

"How many Irish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? None. They say, 'We'll be all right here in the dark.'" This old joke was offered last month during a 12-day visit to universities and institutes in the Republic of Ireland. A senior education official was using it to illustrate Irish stoicism and fatalism in the face of the conditions for the bailout of their banking system.

Irish mothers were often invoked in discussions about higher education. They have, it seems, a keen interest in Leaving Certificate points and the content of exam papers. They understand the complexities and rigidity of the Central Applications Office, which brooks no changes of course preferences after a fixed date and limits those preferences to 10 in a higher education system with more than 2,000 courses. They are also keen to see their children go on to higher education. Skill has been the pathway to a better life since the famine of the 1840s. Skill and aspiration have sustained emigration for 200 years. Now, with unemployment at more than 14 per cent, Ireland's mothers see no reason to change their message: keep studying.

And their children are listening. Post-secondary education participation is high. More than 60 per cent of school-leavers go on to higher education. Another 10 to 12 per cent are in technical education colleges and programmes. Low tuition fees help, as does an ample supply of support grants. Current fees of EUR2,000 (£1,570) will rise to EUR3,000 in 2015 - still a bargain compared with those of the US and the UK.

The government is also listening. It sees education as one of the paths to economic recovery and long-term competitiveness. Plans to increase higher education participation to more than 70 per cent are widely discussed. But accommodating such an increase is challenging.

The Irish higher education system is fairly inflexible. It is not just that student choice is constrained at the point of application, and that the time between a student receiving the offer of a place on a course and starting in that programme is short - about 10 days. Transfer between courses is limited, difficult and costly if it happens beyond seven weeks into an academic year. Transfer between institutions is also difficult, and articulation from a course at an institute of technology to a similar or related course at a university is uncommon.

These structural rigidities will make it hard to attract the next 10 per cent of school-leavers to higher education, and to retain them. Many are the first in their families to go to university, and some will be ill-prepared for study. They will need support and guidance in choosing courses and in adjusting to different styles of teaching and learning.

Providing that support to students in need will be challenging in a system where student numbers have grown by more than 15 per cent since 2008. In the same period staffing numbers have fallen by 7 per cent, with most reductions being in non-teaching staff. Academic staff working hours increased in the 2011-12 academic year.

These reductions are driven by the requirements of the "troika" - the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank - to reduce public sector staff numbers and increase productivity as part of the country's austerity measures. They make it difficult for the government to implement its strategy to deepen the skill base. Investing in human capital is the key to Ireland's regaining the competitive advantage that helped its economy rise in the 1990s. Ireland needs more flexible approaches to the deployment of its public expenditure so that staff can move between institutions more easily, so that centres of excellence can be created across universities and institutes of technology, and so that courses can respond to student demand and industry needs.