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.

Regional clusters have been established to strengthen regional capacity and competitiveness. These provide for Regional Skills Fora to engage with enterprise, community organisations and other Further Education and Training providers and support the development of regional plans. These regional plans focus on shared academic planning between higher education institutions in the cluster and the improvement of access, transfer and progression for students in the region.

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 to provide some 6,000 mainly part time places annually for unemployed people in areas targeted for growth in the economy, such as ICT, international languages, international trade and marketing, financial services, bio-pharma, construction and enterprise sectors. Courses are generally less than a year, and lead to awards at national certificate, national diploma, degree and post graduate level (Levels 6-9 of the National Qualifications Framework). Full-time intensive conversion courses under the ICT Skills Action Plan also form part of the initiative. Further rounds of Springboard were announced in 2012-2018.

**2019**

**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:
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 five projects were:
- €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

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.

Access

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 [4].

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 eye to international best practice;

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 fora, 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 75,000 m² 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.

2017

Funding

In December 2017, the introduction of the 1916 Bursary Fund was announced. This bursary will support 600 students over the course of three years. These students will be from target groups who are currently under-represented in higher education and the fund will provide them with a bursary of €5,000 per academic year to support them in their studies. A significant proportion of these students will be lone parents and those studying both part-time and full-time are eligible to apply. An individual can be in receipt of both a 1916 bursary and a Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant, if they are eligible.

An allocation of €3m funding for initiatives to widen access to initial teacher training courses to encourage and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to study to be teachers was also announced. This will fund an additional 70 students to become teachers and will bring the total investment in these initiatives to €2.7m.

This represents the first and second strand of Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funding and fulfils a commitment in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, and it is also one of the actions in the Action Plan for Education.

In September 2017, the Department announced €16.5m for new initiatives to widen access to higher education over the next three years, with a strong focus on helping lone parents to access higher level education. This included:
Funding bursaries worth €5,000 for 600 students coming from non-traditional backgrounds into college, with support for at least 120 socio-economically disadvantaged lone parents. This will be a €6m regional call over three years.

Funding for support programmes to help 2,000 students, of which 200 will be lone parents, from non-traditional backgrounds enter college and successfully complete their course. This will be a €7.5m regional call over three years.

A further €3m over three years in increased funding for the hardship supports to help students, with lone parents being prioritised.

The funding will support a range of new initiatives and partnerships to support over 2,000 extra students from disadvantaged groups to participate in third level education over the next three years. Higher Education Clusters were invited to submit proposals for funding and the most innovative ideas will be supported.

The groups being targeted include: entrants from under-represented socio-economic groups and communities; entrants with disabilities; mature entrants; members of the Irish Traveller community; students entering on the basis of a further education award; part-time flexible learners; as well as socio-economically disadvantaged lone parents and ethnic minorities.

The latest data available from the HEA shows that access to third level by disadvantaged groups is improving. In particular, the number and share of students from disadvantaged backgrounds rose from 22% to 26%, and of students with a disability rose from 7% to 11% between 2012/13 and 2014/15. The extra funding is designed to accelerate this progress.

In the Budget 2017, an increase of 4% was provided for higher education and the Department announced that work was beginning on the development of a sustainable and predictable multi-annual funding model for higher and further education and training, involving increased employer and exchequer contributions from 2018.

In March 2017, the Ministers for Jobs Enterprise and Innovation and Public Expenditure and Reform launched a public consultation process on an Exchequer/Employer Investment Mechanism for future funding of further and higher education and training. The paper outlines the major investments to date in providing skills for the labour market and the ongoing reforms under way in both sectors. It seeks views on a proposal to increase the National Training Fund levy on employers from 0.7% of payroll at present, to 1% phased over a three year period. The proposal takes on board the need to put funding of the FE and HE sectors on a more sustainable footing through an increased employer contribution, allied with a greater role for employers in identifying and responding to skill needs. Responses to the consultation have been requested by April 2017. A greater contribution from employers had been proposed in Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education [9] published in July 2016. The report is being examined by the Oireachtas (Parliament) and an expert working group has been established to develop a new higher education funding allocation model.

Data

What Do Graduates Do? - The Class of 2015 [10] was published in February 2017. This shows that 68% of graduates progressed to employment (of whom 11% went overseas). 31% of Bachelor Degree holders, 16% of higher and post graduate diploma holders and 8% of Masters and Doctorate
graduates progressed to further education or training. Only 6% of all graduates were still seeking employment nine months after graduation.

**Springboard**

In May 2017, the Department launched over 6,400 new free education places under springboard+ 2017. The courses are targeted at jobseekers and those in employment or self-employment who wish to upskill, reskill or cross skill in the Biopharma/Med Tech and ICT sectors. For the first time, homemakers are also eligible to participate in Springboard+ courses this year.

Incorporating part-time Springboard courses and full-time and part-time ICT skills conversion courses, Springboard+ 2017 will provide for 198 courses at public and private educational institutions across Ireland. Courses approved for funding will be in the following skills needs areas:

- **ICT**
- Manufacturing which includes the Biopharma/Med tech sector;
- Entrepreneurship;
- Hospitality;
- Financial Services.

There will also be a limited number of courses in Marketing (including digital marketing), specialist management courses (Food Business, Aviation and Technology Management), Animation and specialist Construction related courses.

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