

**Oireachtas Joint Committee Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, & Science**

**Technological Higher Education Association**

**Submission December 2020**

***Speaking Draft***

***With supporting paper and Appendix***

***Title as provided by the JCEFHERIS***

*‘**The effects of Covid 19 on Higher Education Institutions, and specifically, (a) admissions and reopening of Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities/delivery of courses; (b) funding and (c) future reforms’.*

*Meeting date: 03 December 2020*

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| Prof Vincent Cunnane | President LIT & Chair of THEA |
| Dr Patricia Mulcahy | President of IT Carlow & Deputy Chair of THEA |
| Mr Paul Hannigan | President of LyIT |
| Dr Joseph Ryan | CEO THEA |

# Introduction

# Chairman, members of the Joint Committee, we appreciate this opportunity to engage on the effects of Covid-19 and our future trajectory. We represent the sector key to broadening access and one with a proud record for addressing disadvantage.

# The Academic Context: Admissions & the Reopening of Institutes of Technology The higher education system went underground from March but not to hibernate; we successfully completed our programmes. The response from students was positive and we acknowledge the flexibility and innovation of staff in ensuring that the learning outcomes were delivered and assessed.

# An evaluation of these measures by QQI concluded that they were successful in maintaining academic standards in unprecedented circumstances.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# A worry was that the crisis would exacerbate inequality; the challenges of ensuring a reasonable measure of equity and support for vulnerable learners were significant. There were concerns around access to devices and adequate broadband, and mitigating educational disadvantage emerged as a principal theme.

# Through a cohesive transitions’ subgroup, THEA made its contribution to ensuring that the ambitions of applicants were met through the Leaving Certificate calculated grades approach. This included the provision of additional places on high demand programmes. The CAO outcome realized an intake consistent with recent years and similarly, the early indications from this year’s Student Record System suggest that retention has not been disproportionately impacted.

# We are currently working collaboratively to facilitate the phasing in of increasing in-person activity in Semester 2.[[2]](#footnote-2) The discretion afforded autonomous institutes is key.[[3]](#footnote-3) The nature of our pedagogical approach along with a high-proportion of studio and practice-based subjects requires us to maintain a higher level of on-campus learning and this is in concord with the desire of learners.

# International students

Ireland took some considerable trouble to care for international students from the outset of this pandemic. This enhanced our reputation as a safe destination for study abroad. The Joint Committee will wish to be apprised that despite this reputational gain, there is a significant concern over access to medical insurance, the cost of which has increased exponentially following the recent decision of the Court of Appeal.[[4]](#footnote-4) We request that the Joint Committee take an interest in this matter as failure to address it will undoubtedly impact our ability to maintain Ireland’s place as an attractive destination.

# Student Life

The capacity of students to work in a blended environment over a prolonged period remains in question. Notwithstanding the practical implications such as accommodation, at core were questions of increasing isolation and the undeniable reduction of the student experience. In THEA we have worked to facilitate surrogate opportunities for socialization.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The positive mental and physical benefit of participation in sport and activity is a contribution to health and wellbeing. Our institutions have invested in excellent sports facilities, indoor and outdoor. They are managed by experienced professional staff whose priority is the safety of their service users. Our advice is that we remove anomalies and ensure that students are allowed access to their controlled sports facilities and offer them safe occasion for social connection.[[6]](#footnote-6)

# Research

The initial Covid challenges for research and innovation related to access to facilities and subjects. Looking ahead and consistent with the strictures of the legislation, we are building capacity for our technological universities.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is necessary to deliver on the expectations of exciting new entities to meet their obligations as set out in framing national policy.[[8]](#footnote-8) It speaks also to the current European focus on ‘Distributed Excellence’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The potential attaching to aligning research largely under a single department offers opportunity to effect necessary structural change that can be the prerequisite to releasing the potential inherent in the technological university.[[10]](#footnote-10) We need to move from a workload allocation model which focuses on teaching contact hours and does not incentivise academic staff to engage in R&I; and from a promotional pathway which provides the opportunity for academic staff to take up only managerial roles. In addition, the financial challenge speaks to the need for a time-limited R&I capacity building fund to leverage the work of the TURN Report and the Technological University Transformation Fund.[[11]](#footnote-11)

# Funding

Transition and capacity building informed our recent budget submission and, as the expectations of higher education as a driver of economic development become more explicit, the sector needs to be equipped to deliver on this ambition. The investment requested can be categorised under four topical headings, namely Digitalisation and Infrastructure, Human Capital, Research and Innovation, and Climate. The intent is to equip institutions to deliver on key regional economic growth and greater social inclusion.

# Future Reform

We inherit an anachronistic system based on input hours and the goal is to work with partners to arrive at an alternative lecturing contract that can better reflect the advanced mission of the TU whilst respecting the contributions of committed staff to teaching, research, and service. This revised workload model will have to triangulate with a broadened career pathway. The challenge in this is to realize an agreed approach balancing professional autonomy with accountability.

Minister Harris has set out four pillars of this vision for the new department; this all-island dimension triangulates with the Shared Island vision which is of particular interest to our sector and especially with border institutes in Letterkenny and Dundalk.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Finally, chairman, it is appreciated that this committee will next year weigh the economic advice from the European Commission on the Cassells Report. That significant investment in higher education is required is accepted; the question will be on how that sustainable future might be fuelled. At a time of unprecedented change in our sector, we look forward to working with you on advancing this agenda.

1. [https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/The%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20Modifications%20to%20Teaching,%20Learning%20and%20Assessment%20in%20Irish%20Further%20Education.pdf#search=The%20impact%20of%20Covid%2019%2A](https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/The%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20Modifications%20to%20Teaching%2C%20Learning%20and%20Assessment%20in%20Irish%20Further%20Education.pdf#search=The%20impact%20of%20Covid%2019%2A). QQI is the national quality assurance agency, [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The re-opening of Institutes of Technology was carefully planned in full compliance with public health guidelines and informed by a set of sectoral principles; see <http://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/THEA-COVID-principles.pdf>. These set out high level principles that have continued to inform practice at the institutional level to this point. Details of the Principles and Guidelines are contained in the appendix. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The sector working cohesively with D/FHERIS and its agencies issued a statement on continuity last week Attached as Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Court elected to uphold the ruling in HIA v Chubb.. High Court Judgement: Health Insurance Authority v Chubb European Group plc 22 October 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We acknowledge the work the USI with whom we have worked closely to understand this better. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Joint Committee may note that given the commitment to have some staff and students on campus in a managed and safe manner, we should be facilitated to provide them with some basic canteen facilities in a controlled manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The 2018 Act sets out several challenging R&I metrics which institutes must reach before they can become a TU and those that must be achieved post-designation. 1) At least 4% of students registered on programmes of study from NFQ Level 8 (typically honours Bachelor’s degree) to Level 10 (doctoral degree) must be research students. This must rise to 7% within 10 years of TU designation. 2) The applicant TU must have PhD programmes and staff/students conducting research in no less than three fields of education (ISCED narrow field ). This must increase to five fields within five years of TU designation. 3) At least 45% of academic staff within the applicant TU must have an L10 (or equivalent) qualification. This must rise to 65% within 10 years of designation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Project Ireland 2040* and the *National Development Plan 2018—2027..* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The concept of Distributed Excellence is a fruit of the German and Polish rectors’ conferences in 2017. Essentially, it argues the advantage of the wide spread of research quality across a range institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See keynote speech, Minister Simon Harris, IUA Future of Ireland Webinar: The pivotal role of universities for future skills and innovation. <https://www.gov.ie/en/speech/14a93-keynote-by-simon-harris-td-at-iua-future-of-ireland-seminar-series-webinar/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The 2019 Report of the Technological Universities Research Network (“TURN Report”). A key instrument in this would see a significant increase in the multi-annual R&I funding in the HEA Recurrent Grant. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The minister cited an innovation island, an island of talent, and international island, and an island of inclusion & engagement. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)