Higher Education

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 identifies a number of high level objectives for the Irish higher education system. These are:

- Ireland will have an excellent higher education system that will attract and respond to a wide range of potential students from Ireland and abroad and will be fully accessible throughout their lives and changing circumstances.

- Students will experience an education that is excellent, relevant and responsive to their personal development and growth as fully engaged citizens within society;

- Research activity in Irish higher education will continue to increase. It will be characterised by its international level quality, by a strong and broad base across all disciplines, as well as significant focus in niche areas that are aligned with and are a significant support for Irish national economic social and cultural needs;

- Institutions will be autonomous, collaborative and outward looking, effectively governed and fully accountable for both quality and efficiency outcomes. They will respond flexibly to the changing needs of the economy and of society. Higher education will recruit, develop and retain high-quality staff, fully accountable for their performance to a strong and dynamic leadership.

- Higher education will accommodate a diversity of institutional missions that will be clearly articulated and defined. Together, the institutions will form a coherent and inter-related system and collectively will have the requisite critical mass for optimal quality and efficiency.

- The policy framework for higher education will make national expectations clear. The objectives and operations of the institutions and those of the funding and quality agencies will be mutually aligned, and will be underpinned by a sustainable funding model and clearly defined structures for system governance and accountability.

Since the early 1960s, there has been a transformation with regard to the role of tertiary education and its structure, content, and place in the socio-economic affairs of the nation and a strong higher education binary system was established. While the universities were to be greatly expanded, the second prong to policy was the building up of a strong non-university sector with a scheme of new
regional technical colleges, the development of the Dublin Institute of Technology and the setting up of National Institutes of Higher Education in Limerick and in Dublin. This sector of the binary system was intended to be more technical and applied than the university sector and to come more directly under state control. Even when the National Institutes of Higher Education at Limerick and Dublin were raised to the status of independent universities in 1989, it did not break the policy approach for a binary higher education system.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) was established in 1968 as a key intermediary agency between the state and the universities with important planning and budgetary responsibilities for the university sector. In 1971 the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) was set up with academic responsibilities for the non-university sector. The Central Applications Office (CAO) was set up in 1971 to process applications for all university undergraduate courses, on the basis of a points system linked to performance in the Leaving Certificate Examinations. It later took on the processing of applications for the non-university sector also.

In 1998 the Regional Technical Colleges became Institutes of Technology (IoTs), and while they have delegated authority to grant some or all of their own awards, such authority is ultimately subject to validation by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

In November 2012, a significant piece of legislation relating to the quality assurance of higher education was enacted, namely the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012). The Education and Training Act 2012 will have a considerable impact on the quality assurance of higher education in Ireland over the coming years. Under this legislation, a new agency called Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), was established. QQI was created by an amalgamation of three bodies that had both awarding and quality assurance responsibilities in the higher education area: the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB).

QQI also comprises the body which had awarding and quality assurance responsibilities for the further education and training area; the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

Ireland has seven universities legislated for under the Universities Act 1997 and thirteen institutes of technology legislated for under the Institute of Technology Act 2006 and the Dublin Institute of Technology which is legislated for under the Dublin Institute of Technology Act 2006. There are also a significant number of private and not for profit independent colleges offering higher education programmes.

Irish tertiary education has experienced significant growth and development over recent decades involving such features as improved infrastructure, new legislative frameworks, diversification of courses, new forms of teaching and learning, expansion of research activities, new governing structures, quality assurance procedures, and modernised accountability measures. There has been a general proactive policy approach which has transformed tertiary education in contemporary Ireland from that of a generation ago.

The proportion of 18 year olds entering higher education is approximately two thirds. Ireland now ranks highly internationally in terms of attainment in higher education with 48% of 25-34 year olds with a tertiary education qualification.

In 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills launched a strategy that will see the transformation of Ireland’s higher education sector over the next two decades. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, has been endorsed by the Government as the future blueprint for the sector. The Strategy sets out changes for the sector that are aimed at providing for:
• a more flexible system, with a greater choice of provision and modes of learning for an increasingly diverse cohort of students;
• improvements in the quality of the student experience, the quality of teaching and learning and the relevance of learning outcomes; and
• ensuring that higher education connects more effectively with wider social, economic and enterprise needs through its staff, the quality of its graduates, the relevance of its programmes, the quality of its research and its ability to translate that into high value jobs and real benefits for society.

It was not until the economic expansion of the 1990's that significant investment from public funds in research in tertiary education became established. The realisation that the production, dissemination and utilisation of knowledge were the key driving forces of the knowledge society provided a momentum for such investment. While the economic returns from research provide an important incentive for public investment, it is also realised that research widens and advances the intellectual, cultural and artistic accomplishments of society.

There has been significant exchequer investment in research, particularly in the higher education sector, since the late 1990s and this has been matched by high levels of growth in research investment in the private sector. Higher Education R & D expenditure, the majority of which is provided from public sources, increased from €200m in 1998 to €829m in 2009 (Statistics at a Glance 2011 [2]) , while the numbers graduating with PhDs grew from 808 in 2005 to 1222 in 2010 (HEA Statistics [3]) . Significant developments since the late 1990s include the introduction of the Programme for Research and Development in Third Level Institutions; the establishment of Science Foundation Ireland; establishment of the Research Councils (merged to form one Council in 2012), and adoption by Government in 2006 of a whole of government Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation.

However, in comparative terms, such expenditure must be gauged against general expenditure on research and development (GERD) as a percentage of GDP. In 2009 Ireland at 1.78% (GNP) is below the EU mean of 1.92%, and the OECD mean of 2.34% (2008) (Statistics at a Glance 2011 [4]) . In its National Reform Programme submitted to the European Commission in April 2011, Ireland targets to increase overall expenditure on research to 2.5% of GNP (2.0%GDP) (National Reform Programme April 2011 [5]).

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-13 was drawn up by the National Access Office in close consultation with the Department of Education and Skills and other education partners. It follows directly from the 2005-2007 Action Plan on Equity of Access to Higher Education and from the 2001 Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education. It is aligned with the National Development Plan in terms of strategic objectives and, in particular, with the high level objective of the Student Support/Third Level AccessSub-Programme.

The objectives of this Plan are set within the overall mission of the Department of Education and Skills, to "enable individuals to develop their full potential and to participate fully as members of society" and to provide for high quality education which will "contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development". It contributes directly to the achievement of the Department's objective to "promote access to higher education for under represented groups and provide flexible learning opportunities.

DID YOU FIND WHAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR?

YES

NO