

# Foreword

## Purpose

2023 has been an incredible year of success for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Across the further and higher education sectors, we have made incredible progress together.

It was the year we launched degree programmes outside the CAO system, reduced the cost of education for families, approved significant student accommodation projects, launched four more apprenticeship programmes, and increased investment in both the higher education and further education and training (FET) sectors.

As we look back, I think we can take great pride in the changes we are making across the third-level sector. Just three years ago, this Department was in its infancy, and now, I believe, it is making an enormous contribution to the economic and societal success of this country.

Our purpose is simple. We have to ensure that each citizen can reach their full potential. When I consider what this means, I imagine a country in which everyone can access the training and skills they need to pursue a career they are passionate about. To find a job they love doing and are good at – one that they're happy to get out bed in the morning for.

It shouldn't matter where you are from, what your parents did, how old you are, what gender you are, or how much money you have. There must be no barriers to making your ambition a reality. But the hard truth is that this mission remains just that – a mission, albeit one we are working hard to fulfil.



**Simon Harris TD**

Minister for Further and Higher  
Education, Research, Innovation and  
Science

## Different paths

We live in a country which, over many years, has become obsessed with the arduous, and too often unfair, CAO points race. We live in a country where most of the population is highly educated, but when it comes to lifelong learning, we are lagging behind Europe's top performers. We live in a country where – to our shame – a snobbery towards further education and apprenticeships persists.

The hard truth is that ours is a country which has become blinkered in its belief that there is just one preferred route through an established higher education institution to finding your perfect career.

Let me be clear: There is no one right way; there are just different paths. There is no one right time in your life to study, only many life-defining steps on your educational journey. There is no one right educational provider, only the right course that will offer you the skills you need and want. There is no one size fits all in education; there are just different ways – and they must be open and available to everyone.

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It is my job, and that of my Department, to ensure that the policies and strategies are in place to make these truths not just aspirational but real and tangible for everyone.

One of the proudest moments I have had since becoming the first Minister of this new Department was the launch this year of new courses which offer students the opportunity to earn a university degree outside of the points system.

These unified third-level courses challenge the notion that your Leaving Certificate results should determine your education and career path, define a person or their capabilities, or get in the way of their dreams.

Why should someone with a creative streak be denied a career in animation and visual effects because they didn't do well in Irish, Maths, or Biology? Or what about the young person with an entrepreneurial drive, who is denied a business degree because they didn't do as well in subjects with little relevance to where their talent lies?

There are now, for the first time in the history of the State, dozens of degree courses up and running across business, IT, science, sustainable technologies, animation, and media production for which the students did not need to meet a certain Leaving Cert points tally. In September, these students began their studies in further education institutions, and they will later progress to a higher education institution to complete their fully accredited degree.

## Step change

This is only the beginning of this significant step change in how we offer different pathways outside of the CAO points system. Over the coming weeks, we plan to announce many more new courses as we continue to unify the third-level system and ensure there is a route to success for everyone.

And to ensure it is inclusive and accessible to all, there is no tuition or student contribution fee while the students are at FET, and students are still able to apply for student maintenance grants.

Working tirelessly behind the scenes in all this is the National Tertiary Office, which I established in December 2022 with a mandate to develop joint further and higher education degree programmes. Our vision and goal was to create a more unified third-level system, one which is flexible and diverse, and which offers clear pathways for our students to reach their potential and fulfil their dreams.

I firmly believe it is one of the most exciting developments in third-level education the country has seen in decades, and I am excited to see how it develops and grows over the coming years.

Prior to this, in our bid to drive parity of esteem across third-level education, we also asked the CAO to change its website so that students could see the other options available to them outside of higher education, such as apprenticeships and further education.

## Apprenticeships

To drive this message home, I visited over 80 secondary schools across Ireland in 2022 and spoke to students from Fourth Year upwards about all the educational pathways available to them. My message to them was clear: Follow what you are passionate about, and we will make sure there is a course or pathway available to you.

For some, this will be degree at a university, but for others the correct route to their dream job is through further education or an apprenticeship.

We have been doing an incredible amount of work to increase the number and variety of apprenticeships available for learners. As part of Budget 2024, funding of €67 million was announced for the continued growth of apprenticeships from 13,000 places in 2022 to over 16,000 places next year.

We now have 73 apprenticeship programmes in Ireland, and a key part of our strategy has been the development of craft apprenticeships. We know we need

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50,000 new skilled workers by 2030 in order to build the homes this country needs, and we are working hard to hit those targets.

But the idea of what an apprenticeship is, and can be, is also rapidly changing. For example, in November we announced two really important programmes – a level 6 Higher Certificate in Civil Engineering, which will take two years, and a level 7 Bachelor of Engineering in Civil Engineering, which will take three years.

This new mode of delivery is already attracting new entrants into the profession and is satisfying a growing demand for learning through apprenticeship. And we won't stop there. Phase two, due to begin in 2024, will include apprenticeships at degree and master's level in Civil Engineering.

All of this ties in with our strategy to change the perception of an apprenticeship and encourage students to consider this route through third level when chasing their dream profession.

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But changing how people think about apprenticeships is not enough – we need to tear down any barriers that might exist for those who want to pursue one. In May, I announced a new bursary to help make apprenticeships more inclusive and accessible for everyone.

From this September, learners who participated in an 'access to apprenticeship' course, in Technological University Dublin or Technological University of the Shannon, were eligible for €3,000 in financial support to help cover the costs of travel, accommodation, and successful participation in the access course.

It's vital that people of all ages and backgrounds in Ireland who want to choose the apprenticeship route have the means to do so. There must be no barriers in apprenticeships and across third level as a whole. We know that accommodation and travel costs were proving to be a barrier for many who wanted to pursue a third-level degree.

## Mission

It was not fair that the main universities were based in the main cities, and that's why we worked hard to establish five technological universities across Ireland. These are five new national universities, operating at a world-class standard, while delivering for each of their regions and far beyond.

When I think about my Department's mission, I am filled with a desire to create a society that takes learning for granted, and knows that there are pathways available and accessible at every stage of life for everyone willing to take that vital next step.

We want to achieve a cultural shift in Ireland, one in which personal development does not end once we enter the workforce but, instead, continues throughout our lives. And we want to create a society where the snobbery that has existed in relation to some areas of third-level education is soon the bias of a different era.

Education is the great equaliser and can offer everyone the opportunity to reach their full potential. My Department and I remain steadfast in our determination to make that mission a resounding success.