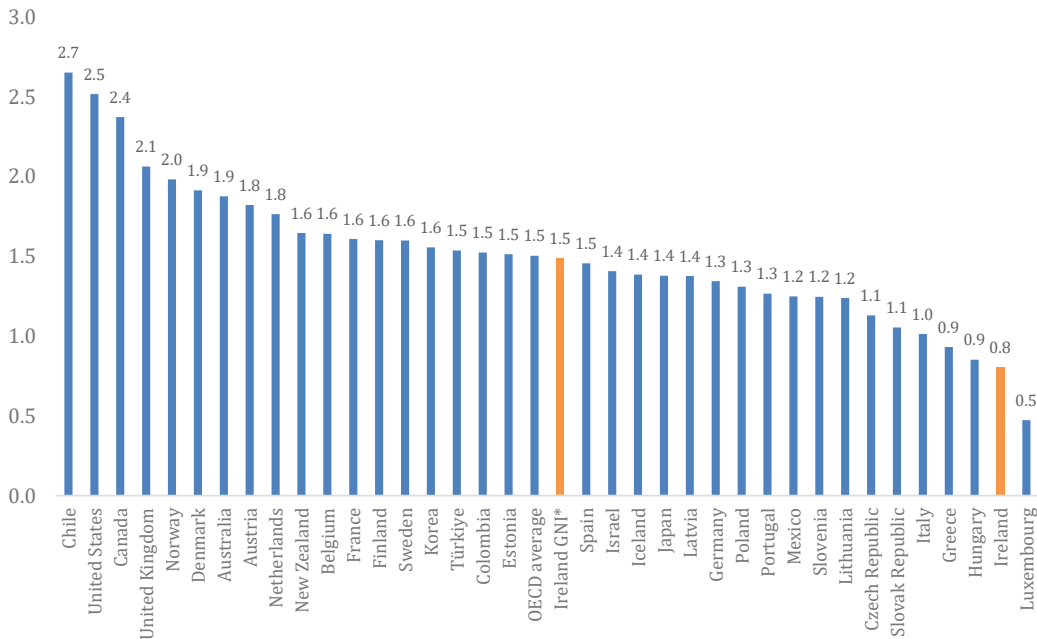


Figure 3: Expenditure on tertiary educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (2020) Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2023

In addition to the relatively low level of total spending on tertiary education in Ireland, the amount spent per student in Ireland has declined significantly, the most recent available data, which was released in February 2024 as part of the publication 'Measuring Ireland's Progress 2022', shows that between 2009 and 2016, spending per student in third level education decreased by 39% from €10,252 in 2021 prices to €6,774. After 2016 spending increased but it did not reverse the reduction in spending. In contrast, spending per student in primary remained fairly stable, while spending per student in secondary declined and then recovered.

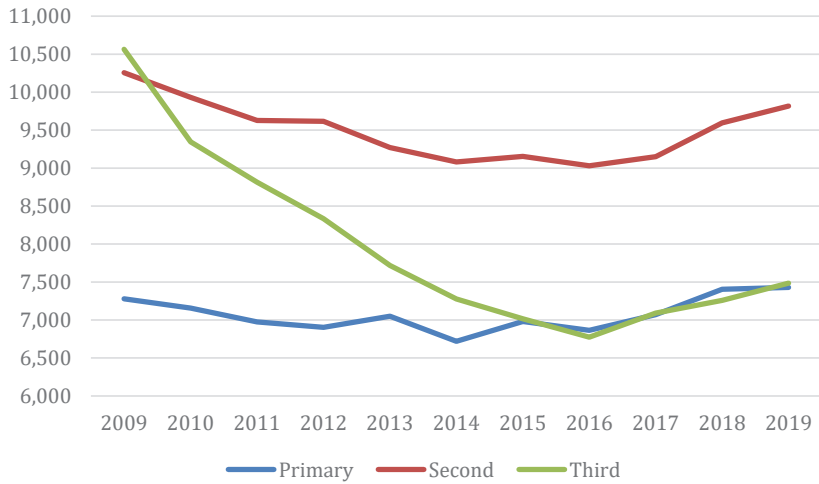


Figure 4: Real current public expenditure on education (2009-2019), € per student at constant 2021 prices  
Source: CSO, Measuring Ireland’s Progress 2022

### High student-to-teacher ratios & rising student numbers

A result of this low level of investment is unusually high student-to-staff ratios. The most recent OECD figures show that Ireland has the highest student-to-teaching staff ratio of the countries where this data is available. They estimate that there are 22.4 students for every member of teaching staff in Ireland’s third-level sector. This is well above the EU average of 15.6 and more than double the level in peer states such as Norway or Sweden, where the student-to-teaching staff ratio is below 10.

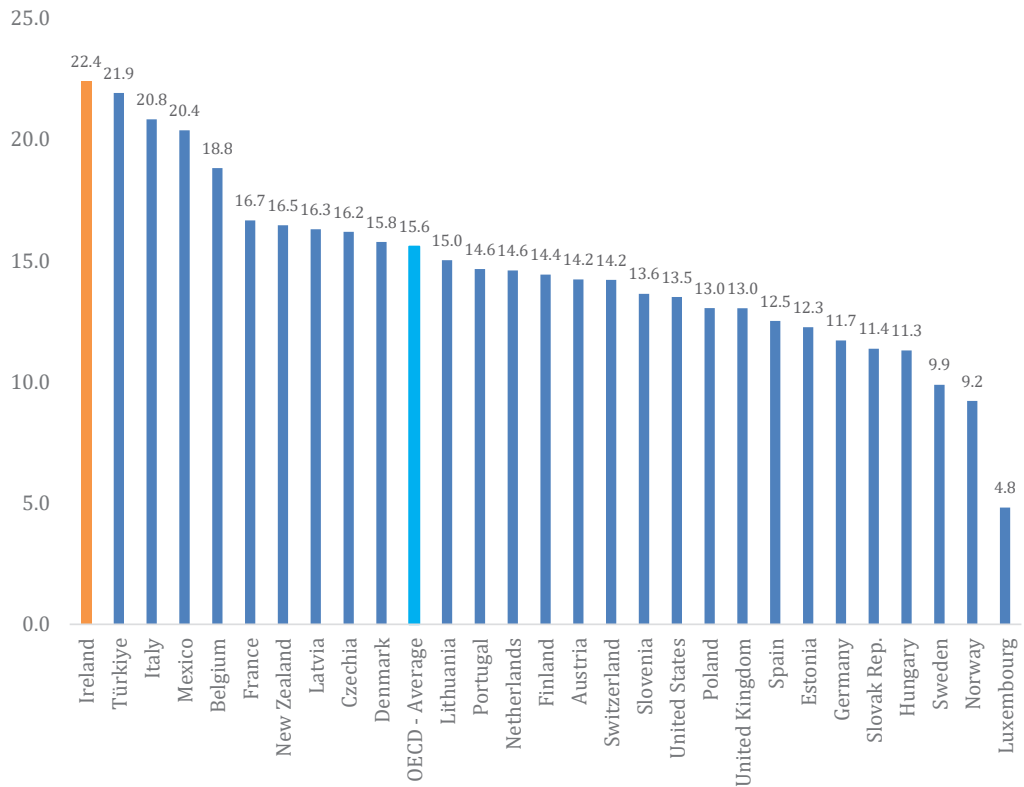


Figure 5: Students per teaching staff in the tertiary sector, 2020 Source: OECD



The prevailing situation regarding funding and staff-to-student ratios is no surprise. A Press Statement issued by the CSO as far back as June 2018 stated:

*'The secondary school-aged population is projected to increase by between 67,300 and 75,700 persons by 2026 depending on the assumption used, equating to increases of between 18.2% and 20.5% on the 2016 level of 369,900 persons. By 2051, there will be between 330,300 and 439,600 secondary school-aged children.'*

Reference is often made to this 'demographic bubble' by academics, studies into this, which were known to those in government before the last general election and the development of manifestoes and programmes for government established that by 2030 established that there would be an additional 40,000 students in higher education in Ireland. Page 21 of the 'Population and Labour Force Projections 2016-2046' CSO Report shows increasing participation rates in education for the ages between 2002 and 2016, the report assumes that these percentage figures will remain largely constant until 2026. These figures have further increased in recent years as a result of migration into Ireland.



Crucially, a key issue in the sector is the student-to-staff ratios and the challenges presented by demographic changes in the years ahead. A recent TASC study recommended increasing academic teaching staff by 650 net annually over the next decade. Adding these posts will reduce the student-staff ratio and allow for the creation of quality research-informed teaching posts. OECD figures indicate a current student-staff ratio of 22.4:1 across Further and Higher education in Ireland. To reach the OECD average of 15:1, staff numbers would need to increase by 49%, or by approximately 6,500 new teaching positions. Government projections show increases in student numbers over the next decade of between approximately 6 and 19%. In that context, an increase of some 650 staff annually is a conservative estimate of what is required to reach the OECD ratio average. Working towards the lower ratio will enable a greater proportion of jobs to be filled on a long-term, full-time basis, thereby tackling the problem of precarious employment, which remains pervasive across the sector.

It is vital that academic careers across the sector are attractive to talented teachers and researchers and that all enjoy a comprehensive and coherent career framework.







## Previous Commitments to Increasing Core Funding

A Government-commissioned Report, published in March of 2016 'Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education' colloquially referred to as 'The Cassells Report' recommended an increase in core funding to €600 million in 2021, rising to €1 billion by 2030. These recommendations were premised on moving towards a staffing ratio of 14:1 in line with the best-performing states by 2030. While the government ultimately accepted this report, the recommended budget increase was not acted upon. In 2022, the then Minister for Higher and Further Education, now Taoiseach, determined that increasing the annual funding to the sector by €307m would address the shortfall. While this figure was, and is, disputed the additional funding introduced into the sector is of the order of €100m annually.

It may give the impression that this covers around a third of the funding gap identified by *Funding the Future*, however, the Irish Universities Association estimates that €92m of that €100m has gone to increasing costs, with only €8m going towards the €307m per annum core funding gap identified by *Funding the Future*.

The student: staff ratio which was a focus of the Cassells Report has not improved since the publication of the Report and continues to increase year on year.

While these funding shortfalls are challenging, the exchequer is in a healthy position and there is scope for increased funding. The 2024 Summer Statement notes "the health of the public finances" and states that for Budget 2025, an overall package of €8.3 billion is being made available. Of this €3.2 billion is yet to be allocated. Indeed the 2024 Summer Statement forecasts annual "to be allocated" funding up to 2030 of between €2.6bn and €3.1bn. Therefore, funding is available to address the third-level funding shortfall.

# Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations in 2015, serve as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030. These goals address global challenges, including those related to education, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. Within this framework, IFUT places a particular emphasis on SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. For higher education, this includes increasing the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship. It also advocates for eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations.

SDG 8 focuses on promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. In the context of higher education, it is crucial to address the prevalence of precarious employment practices which undermine both staff well-being and the quality of education provided to students. The current reliance on temporary, fixed-term, and casual contracts for academic staff runs counter to the objectives of SDG 8, as it fails to provide stable and secure employment conditions that support economic growth and decent work.

## Academic Precarity

### *Academic Precarity: A Critical Challenge in Higher Education*

Precarious employment in higher education is not merely an inconvenience but a systemic issue that undermines the stability and quality of the entire sector. Characterised by temporary, fixed-term, and casual contracts, precarious employment practices have far-reaching negative impacts on both staff and students. The IFUT Report on Precarious Employment (October 2023) provides a comprehensive overview of these impacts and highlights the urgent need for reform.

### *Impact on Staff*

The IFUT Report underscores that precarious employment conditions significantly affect university staff, leading to financial instability, lack of career progression, and increased stress. Many university staff, particularly those in teaching and research roles, find themselves on successive short-term contracts with no clear pathway to permanency. As the report reveals, ***“Precarious employment significantly affects university staff, leading to financial instability, lack of career progression, and increased stress. These conditions are particularly detrimental to women, who are disproportionately represented in casual and temporary roles”*** (IFUT Report, p. 48).





Moreover, precarious employment practices have a chilling effect on academic freedom and innovation. Staff on insecure contracts often lack the stability needed to engage in long-term research projects or innovative teaching methods, which in turn diminishes the quality of education and research outputs. The report also notes that many staff members on precarious contracts are forced to take on multiple jobs to make ends meet, leading to exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction. This is not just an individual problem but a systemic one that affects the entire academic community.

### *Impact on Students*

The instability caused by precarious employment extends beyond staff to negatively impact students as well. There is a clear link between precarious academic employment and compromised student learning conditions. The report highlights that “Casualisation affects the ability of staff to provide consistent, high-quality education, which in turn undermines student satisfaction and educational outcomes” (IFUT Report, p. 25). High staff turnover disrupts student learning and mentorship, undermines academic continuity, and affects the overall quality of education. Students suffer when their educators are overburdened, underpaid, and constantly facing job insecurity.

### *Gender Inequality*

Precarious employment also exacerbates gender inequality within higher education. The IFUT Report identifies a stark gender dimension to precarious employment, stating that **“Women are more likely to be employed in precarious positions, exposing them to workplace harassment, career disruptions, and a lack of salary progression”** (IFUT Report, pp. 49-50). This situation perpetuates gender inequality and limits opportunities for women to advance in their academic careers. Women are overrepresented in part-time and non-permanent positions, which not only affects their career progression but also their overall job satisfaction and mental health.

### *Call to Action*

To address the challenges posed by precarious employment, IFUT is calling on the next government to take decisive action. We demand the full implementation of the recommendations outlined in the IFUT Report on Precarious Employment. This includes establishing clear pathways to permanent contracts, ensuring fair working conditions, and addressing the gender disparities within the academic workforce. Furthermore, we urge the government to eliminate the Employment Control Framework (ECF) that restricts the hiring of permanent staff and perpetuates the cycle of precarious employment.

By committing to these changes, the next government can ensure that Ireland’s higher education sector remains a leader in quality education and research, free from the detrimental impacts of precarious employment.









# Sectoral Engagement: A Need for Structured Dialogue in Higher Education

Effective sectoral engagement is vital for addressing the challenges facing higher education in Ireland. Currently, there is a notable absence of a dedicated forum for comprehensive sectoral dialogue between trade unions and employers within the higher education sector. This lack of structured engagement limits the ability to resolve disputes and collaboratively address broader issues beyond those covered by existing public sector agreements.

The absence of a sectoral forum for higher education is unique within the public sector and presents a significant gap in industrial relations. The current public sector pay agreements, including Section 5.3.2, focus primarily on overseeing the 'smooth functioning of industrial relations' through management/union forums that operate within the confines of existing agreements. However, this framework does not extend to sector-specific issues within higher education, leaving significant concerns unaddressed.

Furthermore, the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages obligates Ireland to promote collective bargaining and enhance the capacity of social partners to engage in meaningful negotiations. Given that collective bargaining coverage in Ireland is below the 80% threshold required by the Directive, it is imperative to establish a formal sectoral forum for higher education. This would ensure that all stakeholders, including trade unions, academic staff, and employers, can engage in constructive dialogue on issues such as employment conditions, funding strategies, and workforce planning.

IFUT calls on the next government to prioritise the creation of a sectoral engagement forum for higher education. Such a forum should be inclusive, well-resourced, and empowered to address the systemic issues affecting the sector, including those related to precarious employment and academic freedom. Only through meaningful sectoral engagement can the challenges facing higher education be effectively addressed to ensure a stable and sustainable future for universities and their staff.







# IFUT's Demands

Given the range of challenges facing the third-level education sector, IFUT demands that any party or individual aspiring to be part of the next government must:

1. ***Increase Investment in Education:*** Commit to substantially increasing investment in education at all levels. This includes bringing expenditure per student up to the average levels of peer countries over the medium term, reducing class sizes, resolving teacher supply issues, and creating a more inclusive education system.
2. ***Implement Recommendations on Precarious Employment:*** Fully implement the recommendations from the IFUT Report on Precarious Employment. This involves creating clear pathways to permanent contracts for all staff, ensuring fair and equitable working conditions, and addressing gender disparities and inequalities within the academic workforce.
3. ***Align Staff-Student Ratios with International Standards:*** Commit to achieving staff-student ratios that meet or exceed international best standards within the term of the next government. This requires significant investment in hiring additional academic staff to reduce the burden on current staff and improve the quality of education.
4. ***Establish a Sectoral Engagement Forum:*** Create a dedicated forum for sectoral engagement within higher education. This forum should facilitate structured dialogue between trade unions, representing academic staff, and employers to collaboratively address issues such as employment conditions, funding strategies, and workforce planning, ensuring alignment with EU directives on collective bargaining.
5. ***Advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):*** Actively promote and implement policies that advance the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Commit to adhering to these goals within the proposed timeframes and strive to achieve these objectives ahead of schedule where possible.
6. ***Remove the Employment Control Framework (ECF):*** Eliminate the outdated Employment Control Framework (ECF) to allow universities the flexibility to hire according to current needs, rather than being restricted by employment levels that are no longer relevant. This change is essential to address the pressing issues of staff shortages and precarious employment.

The future of higher education in Ireland depends on the commitments made today. We call on all political leaders to act decisively and support these essential priorities. Each student matters, each staff member counts, and each vote is crucial for the future of higher education in Ireland.

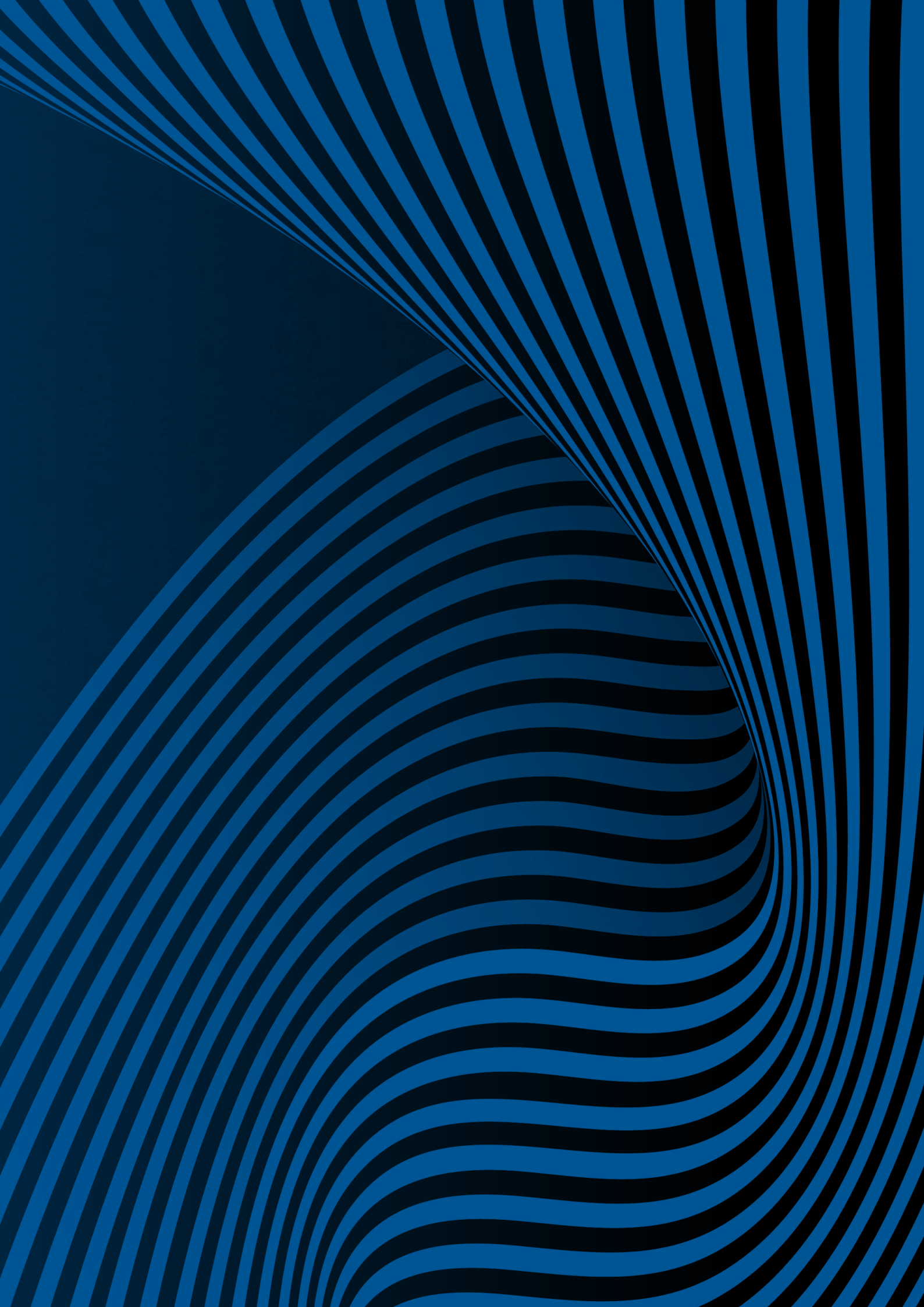
# Acknowledgements

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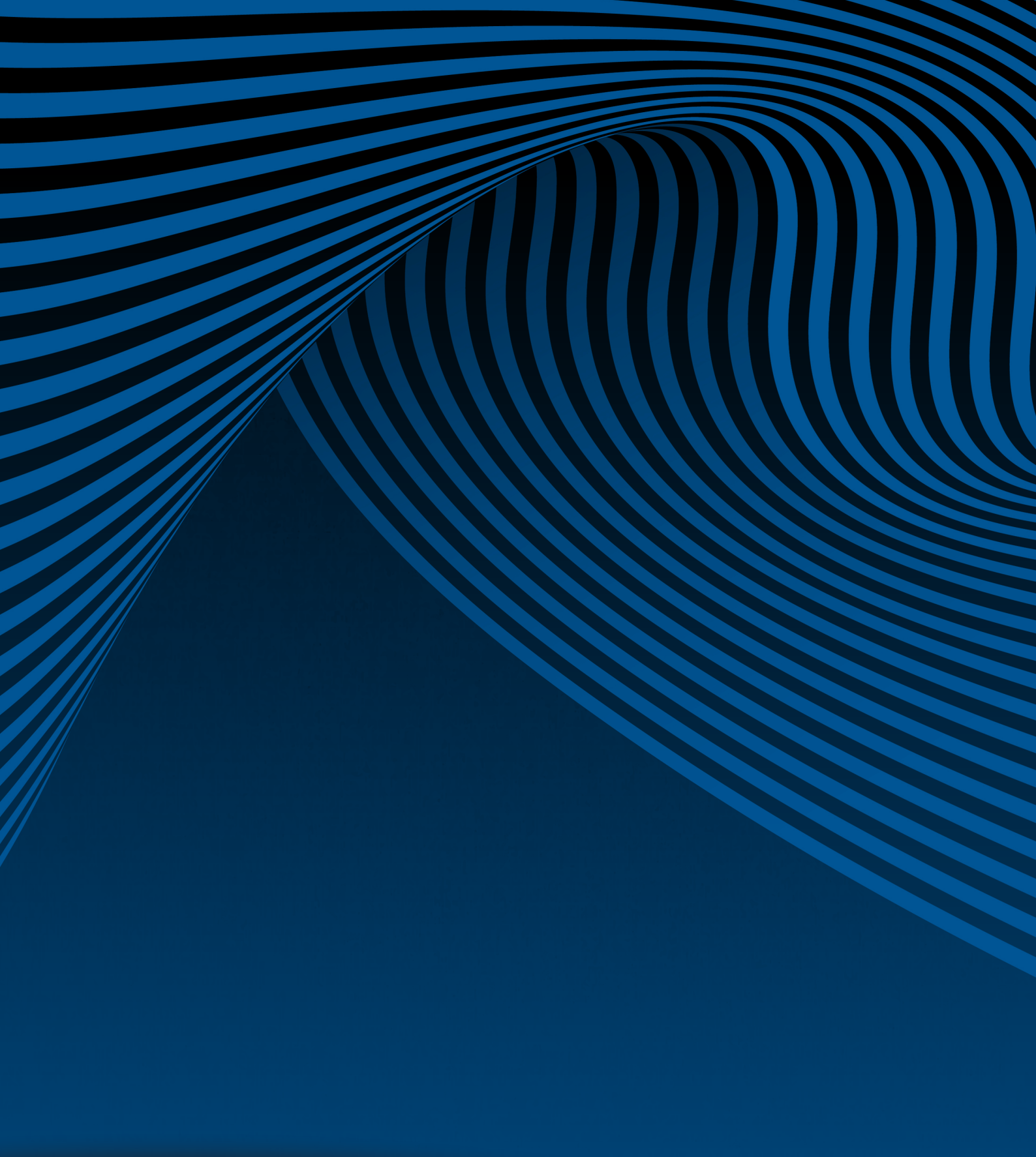
The Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) would like to extend our sincere thanks to Oisín Gilmore, Senior Economist at TASC, for his invaluable contribution to the statistical information and analysis provided in this document. His expertise has been instrumental in highlighting the critical challenges facing the third-level education sector in Ireland.

We are greatly appreciative to the late Macdara Doyle of ICTU for the research and support that he provided to IFUT and to the ICTU Group of Further and Higher Education unions in recent years. The recommendations contained within his report of Spring 2020 'The Case for Publicly-Funded Higher Education' remain as relevant today as they were in 2020.

We would also like to express our deep gratitude to the countless volunteers from the academic community who dedicated their time and effort to contribute to the IFUT Report on Precarious Employment. Your commitment and insights have been essential in documenting the realities of precarious work in higher education and shaping our call for urgent reforms. Your voices are vital in advocating for a fairer and more sustainable future for all who work and study in our universities.







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