



Students4Change FOI Reveals Underfunding of Blue Skies Research

Students4Change has obtained access to per-School funding amounts for the 24 Schools in Trinity College Dublin following [an appeal](#) at the Office of the Information Commissioner, and has analysed the results. The Freedom of Information (FOI) act allows individuals to ask for information from public bodies and the requester in this case was László Molnárfi, Chairperson of Students4Change.

Please find attached:

- [The document provided to Students4Change describing the funding per-School from 2019 until 2022](#)
- [Students4Change's additional calculations showing funding per School per full-time equivalent student in 2022, and subsequent graphs and visualisations](#)
- [Explanatory Booklet for the Baseline Budgeting Model \(BBM\) obtained via another FOI](#)

The data we received clearly shows the approach that Trinity College Dublin, a university that has undergone neoliberal reforms over the past decade, is taking. We expect that the situation is similar in other third-level institutions too. The government underfunding of the sector is responsible for the market-based reforms that are transforming academia into a money-making venture. It is unquestionable that encroaching fees, no proper funding from taxpayer money has led third-level institutions to adopt corporate models, increasing fees and rents, reducing democracy, casualizing staff (thus hurting teaching, research and the community as a whole) and cutting vital student and staff services.

The data in question shows a deep inequality in the funding of Schools that are predominantly engaged in blue skies research as opposed to those engaged in marketable research. The former Schools struggle to attract funding, whereas the latter Schools are inundated with partnerships, sponsorships and corporate donors. What would be ideal is a sector that adequately funds all academia, but this is not the case under the current funding regime for a variety of reasons.

We can at the outset say that the data is not a detailed budget breakdown but it is broadly reflective of the trends in funding¹. Firstly, we see that most of the arts and humanities

¹ The "spend" by school in the FOI response refers to operational expenditure incurred by schools, meaning it reflects day to day costs. College does not have a 'funding by school' category in our accounts. The numbers do not include direct research expenditure. (As

Schools fall in the €4000 to €10000 range when it comes to funding per FTSE student in 2021/2022, whereas most of the sciences Schools fall in €10000 to €15000. Notable exceptions are the School of Business for humanities, the School of Mathematics and the School of Nursing & Midwifery for sciences, the first one being marketable, the second one being focused on pure mathematics therefore not marketable, and the third one is focused on practical healthcare training². In any case, the average arts and humanities funding in the data was €7024, whereas it was €10775 for sciences.

There is an “ah sure, give them some chalk and blackboard, it’ll be grand” approach to humanities funding. There is, without a doubt, additional costs associated with certain Schools, such laboratories, equipment and technology. However, the funding given to arts and humanities Schools is significantly less than given to their sciences counterparts. So, this funding model ignores the need for staff to be on permanent, secure and well-paid contracts, and also the need for adequate infrastructure in the arts and humanities Schools too. Not exclusively - as all Schools are underfunded - but casualization is a massive issue in the arts and humanities. Approximately 50% of teaching staff are on casual contracts at Trinity College Dublin. Staff working conditions are student learning conditions.

Another way the inequality manifests itself is that promotions are not merely merit-based at our College, but factors in how financially viable the subjects in the School are and the grants and PhD numbers the academic can bring in. It happens that staff meet the criteria, showing outstanding research, teaching and service to the College community, but do not secure promotions simply because not enough grants, PhDs, and money has been secured. This forms part of the internal evaluation for promotions. The process is entirely competitive and embeds a corporate ideology within promotions. This saps morale and leads to staff loss. This issue would affect Schools that are sidelined in the budgeting process more intensely, and specifically these are the arts and the humanities where there is less grant money or indeed PhD applicants to seek out.

At the same time, staff and Schools are under immense pressure to apply to grants, however these are more often than not given to profitable research that increases capital. In [2015](#), more than 1,000 academics signed an open letter in support of blue skies research which they saw as under threat; this was repeated in [2023](#) where 1,400 academics signed an open letter calling for a more balanced funding regime in relation to the proposed Research and Innovation Bill 2023, which threatens to further cement the role of academia as a profitable endeavour. The Irish Humanities Alliance has also warned multiples types of the decline of blue skies research. This is the case for government grants. For example, the Higher Education Authority’s [recurrent grant allocation model \(RGAM\)](#) (which is the HEA's core research and teaching grant for institutions) has a multiplier of 1.0 for non-lab based research, but lab-based counts for 1.7 and medicine for 2.3. Students in the humanities are considered less costly to teach, once again ignoring that humanities staff also need to be on secure contracts. Furthermore, basing the grants on this, and also the performance-based

communicated to us by Trinity Spokesperson Catherine O’Mahony). Furthermore, “Figures reflect the recorded expenditure at the time of processing of the original request (December 2021) and therefore may not reflect minor adjustments based on subsequently identified accruals after this date”. (As communicated to us by the Information Compliance Office).

² School of Medicine is also very focused on practical healthcare training, but it also produces a lot of marketable technology research.

indicators implemented with 3-year HEI-specific agreements whose overall aims are set by the Minister for Education and Skills, sidelines the humanities in favour of the profitable non-blue-skies-research. This corners the humanities, which are left having to chase after student numbers (focusing on non-EU and postgraduates) to compensate.

However, this is not the end of the unequal funding mechanism. College follows the corporate model in this system, and if not for the lack of challenging the government, it is the budgeting model which further redistributes money from non-marketable to marketable subjects. The Baseline Budgeting Model (BBM) is a type of [Activity-Based Budgeting \(ABB\)](#), which has emerged across third-level institutions as a corporate model of funding. It starves certain disciplines of funding. Here is how it works. The baseline is calculated and Schools get more or less depending on whether they meet increasing student number quotas (focused on non-EU and postgraduates) and research activity output. If any of these factors decrease, the School will get less money next year as compared to the baseline, with the possibility of sending them into a downward spiral. If any of these factors stay the same or increase, the School will get an amount of money equal to the baseline. A slice of the pie is taken out for operational expenses for the whole of College. Naturally, this will starve certain Schools of funding, especially those who are not as good at raking in student numbers, and those whose research activity is less or do not have a lot of grants available. For example, for Schools whose raison d'être prioritizes activism and community service, assessing their income through student numbers or even research activity is inadequate (for example, think of starting the Sanctuary project).

“We must expose the neoliberal funding regime of academia. The question is not merely whether research is being conducted, but what type of research, in what working conditions and what the funding trends are, and what invisible economic factors are influencing outcomes. It is evident that capital attempts to rework our third-level institutions in its own image. The state, through sidelining blue skies research while promoting marketable research in grant funding and underfunding our institutions, creates the conditions for the decline of blue skies research in favour of research that can be integrated into the labour market. At the same time, dissent is squashed as labour is reorganised to be precarious and directed towards the interests of the state, the highest representative of capital. The economic reorganisation is mirrored in the corporate models the third-level institutions adopt as a result of underfunding, thus is academia instrumentalized in the exclusive interests of the market, profiteers and big business. This is the link between our institutions, the state and global capitalism,” says László Molnárfi, Chairperson of Students4Change and President-elect of the TCDSU, adding that “all research should be adequately funded and researchers should be free to pursue their interests without having to bow down to the needs of the market, and should not be made precarious. All Schools should have staff on good contracts, proper infrastructure and stable funding.”.

Trinity Spokesperson Catherine O'Mahony said, “*Trinity does not direct the kind of work that researchers do as this would impinge on the principle of academic freedom – they are free to pursue research in whatever direction it takes them. But there has been a tendency, given the paucity of funding, for researchers to look into non-traditional funding sources.*

A balanced research landscape is essential for researchers in all fields of enquiry. It is important to note that the cost of doing research varies enormously across disciplines and

often within disciplines. Trinity has always championed AHSS research and will continue to do so as we advocate for a rebalancing of the research-funding ecosystem in Ireland to fully support excellent research across all disciplines.”