

# Sustainability and Gratitude

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Expressions of gratitude are infrequent. Although this unhappy trait is typically associated with modern youth; to quote the woman on the 46A bus - 'The age of chivalry and thank you notes is with O'Leary in the grave' - we know that it goes back to Biblical times. 'Where are the other nine?' Jesus asked plaintively, as only one of the 10 he healed came back to say 'thanks'. In the modern era, they would have announced their good fortune and perhaps even their gratitude on Facebook.

Why our species so often fails to say thanks is unclear. Enjoying the moment is part of it. The 'other nine' probably were so ecstatic to be whole that they couldn't wait to tell family and friends, and in no time they were ensconced in the local equivalent of the Irish pub, where the source of their good fortune and impulse to say thanks wafted away in vapours of alcohol and the sounds of whatever instruments were then the equivalent of the fiddle and the bodhrán. Another explanation is that most of us think we are better and more deserving than objective reality would support. If you feel 'you deserve it' why should you thank someone for it?

We in the Irish academic world have reason to express our gratitude for a recent commitment by government to fund research infrastructure under the 5<sup>th</sup> wave of the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLII). It has never been clearer that without innovation and associated productivity growth, sustaining economic activity and employment will not be possible.

And research is a necessary but not sufficient requirement to do so.

The big ticket items funded and listed below are dominated by medicine and biomedicine; adjusted for size, the National University of Ireland Galway is the biggest 'winner'. The topic heading, the lead university and allocation including co-funding in millions of Euros in brackets, in rank order are: TCD Biomedical Sciences Development, Trinity College Dublin (76); UCD Science Centre, University College Dublin (54); Advancing Medicine Through Discovery, National University of Ireland Galway (33); Nano-Bioanalytical Research Facility, Dublin City University (17); Translating Biosciences into Health, University College Cork (19); Arts Humanities Social Sciences, National University of Ireland Galway (17); Environmental Health Sciences Institute, Dublin Institute for Technology (12); National Centre for Applied Materials Research, University of Limerick (12).

But other research funding streams also recognise that there is no point in innovation unless we find new and better ways to live on this planet, and there is support also for creating and enriching bridges between the policy framework, research and the generation of enterprise, with the TCD-UCD Innovation Alliance as a flagship in this regard.

While the logic for this support is compelling, it is undertaken in the teeth of the worst fiscal and banking crisis we have ever faced. Facilitated by the radar of the Irish financial regulatory system, two torpedoes from the U-boats Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society have sunk the Irish ship of State with €25 billion on board, with no prospect of salvage. And the passengers whose money it was are in lifeboats struggling to stay afloat, and survival (and possibly revenge) rather than research are their preoccupations. This means that every cent of the funding from government must be borrowed abroad, and will have to be re-paid at an interest rate that is now approaching 6 per cent.

We in the Universities must ensure that we are worthy of our hire, and that the faith shown and the investment made yield a real and enduring payback.

This will not be easy: there is a hollowing out underway as reduced caps on personnel and associated restrictions on recruitment, leakage of talent abroad, and inability to hold onto temporary hires of quality so as to avoid contracts of indefinite duration, take hold; reduced funding for students, difficulties in the enterprise sector which makes it more challenging to secure complementary funding, the need to recognise and reward innovation and enterprise creation while at the same time maintaining the core functions of knowledge creation for its own sake and teaching, all make the task challenging.

And successful research management itself is an art that not many fully master. Max Perutz, who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1982, is recognised as perhaps the most successful research manager the world has ever seen. He founded the Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB) at Cambridge University, and under his influence Francis Crick, Jim Watson, John Kendrew, Fred Sanger, Sydney Brenner, John Sulston, Aaron Klug and Bob Horvitz carried out work that won them science's ultimate accolade.

He explained his success as follows: 'Use only the gentlest of touches on the tiller. Creativity in science, as in arts, cannot be organised. It arises spontaneously from individual talent. Well-run laboratories can foster it, but hierarchical organisation, inflexible bureaucratic rules and mountains of futile paperwork can kill it.'

So the challenge is great. But in these incredibly difficult times, we have been given the opportunity to show that we can meet it. For which we say thanks.