

Towards a New Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills, and Knowledge

This article by Minister Harris outlines the seismic changes of recent years in how education and learning are delivered after the school system in Ireland. These changes have been aimed at creating a new unified tertiary system with learners at its centre. The article stresses the importance of inclusive access to this system and describes the measures that will help realise it.



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Introduction

When the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science first came into being in 2020, this country and much of the world was grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic. The actions of educators, learners, and staff during those first few months told me everything I needed to know about the third level or tertiary sector.

Amidst the public health restrictions and economic decision-making, it was clear to me instantly that the further and higher education sectors and the research community were determined to keep education open and research continuing in whatever form it took to remain safe. Education is vital, a powerful source for good, and those working in third level showed true leadership, adaptation, and kindness for learners during that period. This is a sector which didn't lose out on a single day of learning and teaching during the pandemic.


As the first Minister of the Department, I have relished the opportunity to bring about seismic and enduring change in how we deliver education and learning after the school system. What it means for our lives, whether we are 18 or 58, is a conversation that has often been lost in narrow debates on university rankings and points. The ability to shape our futures through knowledge, skills, and training has changed countless lives, created one of the most highly educated populations in the world, and driven social and economic change beyond the dreams of the founders of the State.

Unfortunately, not everyone has had the opportunity to make that journey, and so my Department has set out a programme for reform of the third-level and tertiary system to deliver more pathways, greater access to research, education, and training, and more alignment to economic needs.

Unified tertiary system

We are building a new unified tertiary system for learning, skills, and knowledge. The key goal of this work is to simplify navigation of the tertiary education system by creating more clarity around entry requirements and transition opportunities. The aim is to provide accessible information and guidance on how to access and navigate the system for current and future learners.

This new system we are building together will have learners at the centre. By this I mean that irrespective of where learners enter further education and training, higher education, or a research career, they are in a single system which responds to individual talents, ambitions, and motivations. As people live actively for longer, the system will provide opportunities for re-skilling, upskilling, and repurposing qualifications best suited to the learner's stage of development, interest, and life circumstances.

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The work has already begun to make this policy platform a reality. Our capital calls have collaboration and pathways embedded. Just recently (December 2022), we have launched 13 new collaborative programmes between further and higher education, with more to come. The strength of this work and its importance can be seen in the appetite of the sector to embark upon this journey.

Higher education

The question of sustainable funding for higher education was an obvious start for us in the new Department with the Cassells report gathering dust for many years previously. *Funding the Future*, which I launched in May 2021, is the Department's landmark policy document that settles the question on both the funding model and the funding gap once and for all.

With it, we have put in place a twin-track approach: first, a plan on how to fund higher education with a reform process (with an agreed funding gap of €307m); secondly, a plan to address the cost of education for students in Ireland. As a government we ruled out the possibility of introducing student loans and decided that the higher education system will not be funded by one pot only into the future. Rather, it will be a multi-funded model of additional Exchequer investment and employer contributions through the National Training Fund.

The student contribution fee will be retained, but I am committed to reducing it over time. We made really good progress in Budget 2022, with a €1,000 refund on the student contribution as a cost-of-living measure. Furthermore, a new income bracket will be introduced in the Student Support Scheme from September 2023, which will see a €500 reduction in the student contribution where income is under €100,000.

Our plan for the future revolves around effective system performance and universal access to education. In prioritising core funding increases, the intention is that quality of outcomes will improve, the agility and responsiveness of higher education will be strengthened, and the reputation of Ireland's higher education system will be enhanced. We will move back towards European and OECD norms in terms of staffing ratios.

By focusing on access to education, we will bring our third-level education system into line with the State's universal-access approach of primary and secondary education. For the first time ever, we published a *Cost of Education* paper in advance of the Budget, and this process will continue over the years ahead. Hand in glove with the increase in funding, there will be a reform process overseen by an implementation group, which I am honoured to co-chair with Professors Anne Looney and Tom Collins.

This is an exciting time for higher education in Ireland. We plan on providing more funding for universities, new technological universities in the regions, an ongoing reduction in student costs, and an increase in student supports.

Further education and apprenticeship

Our primary objective has been to create a system where every journey is valued and equal. One of my proudest initiatives as Minister in this Department has been to bring apprenticeships and further education onto the CAO website – to show students all of their options. We want to go further again, and alongside Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) – the third-level regulator – we want to develop a singular website with information for everyone aged 16 to 65.

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Further education and training is one of our greatest national strategic assets, yet for too long it has lived in the shadows of other educational programmes. We are beginning to put our money where our mouth is and rolling out huge capital investment to this area. And the results are positive. Last year, the highest number of apprentices were registered, meaning we are well on our way to meet our targets.

We have also reached out to more marginalised groups to consider apprenticeship as an option. We have invested in access to apprenticeship courses in two of our technological universities, and we have established new funding streams for members of the Travelling Community.


Equality and inclusion

Education is the greatest of levellers, and therefore inclusion of all groups in Irish society in the third-level system is a key priority for me and my Department. We have embedded a social inclusion and equality approach

across all project and programme delivery, from apprenticeships to further education and training, research, and high education.

Examples include the publication this year of the fourth strategic National Access Plan, with new, more ambitious targets around entry to high education for underrepresented groups. For the first time, we take specific steps to ensure that young people with experience of care are supported to enter and complete higher education. We have also launched a new funding stream, Path 4, which will see dedicated funding for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education institutions.

The 10-year Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy will change the lives of adult learners who have unmet literacy, numeracy, or digital literacy needs. No one should feel stigmatised because they can't write, or read the medicine bottle. An ALL strategy programme office has been established to drive the strategy forward, with regional literacy co-appointed across the country.

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Under our apprenticeship action plan, we have delivered several social inclusion initiatives to progress underrepresented groups, such as the Traveller and Roma Apprenticeship Incentivisation Programme, Social Inclusion Apprentice Bursary, Access to Apprenticeship programmes, and Access and Inclusion subcommittee of the National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAA).

Conclusion

Finally, we have sought to embed an approach within the Department to ensure that younger generations have their voices heard and their lived experience expressed in policy outcomes. This is a landmark period for students, their families, and the future of third-level education in Ireland.

Third-level education and training serves Ireland and its people exceptionally well. We now rank third in the OECD and second in the EU for third-level qualification. The more people we can educate to third level, the better the individual outcomes for them and their families, including income.

The world around us is changing, and so are the needs of learners and employers. Our education and training system needs to respond by addressing some of the barriers to learners of all ages that prevent them from accessing the programmes they need to live fulfilled lives and build strong careers. The country will be all the better for it.