

# The Tertiary Education Landscape



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This article offers an overview of tertiary education in Ireland from a contemporary governmental perspective. It sets out the department's strategic vision, the legislative picture, the development of technological universities, and the broader landscape of further and higher education in the country.

### **Structure and strategy**

The establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in summer 2020 elevated Irish tertiary education and research to a central and more visible position, both nationally and internationally. I was delighted to get the opportunity to lead the establishment of this government department and to shape the contribution it will make to the future of our country.

Notwithstanding the momentous challenges faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, we have made good progress. The response from the sector and the appetite to work in a collaborative and unified way have been instrumental in this progress.

The support received from colleagues in other departments has also been crucial. In particular, colleagues in the Department of Education, led by Seán Ó Foghlú as secretary general, have been enormously supportive and generous in helping our new, fledgling organisation to become operational quickly. Both departments are highly committed to ongoing collaboration on the many areas of shared policy interest.

DFHERIS's first Statement of Strategy, for 2021–2023, was submitted to government and published in March 2021. We set out six strategic goals:

- talent – develop talent and skill
- innovation – promote research, knowledge, and innovation
- inclusion – support learning for all
- international – succeed on world stage
- governance – good governance to enhance quality
- capacity – department fit for purpose.

The Statement of Strategy, building on the original decision by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin to set up the new department, recognises the importance of further and higher education and research to the

economy and to society. From the outset, Minister Simon Harris has been very clear that we are both an economic and a social department – driving future economic prosperity, but making sure that no one is left behind.

The establishment of the department has coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. Unquestionably the pandemic has brought huge challenges and setbacks for our sector. But in keeping tertiary education operating safely, albeit remotely, the sector has proven how determined, flexible, and innovative it is in meeting the needs of learners. And in the carefully planned return to campuses in September 2021, the recognition of the unique contribution of colleges as places of engagement has never been greater.

The students, academic and administrative staff, and public servants who worked so hard to make this possible deserve enormous praise. This work has been characterised by close and ongoing engagement among all stakeholders and shared leadership.

Even as we all grappled with an unprecedented national crisis, the department was also quietly commencing its work towards further developing our further and higher education sector as a high-performing, world-class system. In doing so we are fortunate to build upon the many achievements already realised in recent years.

### Legislation and reform

As we look to drive our ambitions forward, we are seeking to ensure that the fundamental building blocks of governance and funding are firmly in place. That is why the government is committed to the reform of the Higher Education Authority Act 1971.

There have been enormous changes to the higher education sector since this legislation was enacted 50 years ago. We have seen an increase in the number of students from around 20,000 to over 200,000 today. There has been a major expansion in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs). Higher education has become more accessible to all sectors of society, and more adaptable to meeting the State's social, economic, and labour market needs.

The pre-legislative scrutiny report from the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was published in September 2021, and the department looks forward to supporting the Minister in advancing the legislation through the Houses of the Oireachtas. The model informing the proposed legislation is one of co-regulation. This recognises the importance of autonomy and agility on the part of HEIs, coupled with appropriate accountability.

The legislation will allow institutions to meet their responsibilities and accountabilities in line with contemporary best practice. It will provide the Higher Education Authority (HEA) with clarity on its overall role in planning and managing at the system level and, where necessary, intervening proportionately to address issues where individual institutions may need additional supports.

There has been extensive consultation with stakeholders throughout the development of this legislation. The legislation will recognise that autonomy and flexibility are essential features of HEIs, but also that this must be matched with transparent governance and accountability to students, stakeholders, and the public.

I would emphasise that nothing in the legislation will impinge on the academic freedom of HEIs or their staff. This is a core tenet which will continue to be enshrined in legislation. Institutions will continue to be supported to do what they do best – delivering excellence in education and research and providing places of engagement and insight to support a flourishing democratic society.

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The work undertaken under the auspices of the EU’s Reform Directorate on the future funding and sustainability of Ireland’s higher education system has now been completed. In his recent Budget speech, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, noted that his colleague Minister Harris will shortly bring a report on the future funding of the sector to government for consideration and that government will ensure that its decisions on future funding for this sector reflect its vital role as a cornerstone of our economic model. We are working with colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on an implementation process for the significant reforms recommended in the EU-funded study and look forward to establishing this process with the sector and wider stakeholders in 2022.

### Technological universities

It is also worth highlighting the considerable work under way to further the development of technological universities (TUs), so that they make a distinct contribution to our higher education system and contribute to balanced regional development and other national goals.

For the past 50 years, the regional technical colleges and then the institutes of technology (IoTs) provided vocational, technical, technological, and professional skills and qualifications to generations of students. The strengths of the sector reside in strong links with local and regional enterprise and communities, and a practical, applied-research-informed approach to teaching and learning.

These institutions provide pathways into higher education which, through geography or circumstance, may not otherwise have been within the reach of many young (and not so young) people. We want to nurture and build on these strengths in the new TUs.

The TUs will have a distinct role and purpose in the overall higher education sector – ensuring that the diversity of learners’ needs and interests is met by a breadth of institutions. This applies across the entire range of the National Framework of Qualifications, from level 6 to level 10, with apprenticeships as a continuing vital component.

TUs are rooted in their communities, and the collaboration that this facilitates presents a key opportunity. In October 2019 the TU Research Network (TURN) high-level advisory group, comprising the president of TU Dublin and all presidents of HEIs then seeking TU status and chaired by independent UK higher education transformation expert Professor Phil Gummett, produced its seminal report ‘Technological Universities: Connectedness & Collaboration through Connectivity’.

It details the case for TUs to lead the delivery of national strategic objectives for regional socio-economic development, higher education access, research capacity-building, and skills progression. On foot of the TURN report, government announced in Budget 2020 the provision of €90 million over the following three years under a TU Transformation Fund to support IoTs to jointly achieve TU designation and to further the advancement of established TUs.

Approval has been secured for an additional, separate allocation of €40 million up to 2024 for specified TU activity under the government’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan. In 2021 the department provided €9 million in additional funding to Science Foundation Ireland, which now operates under the aegis of the department, to establish a new Frontiers for Partnership Awards programme that will support increased research capacity in TUs and IoTs. Work is also in train on applications for additional TU-research-related funding under Operational Programmes co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

The strides made since the enactment of the Technological Universities Act 2018 mean that in just three years, in place of 14 IoTs of varying sizes we will have five TUs of significant scale and strength and two IoTs.

Three TUs are now fully operational. The first to be established was TU Dublin in January 2019, followed by Munster TU in January 2021. Most recently, we have seen the newest, TU of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, established on 1 October 2021. In 2022, the work of the Connacht–Ulster Alliance of Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), IT Sligo, and Letterkenny IT, and the TU of south-east Ireland consortium of Waterford IT and IT Carlow, will see two more established.

The new Housing for All strategy commits government to legislating to allow for TUs to borrow from the Housing Finance Agency to deliver purpose-built student accommodation, the shortage of which is currently a challenge to furthering access to TUs and across the higher education sector. We are working with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on this priority issue.

Government and DFHERIS, working with the HEA, is fully committed to ensuring that technological universities continue to be supported over the period ahead, so that all parts of the country can benefit from a regional, multi-campus TU with the opportunity to enable greater access to high-quality higher education, improve skills and lifelong learning, and increase research and innovation output as engines of regional and national specialisation and competitiveness.

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### Broader landscape

It is essential that our entire sector – both further and higher education – leads the way in equipping learners with the knowledge and skills required to succeed in a world that is rapidly changing, and that it provides the country with the range of talent needed to address critical challenges and respond to the quickening pace of globalisation and digitisation.

The latter has been accelerated by the pandemic. Earlier this year we produced *Adult Literacy for Life*, a 10-year strategy addressing not just literacy and numeracy but digital literacy, all of which are now fundamental requirements for someone fully engaging in society and realising their full potential.

The development of apprenticeships is a key priority, including in providing the skills needed to tackle the housing and climate crises. The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025 sets out new ways of structuring, funding, and promoting apprenticeships to make them accessible to employers and learners, with a target of 10,000 registrations a year by 2025. There are now 62 apprenticeship programmes, including craft apprenticeships but extending into many new areas, such as finance, ICT, biopharma, engineering, logistics, hospitality, and arboriculture.

Meanwhile, the CAO website has been redesigned so that prospective students can clearly see that higher education is not the only option after the Leaving Cert, and that further education and apprenticeships offer exciting career possibilities.

We have launched a new website, the Right Course, which is a one-stop shop for those looking to upskill, train, or re-skill. It is aimed at a wide range of people, including school leavers, those recently unemployed or looking to change employment, employees who want to upskill in their field, and employers seeking to develop their workforce.

Lifelong learning will be an essential feature of how we equip ourselves for the pace of change that we will continue to experience. It will be an important component of an enhanced further and higher education sector in the years to come.

In conclusion, this is a really exciting time for further and higher education in Ireland, and it is now up to all of us to take this opportunity and deliver for the people of Ireland. Establishing a new government department in the midst of a global pandemic has not been without its challenges, but we are well on the road in our ambition to lead a sector that is innovative, adaptive, and inclusive and is supported to contribute in the best way possible to Ireland's social, economic, and cultural development.