

Strategic Development of the Tertiary Education System

This article provides an update on the work of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in supporting the strategic development of the tertiary education and training sector. It highlights the significant progress on the areas that were focused on in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021*.

I am delighted to have been given the opportunity, one year on from my article in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021* by Education Matters, and well into the second full year since the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, to provide an update on the work of the Department in supporting the strategic development of the tertiary education and training sector. I am pleased to be able to say that we have made significant progress on the areas of focus that I highlighted in 2021's *Yearbook*.

This is a crucial time for our entire sector to contribute to the major societal and economic issues that Ireland faces: not least continuing expansion in enrolments, driven by favourable demographics but also by the acceleration of change associated with decarbonisation and digitisation transitions set out in national policy, including in the *Climate Action Plan*, *Project Ireland 2040*, the *National Digital Strategy – Harnessing Digital*, and the *White Paper on Enterprise 2022–2030*.

Whereas the Department's establishment is novel in Irish terms, our portfolio is by no means unusual in Europe or globally. Countries such as France, Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Poland all have Ministries with major elements similar to ours. In Irish terms the portfolio is sizeable, representing the fourth-largest revenue budget across government.

In response to being accorded this mandate by government, the Department's first Statement of Strategy, which covers the period 2021–2023, laid out an ambitious agenda. It is one that colleagues in the Department have taken hold of and delivered on enthusiastically. As a result we can see many of the big-ticket items from that Strategy being delivered.

It has been a privilege to be part of a Department that has made a positive impact in such a short period of time. The support and engagement that my colleagues and I have received from the national agencies and the further and higher education and research sectors, and the desire of all to work together in a collaborative and progressive way, have been instrumental in this progress.



Jim Breslin
Secretary General of the
Department of Further
and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation
and Science

Central to the Department's policy remit has been acknowledgement that learners' pathway to success is not uniform and, indeed, often not linear. That recognition is driving the landmark work under way to develop a unified tertiary sector – our vision of a system for learning, skills, and knowledge, composed of complementary further and higher education, research, and innovation pathways. 'Unified' should never be mistaken for 'uniform'; the latter has never been seen by the Department as a desirable goal for the wider tertiary sector. Indeed, in engagement with stakeholders, I have been explicit that the system should be unified, *not* uniform. This is not wordplay. Distinct and complementary elements contribute to a coherent whole. Providing opportunities for every learner, and at every point in their life, requires diversity rather than uniformity.

Importantly, for diversity to flourish, difference needs to be valued and respected. Further education and training has its own philosophy, traditions, and track record, together with a clear and differentiated strategic direction in *Future FET: Transforming Learning – The National FET Strategy*. Highlighting the development of technological universities in last year's article, I wrote that they 'will have a distinct role and purpose in the overall higher education sector' and that this distinct role has been set out in both the Technological Universities Act, 2018, and the TURN Report: *Technological Universities: Connectedness & Collaboration through Connectivity*.

With regard to the traditional university sector, it is imperative to support each of those institutions in articulating and making their vital contributions, both individually and collectively. The government's commitment to increasing core funding to the higher education sector provides a positive environment in which these universities can respond and identify future priorities that build on their many achievements to date. The capability that exists in these institutions is recognised as a key national asset across various policies, including *Funding the Future* and *Impact 2030 – Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*.

“ Unified should never be mistaken for uniform; the latter has never been seen by the Department as a desirable goal for the wider tertiary sector. ”

The overall policy framework for the sector will be further strengthened by Section 33 of the Higher Education Authority Act, 2022. This section requires the Minister to prepare a strategy at intervals of not more than every 10 years for the provision of tertiary education – that is both further and higher education. Explicitly, in doing so, the legislation acknowledges different elements and requires the strategy to address how such elements relate to each other. This will provide further opportunity to dispel any fears of a drift towards homogeneity, which would be contrary to policy and to what the country requires. Instead the tertiary strategy will identify how a diverse but interconnected system can deliver for learners, regions, and our country as a whole.

While developing this tertiary strategy and working on some other areas of policy priority in the period ahead, the overall focus of the Department will continue to shift towards policy implementation. With a number of key

national policies now in place, the focus will be on their implementation, as highlighted below.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion, and access to education

In looking forward to our work in the next 12 months, we intend to consistently prioritise inclusion and impact. How do we keep students and learners at the centre of our work? We are focused, now more than ever, on ensuring that the tertiary sector is one that fosters inclusion and provides a springboard for success for an increasingly diverse student population. While we continue to work to make the path to tertiary education as open as possible, we must also ensure that everyone feels welcome, accepted, and supported in our institutions. That is why the new *National Access Plan* seeks not just equity of access but of participation and success.

If not addressed by policy, the cost of college and rising inflation will build barriers to entry and participation for students and learners. Government is putting resources in place to help deal with these issues. This year, for the first time, the Department published an annual options paper on reducing the cost of higher education ahead of Budget 2023. The paper directly contributed to Budgetary decisions, including the 14% increase in the special and higher rates of SUSI maintenance grants, introduced with effect from 1 January 2023.

“ The new *National Access Plan* seeks not just equity of access but of participation and success.

Secure and affordable accommodation is important in ensuring that students can focus on their studies. Wider pressures in the rental market and the increased costs of constructing purpose-built student accommodation are posing major difficulties. The government has approved proposals for the State to assist higher education institutions (HEIs) with the cost of building student accommodation to ensure increased availability and promote greater access, particularly for priority student groups. As an initial priority, the Department and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) are currently engaged directly with institutions to activate those building projects that have already secured full planning permission.

Higher education

There have been a number of critical developments in the higher education sector over this past year that will provide a platform for further strengthening the sector.

With the commencement of the Higher Education Authority Act, 2022, on 10 November 2022 we will see a significant strengthening of governance structures. These will provide a robust framework in which agile HEIs can deliver on their missions. The Act is clear that the task of good governance extends not just to conformance but to performance, that is, to both regulatory compliance and institutional success. Indeed, the first listed

requirement of a governing authority of a HEI is to promote the success (including academic success) and reputation of the university.

Funding the Future, published in May, provides a sustainable path forward in funding, modernisation and reform. Importantly, the question of how higher education will be funded has been settled. The government has determined that student loans will not form part of the funding landscape. This has been welcomed across the political spectrum.

The *Funding the Future* collaborative implementation process has been established and is addressing the strategic outcomes identified by government for the sector, including enhancing the quality and international standing of higher education across its missions of teaching and learning, research, and engagement; driving skills development, including for important public services; enhancing student participation and success, with particular focus on under-represented groups; supporting a balanced and integrated unified knowledge and skills system; and addressing cost as a barrier to education. Linking increased funding with enhanced quality and verification of outcomes was a key tenet of the Cassells report.

In Budget 2023, in the context of the acute and competing budgetary pressures associated with the cost-of-living crisis, it was no mean achievement to start providing additional core funding. Substantial additional funds were also made available for demographic pressures, pensions, and national pay awards. There is much work to do to deliver both remaining core funding and verified outcomes, for existing and additional funds, in the period ahead.

The new academic year began with the targeted addition by the HEA and institutions of over 1,000 undergraduate places in courses where graduates are in great demand. This includes 60 additional undergraduate medicine places as part of an agreed expansion of 200 over the period ahead. This is the largest expansion in recent decades and reflects the requirement to grow our health service in response to population ageing. This requirement is also reflected in the recent expressions-of-interest process conducted by the HEA for institutions to come forward with expansion plans in health-related areas.

The establishment of technological universities (TUs) has continued to advance. Following the establishment of Atlantic Technological University in April 2022, the South East Technological University – the fifth TU in Ireland – was established in May. Strengthening the capabilities of the five TUs to achieve their unique missions over the coming years will remain a key focus for the Department. The recently published *OECD Review of Technological University Academic Career Paths, Contracts and Organisation in Ireland* provides us with a robust evidence base from which to do so.

Research and innovation

Ireland's innovation landscape is enriched by a very high-performing research sector. Implementation of *Impact 2030*, which was approved

by government in May 2022, will maximise the impact of research and innovation with a focus on national priorities, both economic and social.

We want Ireland to be a leader in talent. In order to do that we must ensure that our best and brightest can pursue their research ambitions. One of the actions identified through *Impact 2030* was a national review of State supports for PhD students. This has now been initiated and is considering the current supports and how we match up internationally when it comes to PhD students.

Impact 2030 also entails major change in the Irish research landscape, with the establishment in January 2024 of a new research agency through the amalgamation of the functions and activities of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland. This move is intended to facilitate greater interdisciplinary research and will place the new body at the centre of the country's response to challenges such as climate action, digital transformation, and wellbeing.

Further education and training

The development of the further education and training (FET) sector is essential in addressing the needs of learners and meeting the country's evolving skills requirements. The modernisation of the sector through the *Future FET* strategy has received added impetus with the announcement of successful candidates for a number of FET Colleges of the Future under the programme of strategic capital investment in the FET sector which is provided for in *Project 2040*. The welcome inclusion of FET options on the CAO website assists those planning post-secondary education to be fully informed on the range of options available. Of course FET also offers support for lifelong learning to those who are seeking career opportunities or are already in employment.

“ The inclusion of FET options on the CAO website assists those planning post-secondary education to be fully informed on the range of options available. ”

Apprenticeship programmes are examples that traverse the further and higher education sectors, with learners moving between FET centres and technological universities at different stages. The 'earn-and-learn' model also provides strong linkage between employment and college. It is 'college and career' rather than 'college or career'. Work placements are a core feature of learning in many programmes across higher and further education. More generally, building on the enhanced profile of apprenticeship, we must continue to make the transition between learning and employment – and between different components of our overall tertiary education landscape – easier to navigate.

Climate

Heretofore, managing within budget has been a strong focus for all bodies in receipt of public funds. This will now be added to by the existential

requirement to reduce the carbon admissions associated with our activities. Pathfinder projects have been undertaken by a number of HEIs in retrofitting different building types, with the support of the Department and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. This programme will be expanded and extended to the FET sector. It will form part of the major effort required to meet the government's Climate Action Mandate. This Mandate requires each public body to develop their own climate action roadmap to reduce their carbon emissions by 51% and improve energy efficiency by 50% by 2030.

More broadly, the Department, the tertiary education sector, and the scientific and research communities are uniquely placed to contribute to Ireland's climate action. Decarbonising our economy requires new skills and the evidence base from our researchers to ensure we put in place the right strategies and technologies.

Securing a carbon-neutral Ireland will reshape the workforce in ways that will create new opportunities for workers, but also new risks. Transition towards climate-friendly growth will see jobs created in green sectors while they progressively fall away in sectors with high environmental footprints. The widespread availability and accessibility of quality education and training options, and the provision of up- and re-skilling opportunities at all career stages, will be essential in aiding the necessary transformation of the economy and associated career transitions.

SOLAS is currently developing a national suite of green-skills programmes in collaboration with enterprise partners for blended delivery by ETBs in areas such as sustainability awareness, resource efficiency, carbon reduction, and the circular economy. But in the future, sustainability will not just be the subject of specialist courses: it will become a core component of all education, with all of the implications that entails for how such education is provided across our sector.

Conclusion

2022 has been another critical year for the strategic development of the tertiary education sector, with significant developments across policy, funding, and governance. This has been amplified by the many achievements by institutions and the tertiary sector as a whole. It will be vital to keep up this momentum as we continue to respond to the changing needs of students and learners and the rapidly evolving demands at local, regional, and national level.

Ireland's success and sustainability are now, more than ever, reliant on the quality of our talent and the innovation generated in our sector. The reappointment of Minister Simon Harris and Minister of State Niall Collins provides us with a further period of leadership continuity to embed the progress already made and to continue to highlight what our sector can contribute.
