National Reform in Higher Education

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 [1] was published in January 2011. It set out a range of measures designed to address the challenges of widening participation, enhancing teaching, learning and research, promoting engagement with wider society and developing internationalisation. A world class system will be underpinned by reformed system governance, public funding aligned with national priorities and the development of a new system configuration to meet future needs.

This report reviews the performance and progress of the higher education system with reference to the previous performance-based framework, published by the Minister in 2013. Implementation of this framework was overseen by the HEA through a process of ‘performance compacts’ and ‘strategic dialogue’ where higher education institutions set out a set of strategic and performance objectives which are formally agreed with the HEA.

As part of the Strategy implementation, in May 2013, the Minister for Education and Skills announced a major reorganisation of the higher education system and a new framework for system governance. The changes set out to create a more dynamic, responsive and high quality higher education sector.

One of the core objectives under this performance framework is meeting Ireland’s human capital needs across the spectrum of skills areas through both core funding and specifically targeted initiatives. As part of the 2018 system performance framework, the Higher Education Authority [2] (HEA) implements a process of strategic dialogue to agree performance compacts between the HEA and the higher education institutions. Performance funding compacts have been agreed with all institutions through this process.

Higher Education Employer Links

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) advises the Irish Government on current and future skills needs of the economy and on other labour market issues that impact on Ireland’s enterprise and employment growth. It includes representation from employer, trade union, industry, further and higher education, manpower forecasting and industrial development agencies, and the Higher Education Authority, the Department of Jobs Enterprise and Innovation, and the Department of Education and Skills.

The EGFSN produces sectoral reports with the objective of quantifying skills and labour requirements in sectors in the medium term as well as making recommendations to government and education and training providers as to how skills needs can be met. For providers this may entail:

- Developing new modules that build on existing qualifications of graduates
Introducing work placement programmes to enhance graduate employability

Conversion courses or new programmes to upskill existing employees where new technologies, higher productivity requirements, new work practices or regulations will impact significantly on skills and qualifications requirements.

Each year the EGFSN produces a National Skills Bulletin outlining demand for each occupation. A Monitoring Skills Supply report is also produced annually giving details of the annual output from the education system.

Springboard was launched in 2011 as part of the Government’s Jobs Initiative, It complements the core State-funded education and training system and provides free or 90% funded upskilling and reskilling higher education opportunities in areas of identified skills need. Springboard+ courses are at Level 6 (Certificate) to Level 9 (Masters) on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and are delivered in public and private education facilities around the country. Courses are generally less than a year, and lead to awards at national certificate, national diploma, degree and post graduate level. Full-time intensive conversion courses under the ICT Skills Action Plan also form part of the initiative. Further rounds of Springboard were announced in 2012-2020.

The Human Capital Initiative (HCI) was announced as part of Budget 2019, with a primary objective of underpinning the provision of additional capacity across the Higher Education Sector to meet priority skill needs for enterprise.

The HCI has a strong focus on innovation and agility, and it will enable us to future proof our graduates, and to ensure that our graduates and the higher education system as a whole are in a position to respond to the constantly evolving skills needs of the economy.

The HCI consists of 3 main pillars - graduate conversion and specialisation courses, additional places on undergraduate provision, and an innovation and agility fund.

Pillar 1: Graduate Conversion Programmes

These Graduate Conversion programmes extend the approach currently in place for ICT under Springboard+, offering incentivised places for graduates to reskill in areas of skills shortage and emerging technologies. These are being run alongside, and complementary to, the Springboard+ offerings.

Pillar 2: Expansion of Existing Places on Undergraduate Courses

Pillar 2 provides additional undergraduate student places to address identified key areas of enterprise skills needs including, but not limited to, Science, Engineering, ICT, and Professional Construction qualifications.

Pillar 3: Innovation and Agility

This pillar has two key areas of focus – innovation in modes and methods of delivery and an agility fund.

2020
Springboard

In January 2020, a competitive call issued for course proposals which will be funded under Springboard+ 2020.

Springboard+ forms part of the Action Plan for Education [3], which aims to make the Irish education and training system the best in Europe within a decade.

Now in its tenth year, Springboard+ has to date provided approximately 65,000 free or 90% funded higher education places, primarily to jobseekers in need of upskilling or reskilling to allow them to re-enter the labour market. Homemakers and those in employment who wished to upskill or reskill to meet specific emerging skills needs in the ICT and Biopharma/Med Tech sectors.

On 17th June, new courses and places under Springboard+ 2020 were announced, 11,074 places are being provided on 332 courses. This includes additional places as a response to Covid-19 related skills needs, funded through repurposing of a small element of the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 allocation.

Funding is allocated to Springboard+ from the NTF on an annual basis, since 2011 over 250m has been allocated to Springboard+

The eligibility criteria for Springboard+ still includes jobseekers, homemakers and those in employment who wish to upskill or reskill to meet specific emerging skills needs.

- Level 6 courses will remain free to all participants
- Returners and those in receipt of certain allowances, including Jobseekers Benefit, will continue to be able to access courses free of charge
- For employed participants on courses NFQ level 7 – 9, 90% of the course fee will be funded by the Government, with participants required to contribute just 10% of the fee. This change reflects the Irish Government’s emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning and upskilling/reskilling throughout one’s career.

Springboard+ provides free and 90% funded full-time and part-time higher education courses in areas where there are identified skills needs and/or employment opportunities. Courses to date have been delivered in the following key growth sector of the economy: ICT, Engineering, Manufacturing, Construction, Hospitality, Business Administration and Law, Entrepreneurship, Animation, Medical Devices Decontamination and certain manufacturing related services courses.

Springboard+ courses which are at level 6 (higher certificate) to level 9 (masters degree) on the National Framework of Qualifications, are delivered by public and private higher education providers around the country.

Human Capital Initiative

Pillar 1: Graduate Conversion Programmes

On 17th June 2020 new courses under the HCI Pillar 1 were announced, 5,891 places on 93 courses over a 3 year period have recently been approved, with 2,039 places available in 2020. This includes additional places as a response to Covid-19 related skills needs, funded through a repurposing of a small element of the HCI Pillar 3 allocation.

Pillar 2: Expansion of Existing Places on Undergraduate Courses
3,000 new places on 138 full-time undergraduate courses in 22 higher education institutions have been funded for autumn 2020 and 2021.

**Pillar 3: Innovation and Agility**

Proposals under this pillar are currently being assessed by an independent panel with national and international expertise, and a recommendation on projects to be funded is expected by 2020.

**Student Assistance Fund**

On 30th July, it was announced that the €1m dedicated funding stream under the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) for students attending Professional Masters of Education (PME) courses will continue in 2020/21. Students, who experience financial difficulties, can be assisted towards costs such as rent, childcare costs, transport costs and books/class materials. This additional funding is ring-fenced to provide support for students on PME programmes and it is part of the Department’s wider responses to teacher supply issues, as set out in the Teacher Supply Action Plan [4].

In 2019 the allocation for SAF was €10.1m and supported circa 14,000 students.

In July 2020, a €10m COVID funding access package was secured which will be used to support access measures in higher education – This will mainly provide for the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) which will be doubled to €16.2m in 2020 and will support students who require financial assistance. This brings the total allocation for the SAF in 2020 to €18.2m.

The remaining €1.9m will support vulnerable students from target groups, the exact details of which has to be decided.

**2019**

**Springboard+**

In January 2019, a call for proposals to be funded under Springboard+ 2019 was issued.

It was launched May 2019, providing for over 9,000 higher education places on 275 upskilling and reskilling courses under Springboard+ 2019.

There is a particular focus being placed on digital skills, transversal skills, management and leadership skills, and skills for the workplace of the future. Given the emphasis on upskilling people in employment the majority of courses are delivered on a blended learning basis. All courses provide job-readiness training and most offer the opportunity for work placement, project-based learning or industry site visits where appropriate.

Springboard+ 2019 courses continue to be open to people irrespective of their employment status. Returners and those in receipt of certain DEASP allowances can access courses free of charge. Level 6 courses are free to all participants and for employed participants on courses NFQ level 7 – 9, 90% of the course fee will be funded by the Government, with participants required to contribute just 10% of the fee.

**Human Capital Initiative**

The Human Capital Initiative (HCI) programme was announced as part of Budget 2019, with the primary objective to underpin the provision of additional capacity across the Higher Education Sector to meet priority skill needs for enterprise. It will be a transformative development for the third level
Pillar 2: Expansion of Existing Places on Undergraduate Courses

The call for proposals under this Pillar 2 of the HCI was released by the Higher Education Authority on 14th October 2019.

Announced in December 2019, Government investment of €24 million in this pillar created over 3,000 new places on 138 full-time undergraduate courses in 22 public and private higher education institutions to commence in autumn 2020 and 2021.

Qualifications and Quality Assurance Bill

On 11 July 2019, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Bill 2018 was passed by Government.

The Bill contains the following measures:

- enables QQI to examine the compliance of providers, including those in the English language education sector, with national employment law. Where cases of non-compliance are identified, QQI will be empowered to withdraw authorisation from a provider to use the Mark.
- establishes a new national Learner Protection Fund. This fund will strengthen the existing system of learner protection and benefit students by ensuring that they are allowed to finish their programmes of education and training in the event that their programme ceases prematurely.
- a new mechanism enabling higher education institutions, such as RCSI, to apply to the Minister for Education and Skills for authorisation to be called a university.

Other key provisions of the Bill will enable QQI to address the issue of academic cheating, to examine the corporate governance of providers, and to establish the institutes of technology as designated awarding bodies, allowing institutes of technology more autonomy over the range of programmes they deliver up to and including master’s degrees.

In parallel to the passage of the Bill through the parliament, the mediator to the English language education sector engaged with teachers and school owners and their representatives. Arising from consultations with key stakeholders the mediator recommended the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee to the Minister to set minimum employment standards for the English Language Teaching sector.

Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions


The Framework aims to ensure the creation of an institutional campus culture which is safe, respectful and supportive. It has been developed by an Expert Advisory Group comprising academics, students and leaders in the area of sexual health among students. They were tasked with devising standards that all institutions will be required to implement. Funding of €400,000 is to be made available over the period 2019-2020 to assist institutions in this important work.

The Framework draws from international best practice and research to provide institutions with standards and guidance on what works to create a safe and supportive culture. It sets out aims for
students, for the Higher Education Authority, the Department of Education and Skills, for higher education institutions themselves and for staff of institutions.

The four key outcomes of the Framework will be:

- **Institutional culture**: Effective structures in place, with institutions assigning responsibility by a management team member to implement the framework, including stakeholders in the process
- **Institutional Processes**: Recording and reporting of statistics of incidents
- **Institutional policies**: Dedicated policies consistent with the aims of the Framework, with clear lines of responsibility, reporting, transparency, and implementation supported by institutional leadership
- **Targeted initiatives**: for students and staff, including direct student facing activities that promote an understanding of consent, an education plan to support students and staff, systems for measuring the effectiveness of initiatives and accessible trauma-informed services.

**Funding**

On 30 August, it was announced that almost €100 million is to be invested by the Government in major building projects at five higher education institutions.

As part of ongoing investment in the sector through Project Ireland 2040, the funding has been approved in principle to help support up to 14,000 new places for students in higher education institutions.

The successful projects being backed through the Higher Education Strategic Infrastructure Fund (HESIF) are:

- €25m Maynooth University, Technology Society & Innovation Building
- €6.6m IT Sligo, Extension to Central Campus Project
- €25m UCC, Cork University Business School (CUBS) Project
- €15m NUI Galway, Learning Commons Project
- €25m UCD, Future Campus Project

Project Ireland 2040 will ultimately see Exchequer investment of €2.2 billion in our higher education infrastructure over the coming decade by the Department of Education and Skills through the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

A key objective of the Higher Education Strategic Infrastructure Fund was to encourage non-Exchequer investment in the sector, with the five projects in this round also expected to leverage more than €400m in non-Exchequer co-funding.

Between 2017 and 2030, the number of full-time students enrolled in higher education is projected to increase by more than 38,000 to a total of more than 222,000.

The five projects were selected following a detailed application and assessment process and based on the capacity of the projects to deliver on the objectives of the Higher Education Strategic Infrastructure Fund.

The projects will be subject to ongoing economic and financial appraisal, and a further approval will be required by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) before a project proceeds to tender.

In February, it was announced that 22 projects across 23 educational institutions were awarded a
total of €23 million under the Innovation and Transformation Fund. The fund was launched as part of the modernisation and reform of the funding model for higher education. It is also part of the €250 million additional investment by the Government in higher education since 2016, bringing total funding to more than €1.7 billion.

The 22 successful projects embody collaboration and innovation across the higher education sector and focus on transformation. The 22 funded proposals include partnerships amongst the eight universities, ten institutes of technology, two specialist colleges, one Further Education College and five other state and non-state bodies.

Some of the projects will see third level institutions partnering with organisations such as An Cosán, Family Carers Ireland and the Disability Federation of Ireland to learn and adopt better ways of ensuring education is open to as many people as possible. Some projects will focus on developing digital systems to enable more flexible learning, including through online options and simulation training. Other projects are focusing on student mental health, supporting entrepreneurs and start-ups, student retention, leadership and preparing students for the working world.

**Student Assistance Fund**

In January, it was announced that an additional €1 million has been allocated to the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) for Professional Master of Education (PME) students who are experiencing financial difficulty. This additional funding is ring-fenced to provide support for students on PME programmes and it is part of the Department’s wider responses to teacher supply issues, as set out in the [Teacher Supply Action Plan](#).

In 2018 the allocation for the SAF was €9.1m. In the region of 16,000 students benefit from it annually. The new allocation brings the total fund to €10.1m. Students in third-level institutions can apply for support under the SAF if they experience exceptional financial need.

There will be more than 2,200 places for students in Professional Master of Education courses at state funded HEIs in the coming academic year. That includes 1,800 places for Post Primary PME in the 2019/20 academic year and 420 places for students in the Primary PME.

**2018**

**Funding**

In January 2018, reforms were announced which will link funding of higher education institutions to the delivery of key national priorities, including better alignment to skill needs of the economy, higher levels of performance and innovation, expansion of research, better access for students at a disadvantage and improving lifelong and flexible learning opportunities.

The new System Performance Framework 2018-2020 outlines the Government’s key objectives for higher education for the period up to 2020 and sets out how institutions are to be assessed during these years.

The six key objectives can be summarized as follows:

1. Provide a strong talent pipeline, responsive to the needs of the economy and society;
2. Create rich opportunities for international collaboration;
3. Become an Innovation Leader in Europe;
4. Significantly improve equality of opportunity, break down cycles of disadvantage;
5. Demonstrate consistent improvement in the quality of the learning environment with a close
$\textit{6. Demonstrate consistent improvement in governance, leadership and operational excellence.}$

These key objectives, as set out by Government, will form the basis of the next iteration of strategic dialogue process between the Higher Education Authority and the higher education institutions.

The Systems Performance Framework provides key metrics on which the system as a whole and the institutions can be monitored and evaluated. It builds on the previous higher education sectoral frameworks.

This will be done by tying funding explicitly to delivery in these areas and by developing 3 year compacts with each college designed to deliver new System Performance targets.

Key changes to the funding formula include:

- Increased money for the delivery of higher cost STEM courses;
- Increased weighting to students who come to education at a disadvantage, emphasizing Government’s commitment to tackling educational disadvantage;
- Life long, part-time and flexible learning opportunities to be incentivised;
- Better alignment between the outputs of our Higher Education institutions and the skill needs of the economy;
- The introduction of an Innovation Fund and a performance fund to reward institutions who excel in particular areas;
- Removal of rigid 60/40 split of funds between universities and Institutes of Technology;
- The introduction of a financial penalty for breaches of governance by institutions;
- New funding streams for research.

Important reforms that will be prioritized in 2018 include the following:

- Increasing the proportion of funding that is allocated to universities (via a ‘top slice’) on the basis of research performance from 5% to 10% in 2018
- Establishment of a competitive Innovation Fund to support innovative proposals from institutions with potential application across the system
- Additional funding of €250,000 for institutions with multiple campuses (must meet certain criteria as proposed by the Review Panel)
- Demonstrable impact of new funding on key skill gaps
- Consultation on a potential rewards-based approach to performance funding to incentivise and reward institutions who excel in particular areas
- Design and introduction of a financial penalty system for serious breaches of governance
- Development of an online tool to clearly communicate how funding is allocated, the outcomes it generates and the ways in which it supports the range of objectives set for higher education
- Establishment of an Implementation Group to monitor progress and advise on particular recommendations.

Key new targets for the next 3 years include:

- Increase by 10% the number of those aged 25-64 engaged in lifelong learning by 2020 and by 15% by 2025
- Increase by 25% the total number of students studying on a flexible basis
- All students will have the opportunity to undertake a work placement by 2025
- Increase engagement with enterprise by increasing spin out companies by 40% and licenses by 20%. Double overall higher education research income derived from industry to €48m
- Increase entry coming from disadvantaged and disability streams and ensure every DEIS school partakes in HEI led access programme
- Implement 2018 Higher Education Gender Equality Task Force Action Plan
- Expand alternate pathways by doubling apprenticeships, increasing Springboard by 30%.

Human Capital Initiative

In October 2018, a 20% increase in investment levels in Higher Education was announced as part of the new €300m multiannual Human Capital Initiative (HCI) for Higher Education (HE). The HCI will fund programmes in HE meeting priority skill needs for the five year period 2020 - 2024 through the release of surplus income in the National Training Fund (NTF). The funding will be made available through competitive challenge based calls to Higher Education Institutions promoting student-centred reform and innovation in course provision.

Furthermore under [Project Ireland 2040](#) there will be a near trebling of the higher education capital budget compared to the past decade from €0.8 billion to €2.2 billion, which will be invested in infrastructure in third level institutions.

Technological Universities Bill

In March 2018, the Technological Universities Bill was passed into law. It is a transformative piece of legislation that will radically change the higher education landscape. The legislation will underpin the development of a new type of higher education institution, building on the strengths and mission of institutes of technology to develop world class technological universities.

The creation of technological universities provides the opportunity to drive regional development and provide more opportunities for individuals, enterprise and the community. These institutions will have significant impact and influence regionally, nationally and internationally.

The presence of a Technological University, with a specific mandate towards regional development will have a transformative effect on communities. Enhanced higher education institutions will deliver the skilled and talented people that sustain enterprise and new investments. Ultimately it will make these areas more attractive places to live, raise a family in and work.

Following enactment of the legislation, the next step in the process is for applications for Technological University status to be submitted to the Higher Education Authority for assessment by an international panel of experts. These will be submitted by consortia of existing Institutes of Technology, which have come together to seek TU status.

Design teams were appointed in June 2018 to each of eleven building projects in Institutes of Technology across the country. The final scope of each project has been agreed and the necessary technical and economic appraisals undertaken. The design teams of architects and engineers will now bring the projects through the initial design and planning process. The projects will facilitate an additional 8,000 new student places.

The eleven projects will help drive regional development and meet many of the skills needs that have been identified by the National Skills Council and the nine regional skills for a, established in 2017. These new facilities will be transformative for the individual institutions and the regions they serve and will lead to a steep change in STEM-related skills, including ICT, engineering and life sciences across the country.

This public, private partnership (PPP) programme will be paid for through monthly unitary charge payments to the private operator who will not only construct these projects but maintain them for 25
years post-construction. A capital envelope of €200m was signalled in the 2016-21 Capital Plan for this programme.

This PPP Programme is being rolled-out alongside €367 million in funding from the Department of Education and Skills for investment in higher education over the period 2018-2021. Project Ireland 2040 provides for a significant ramping up in Exchequer funding to support infrastructure priorities in the higher education sector. €2.2 billion will be made available over the coming decade to support refurbishment, new buildings and equipment renewal in the sector.

The eleven projects will be advanced in two bundles providing 75,000m² additional academic and teaching space and 8,000 new student places. The bundles will be subject to rigorous Value for Money tests to ensure suitability for procurement as PPPs before and during the tender process.

On 16 October 2018, the Dáil (Irish Parliament) approved a draft order by the Minister, appointing 1 January 2019 as the date on which the first Technological University will be established. The new technological university will be named Technological University Dublin in English and Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta Bhaile Átha Cliath in the Irish language.

**Springboard**

In January 2018, a competitive call issued for course proposals which will be funded under Springboard+ 2018.

Springboard+ forms part of the Action Plan for Education, which aims to make the Irish education and training system the best in Europe within a decade.

Now in its eighth year, Springboard+ has to date provided 47,000 free higher education places, primarily to jobseekers in need of upskilling or reskilling to allow them to re-enter the labour market.

From last year, the eligibility criteria for Springboard+ was expanded to include homemakers and those in employment who wished to upskill or reskill to meet specific emerging skills needs in the ICT and Biopharma/Med Tech sectors.

This year, for the first time, Springboard+ courses will be extended so that all courses will now be open to people irrespective of their employment status.

- Level 6 courses will remain free to all participants
- Returners and those in receipt of certain allowances, including Jobseekers Benefit, will continue to be able to access courses free of charge
- For employed participants on courses NFQ level 7 – 9, 90% of the course fee will be funded by the Government, with participants required to contribute just 10% of the fee.

This change reflects the Irish Government’s emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning and upskilling/reskilling throughout one’s career.

Springboard+ provides free and 90% funded full-time and part-time higher education courses in areas where there are identified skills needs and/or employment opportunities. Courses to date have been delivered in areas such ICT, Manufacturing which includes the biopharma sector, Construction, Entrepreneurship, Cross-Enterprise Skills, the Hospitality Sector and International Financial Services.

Springboard+ courses which are at level 6 (higher certificate) to level 9 (masters degree) on the National Framework of Qualifications, are delivered by public and private higher education providers around the country.