

Submission to the Joint Oireachtas  
Committee, Further and Higher  
Education, Research, Innovation, and  
Science

Future Funding for Higher Education

*February 2022*

## Introduction

Chairman, members of the Joint Committee, again on behalf of THEA, I appreciate this opportunity make a submission and in this case on the future funding of higher education.

## Context

In a speech hosted by Ibec on 24 January 2022, Paschal Donohue, Minister for Finance, stated:

*Our Further and Higher Education and Research systems represent a critical national asset which can be an engine for economic growth and support the future success of our citizens.*

It led the minister to highlight the current creation of technological universities and their role as anchors for regional and national innovation. His statement that *investment in research will be a critical driver of innovation providing the foundation for future economic growth and societal wellbeing* comes as we emerge from the worst of the Covid pandemic, as the Oireachtas considers the European assessment of the Cassells proposals, and as the OECD provides advice on the contracts and structures that will inform the technological universities. This confluence presents both a challenge and unique opportunity. It comes as we locate our future strategy within the Sustainable Development Goals and specifically SDG 4 and Education 2030, the core aim of which is to:

*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*

In the Incheon Declaration (2015), UNESCO and other partners in considering SDG 4 stated:

*Education is a public good of which the state is the duty bearer.<sup>1</sup>*

Ireland has recorded significant progress. We have much of the architecture in place. We now need consistent and focused public investment to ensure we deliver on our national ambition and international obligations. Substantial investment in the creation of technological universities has taken place. However, this has mostly taken the form of one-off investment, designed to assist the development process, or competitive-based funding which is not guaranteed on a multi-annual basis and does not allow the institutions to “plan forward” in terms of spending. Consequently, not only is there a need for significant multi-annual, long-term investment in higher education generally, there is also a further specific need for same in technological universities. As Minister Donohue noted, our system is a critical national asset; it needs to be prioritized for direct and sustained investment as it will repay this greater economic activity and in the enhanced wellbeing of our citizenry. Failure to make that investment will inevitably impact the ability of the sector to satisfy the ambitions laid out for it by government and will hinder the capacity to contribute to the pipeline of skills talent that the country requires.

## Students

Providing effective learning opportunities for students, of all ages and from diverse backgrounds, has been central to the mission of the institutions represented by THEA. In any given academic year, up to half of all first-year entrants have gained a place on a basis other than Leaving Certificate attainment acquired in that year. Our advanced entry agreements with the FET sector maximise the potential of those entry routes for potential students. An analysis conducted by the National Transitions Reform Steering Group in June 2020<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://iite.unesco.org/publications/education-2030-incheon-declaration-framework-action-towards-inclusive-equitable-quality-education-lifelong-learning/>. Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all.

<sup>2</sup> [des-transitions-sub-group-working-paper-june-2020.pdf \(solas.ie\)](https://www.solas.ie/sites/default/files/2020-06/Des%20Transitions%20Sub-Group%20Working%20Paper%20June%202020.pdf)

demonstrated that a much higher proportion of new entrants progressed with FET qualifications into our institutions than is the case across the HE sector as a whole. The total number of students enrolled in THEA member institutions increased by 23.7% from 2014/15 to 2020/21 compared to an increase of 15.6% for other institutions<sup>3</sup>. The most recent analysis of completion rates demonstrates that as many students successfully complete their studies in technological higher education institutions as anywhere else, when like for like students are compared<sup>4</sup>.

With the increase in student numbers, student support services have faced increasing demands and particularly in our institutions where such services suffer from legacy funding inequalities. Given their profile, our students have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Existing inequalities in terms of housing, income, and cultural capital have been amplified. Students have sought to maintain their learning while dealing with challenges relating to mental health and wellbeing, poor quality study spaces off-campus, and extended periods of isolation which undermined the traditional “whole student” experience. While our institutions acknowledge and welcome the several additional “one-off” funding initiatives provided during this time, it is critical that we move to multi-annual funding to enable strategic planning and decision-making - with commensurate efficient reporting processes so that these essential services are enabled to devote their time to the support of individuals.

Our institutions urgently require specific investment to embed fully the Consent Framework and achieve the required cultural changes at the heart of the Framework. This investment would benefit both students and staff. Detailed investment recommendations for the sector are included in THEA’s latest budget submission.<sup>5</sup>

## Staff

Over the last two years, our employees have made unprecedented efforts to rise to the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic. From switching to emergency remote delivery in March 2020, through adaptations to campuses in September 2020 and 2021 to make them safe places for our students and employees, to the implementation of blended learning approaches so that all can benefit from education, they have done all that we could ask.

The transformation to technological universities is the biggest educational change of our times. For our employees, that will mean transformation and change also. At the time of writing, we are awaiting the final Report from the OECD advising on the academic contract and related matters. The introduction of Professor grades, a workload allocation model to reflect the changing nature of an academic’s work including research and administration as well as the traditional teaching and learning role, robust promotion structures, and new senior management structures will have to form part of that report. These changes will require significant increased core funding for the sector which will require a swift response from Government.

A further challenge relates to the learnings from Covid-19. Students appreciated the ability to learn online and there is no doubt that blended and online delivery will feature more regularly in the years to come. The NextGenerationEU package and our resulting National Recovery and Resilience Plan emphasise the learnings from the pandemic including the power of the latest digital and online technologies. We will need to invest in training and development over the next few years in this regard to leverage this potential. This digitization challenge has been a consistent feature of THEA Budget submissions over the last few years. Some of the forthcoming funding from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) may be available to address this.

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<sup>3</sup> [Key Facts and Figures 2020/2021 | Statistics | Higher Education Authority \(hea.ie\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Completion Analysis 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11 Entrants | Statistics | Higher Education Authority \(hea.ie\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/THEA\\_Budget2022\\_Submission.pdf](http://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/THEA_Budget2022_Submission.pdf)

## Capital & Investment

There is a concentration now on inflation and the costs of living. For our students, the student accommodation challenge looms large. The increase in student numbers, including international students, is creating an unprecedented demand for suitable, affordable student accommodation which has been exacerbated by the wider societal housing need. There is no doubt that increasing the supply of on-campus purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) could relieve the pressure on the private rented market. The delays in addressing this issue over the last few years cannot continue. In fact, the opportunity to address this problem may have already passed. TUs await access to the borrowing framework and since we have sought one many years ago, the investment metrics have changed and a borrowing framework on its own may not be sufficient to enable us to develop PBSA in an economically viable manner; direct government investment may be required.

The lack of capital buildings investment is of great concern and the PPP process currently underway is found to be slow and not delivering the building stock required in the immediate future. A major capital fund needs to be allocated and disbursed. Again, this is something that has been highlighted for many years. A 2016 Report by the HEA<sup>6</sup> identified that our sector “accounts for 29% of the gross space available across the higher education sector yet is able to serve 42% of the students”, which emphasises the capital gap. At the time, international norms for student space ratios were between 10m<sup>2</sup> and 11m<sup>2</sup> per student; Ireland’s institutions average was between 7m<sup>2</sup> and 8m<sup>2</sup> per student. One institution noted, for example, that space within its campus equated to between 6m<sup>2</sup> and 7m<sup>2</sup> per student, and that such constraints prevented the development of effective student services and amenities, undermining the campus environment and amenities. This capital deficit extends beyond the physical buildings into equipment, facilities, and IT infrastructure, including for research & innovation. There is shared determination to build our new technological universities into world-class institutions; the state needs to play its part in providing significant enhanced capital investment. Forthcoming capacity-building funding for the sector through the NRRP and an ERDF-co-funded Regional Research, Development & Innovation Integration Scheme do not include capital expenditure as an eligible cost item.

## Community & International

The establishment of technological universities offers new possibilities for the sector to build productive relationships overseas. Change in the nature of our relationships is inevitable. Technological universities will be able to build broader and deeper partnerships with a wider range of HEIs and attract different categories of students. Seed funding to allow technological universities to develop these relationships, in partnership with Enterprise Ireland and the Department of Foreign Affairs, would deliver a return on investment. The European Universities project, for which some welcome funding has been recently received, is a key international project in which our HEIs are partaking, but support for aspirants must also be forthcoming.

At the same time, we also have to recognize that the post-Covid world will be different, with increased emphasis on sustainable development goals and on a more inclusive and strategic vision of internationalization.

Technological universities are fundamental to the delivery of the regional objectives set out in the Programme for Government, Project 2040, and the revised National Development Plan which comments that:

*“Investments in the new and planned multi-campus TUs will strengthen their role as anchors of enterprise, will further develop research and innovation capabilities that are aligned with regional specialisation, and will help attract and retain talent in the regions”*

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<sup>6</sup> HEA, [Financial Review of the Institutes of Technology, October 2016](#)

<sup>7</sup> National Development Plan 2021-2030, p.99

Post-Covid, the realisation that development of the regions is key to Ireland’s future success is more acute than ever. Delivery of the investment outlined in the NDP needs to happen now if that future success is to happen. As outlined above, reliance on a stalling PPP process is insufficient. Without investment, the TUs will not be able to deliver the regional agenda.

### Research & Innovation

Part of the ongoing transformation of our sector is the policy imperative and legislative requirements to grow our research and innovation capacity in support of the regions, and in particular, in support of enterprise. In building R&I capacity, it is essential to have a balance of 1) core funding, 2) capacity-building funding, 3) capital funding, and 4) competitively won funding, understanding that investments in the first three are essential to securing the latter. The main challenge is that core funding is insufficient, so any R&I capacity-building funding (which, while very welcome, is time-limited) is being used to fund initiatives that would more sustainably be funded from core: it presents a particular challenge to establishing the well-resourced research & innovation support offices typical of a university sector. THEA has repeatedly stated that the R&I allocation through the Recurrent Grant (RG) must increase from €5 million per year (a static amount since its introduction in 2019) to 5% of the overall sector RG (€18.6 million) over a period of 5 years (as shown in the table below), eventually increasing to 10% of total RG (~€37 million) as is the case in the traditional universities.<sup>8</sup> To help achieve this increase, current capacity-building funding could be mainstreamed to become core funding. Capital funding to provide additional space for R&I activities must go hand in hand with capacity-building and core funding; the sector will struggle to accommodate new research staff and students, and new research equipment, in its current building stock.

2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
€5.0m	€8.4m	€11.8m	€15.2m	€18.6m

### Teaching and Learning

Related to the diverse student profile referenced earlier, our institutions have always developed and maintained effective teaching practices and strong student / staff relationships, as evidenced by research such as Studentsurvey.ie<sup>9</sup>. Our sector spearheaded the development of teaching and learning centres, inclusive practice and pedagogy, and a range of additional supports. The ethos of staff engagement with students on an individual level has been a key factor in keeping vulnerable students engaged in their studies.

To achieve the SDG-related national policy objective<sup>10</sup> of providing “*a more flexible system, with a greater choice of provision and modes of learning for an increasingly diverse cohort of students*”, it is essential to provide adequately for different modes of study and for different learning styles. In 2020-21, 25% of students from institutions represented by THEA are enrolled part-time compared to 17% in other institutions<sup>11</sup>. Some 12% of students are registered as ‘remote’ compared to 3% in other institutions. These figures illustrate the flexibility that is commonplace in our institutions. They also highlight an issue more prevalent in our institutions than elsewhere. Students facing particular challenges - due to lower prior attainment, or attendance that is not full-time - frequently benefit from additional teaching / learning support, or additional time to complete their studies. Our institutions are well-placed to meet the needs and aspirations of this “increasingly diverse cohort of student”. We have well-established entrance routes for learners with FET

<sup>8</sup> As recommended in the *Review of the Allocation Model for Funding Higher Education Institutions* <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-RFAM-Final-Report-for-Publication.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> For example, higher indicator scores for Effective Teaching Practices, Student-Faculty interactions <https://studentsurvey.ie/reports/studentsurveyie-national-report-2020>

<sup>10</sup> SDG Policy Map and Matrix, available at <fde13b12-89b7-4a3e-a351-6f28690d1d6a.pdf> ([www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie))

<sup>11</sup> [Key Facts and Figures 2020/2021 | Statistics | Higher Education Authority \(hea.ie\)](#)

qualifications, for lifelong learners, and for those whose prior learning should be recognized to make the most effective use of their experiences. Our institutions have a long-established record in delivering off-the-job training for traditional craft apprenticeships and have been to the forefront of design and delivery of the ever-widening range of newer consortium-led apprenticeships. The current green and sustainability agendas will require a significant uplift in skills provision and our sector can work closely with FET colleagues to meet this demand. Provision of consistent, high quality digital learning resources and infrastructure is vital to deliver learning opportunities, and support, across multi-campus technological universities for a wide range of learners regardless of their location. Adequate investment in infrastructure (hard and soft) is essential to build upon this strong base and to harness "the future success of our citizens".

## Conclusion

Let us conclude with the focus on the student. We have opportunity from the pandemic, from the creation of new technological universities to fashion a novel and enhanced experience for learners and researchers. Our students are from many and varied backgrounds; they reflect the increasing heterogeneity of our complex society. While the funding model has been revised, it doesn't adequately address the diversity of needs in our system. There is insufficient weighting for student access, and no weighting for the smaller student groups that our pedagogical model uses to help these students. Technological universities cannot simply be funded on the same basis as traditional universities with their well-established pipelines of philanthropy and alumni support. At a time, therefore, when higher education is under huge financial pressure while trying to maintain academic standards, the pressure on technological universities is even greater and, if they are not helped in their earlier stages of development, the opportunity may pass to deliver on balanced economic and regional development and access to education for all.