

This article reflects on the emergence of technological universities in Ireland and the significant changes in the higher-education landscape in 2021. It considers the distinctive role that the sector will play in the years ahead, the strengths resulting from its capacity for collaboration, and some of the challenges that it faces.

### **New horizons**

An education yearbook serves a number of purposes: a digest, the catalyst to an inclusive conversation, the opportunity to focus a particular topic. But it also serves to document, to act as a record, and to provide to future generations of readers a contemporaneous insight into the major concerns of the day.

Doubtless any review of 2021 will feature the impact of Covid-19 and the manner in which all of education managed to negotiate that challenge, and, through the heroic and innovative work of all concerned, maintain provision, albeit with a necessarily reduced level of student experience. But the fact of the global pandemic should not disguise the appreciable advances that were realised, not least in the landscape of higher education. Indeed, it can be argued that the impact on modes of working actually facilitated a pace of change that was unlikely to have occurred had there not been such a pressure.

It is likely that 2021 will be viewed as a most significant year for higher education in Ireland. It has seen the formal launch of two new universities, Munster Technological University and the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS): Midlands Midwest. Two remaining applications, from the consortium in the south-east and along the north-western seaboard, have been evaluated by international peers, and their reports are on the minister's desk at the time of writing.

This represents an unprecedented realignment of the higher-education landscape and a significant increase in potential. Most critically, for current and prospective learners, it provides access to the highest quality of education and training in their region. The high-quality and strategically focused research concentration will increase the potential for regional innovation.

The advances this year are consonant with the commitment to invest in technological universities

# A Changing Landscape for Higher Education



**Dr Joseph Ryan**  
CEO of Technological  
Higher Education  
Association

(TUs) which is provided for in the National Development Plan 2021–2030. As that document states:

*The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 continues to provide the framework for far-reaching changes in the higher education landscape. One of the most significant changes is the development of multi-campus technological universities, an agenda which is central to regional development ambitions and is now well advanced.<sup>1</sup>*

The plan continues:

*TUs have a key role to play in driving the rebalancing of regional growth and development, as envisaged in the NPF. Investments in the new and planned multi-campus TUs will strengthen their role as anchors of enterprise, will further develop research and innovation capabilities that are aligned with regional specialisation, and will help attract and retain talent in the regions.<sup>2</sup>*

**“ It is not surprising that it has taken a decade to realise what will likely be five technological universities by the close of the academic year 2021–22.**

The National Development Plan speaks to the distinctive role set out for the technological sector which was documented in the roadmap as originally elucidated in 2011. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 had expounded the vision for the development and evolution of institutes of technology into a smaller number of stronger amalgamated institutes. The change proposed was unprecedented, and it is not surprising that it has taken a decade to realise what will likely be five technological universities by the close of the academic year 2021–22.

That these new entities would be distinctive was clearly adumbrated in the National Strategy, in the legislation (Act no. 3/2018 – Technological Universities Act 2018), and in the subsequent Technological University Research Network (TURN) report.<sup>3</sup> TURN was established in February 2019 by the Department of Education and Skills to examine and report on how emerging TUs could achieve their sectoral and national strategic objectives.

It was an inclusive process, externally chaired and including representatives from the presiding department, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), TUs – existing or intending – and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and it issued the final report in October 2019. It proposes that the introduction of TUs into the higher education landscape in Ireland is a bold and important step and that the concept is distinctive in its rootedness in regional and local communities and economies, reaching out internationally from those roots and drawing international education and research practices directly back into the regions.

These were to be new entities with the confidence to build on the excellent heritage of achievement established through the institutes of technology. This was positioned in the TURN report as a new university sector with the power to substantially enhance the capacity of the higher-education system while also responding to government priorities and societal challenges. The link to broader national policy objectives is unambiguously stated:

*The core mission and purpose of TUs is closely aligned to meeting a number of key National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) and Public Investment Priorities contained in Project Ireland 2040 and the National Development Plan 2018–2027. The NDP specifically highlights the role of TUs in meeting the NSO for deepening the talent pool for regional sectoral clusters and driving applied research and innovation.<sup>4</sup>*

The distinguishing character of a technological university was admirably captured by both Josephine Feehily and Professor Vincent Cunnane, respectively chair and president of TUS: Midlands Midwest, in their addresses at the formal launch of the new university in Athlone on 1 October 2021. Both speakers emphasised the sense of place and the access agenda that are central to the democratising influence of the sector. Indeed, Dr Feehily noted that what has attracted her to this sector is its characteristic and consistent responsiveness to community.

### The challenges

It has been a long road, but the advances in recent years attest to the remarkable work of sectoral staff, management, and governors working with the fullest support of government and its agencies. But we must also be realistic, and there are challenges for the nascent sector, three of which are outlined below.

First, experience teaches that we are slaves to perception. The challenge was to form new institutions reflecting the state-change required of them by government while remaining faithful to the distinctive ethos of the technological sector. The TURN report requires that ‘TUs must also work together to respond to Government policy.’<sup>5</sup> The membership agreed that:

*They need to work together to build the reputation of this new university sector since they share responsibility for that reputation nationally and internationally. TUs that are being formed in more or less the same period have an opportunity to identify and collaborate on achieving mutual projects to ensure the most efficient use of resources and the widest impact for investment, particularly in the initial phases of TU development.<sup>6</sup>*

Technological universities sit within a larger construct. That architecture realises their distinctive contribution as their key strength. Having the confidence to retain and proclaim that discrete character while also operating as an acknowledged and respected university is the challenge. What is a new concept for Ireland is an established currency abroad.

Second, we are in the embryonic stage. As in the passage cited above, the initial phase of TU development requires unity and considerable support. The TURN report was vital in that it fuelled key seed investment in the system, some €90 million over three years. It will be necessary to build the case to extend this support if these new institutions are to deliver on the objectives set for them by government.

Allied to this is the task of determining a sustainable funding model for higher education. At the time of writing, Europe has delivered its consideration of the options set out in the Expert Group on Future Funding

for Higher Education, led by Peter Cassells in 2016, and Minister Simon Harris TD has committed to settle the question of underinvestment in third-level education.

There is shared agreement on the role of higher education as the catalyst for economic activity, for social cohesion, for job creation, and for enhanced quality of life. We equally share the understanding that our people are our key asset, and that investment in human capital is essential for national competitiveness. It is critical for the sector as a whole that this matter be foregrounded, debated, and determined in the months ahead.

A third challenge is that of agreeing a working contract that can meet the ambitions of staff and serve the expanded mission of the technological sector. A process is under way on this through the HEA and with the support of key stakeholders and input from the OECD. It will take time to work through the detail, but the ambition would be to have a new contractual construct available in 2022. This endeavour will include determinations on a new researcher career development and employment framework.

### Conclusion

This article has consciously eschewed the temptation to focus on the impact of Covid-19. But it has noted that the altered working modes have facilitated acceleration of certain engagements and have led many in the education community to consider the learnings from persevering through the age of Covid-19 and the benefits attaching to new methods of working. For learners, the advent of technological universities brings increasing opportunity.

The Covid-19 experience has also reemphasised the importance of, and possibilities attendant on, digital connectivity through the extended regions covered by the new TUs. These new modes for a new time will present opportunities to learners to progress beyond former boundaries. Such a facility is also essential in preparing future generations for what is already an increasingly digital society and economy.

Given the emphasis that national policy places on balanced regional development and the sustenance of local communities, and noting the salient role expected of TUs to support this goal, we can affirm with some confidence that 2021 has been a most significant year and one with the seed of considerable promise for the years ahead.

---

### ENDNOTES

1. Government of Ireland, Project Ireland 2040: National Development Plan 2021–2030, p. 98.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
3. Connectedness and Collaboration through Connectivity (October 2019). <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/12/Report-of-the-TU-Research-Network-2019.pdf>.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 19.