



Opening statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science pre-legislative scrutiny meeting of the Research and Innovation Bill 2023

Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) May 2023

The Technological Higher Education Association represents the common interests of Atlantic Technological University, South East Technological University, Technological University of the Shannon, Dundalk IT and Institute of Art and Design Dun Laoghaire. THEA welcomes this opportunity to discuss with the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the proposed Research and Innovation Bill.

The creation of a new research agency focussed on research and Innovation aligns with the needs of our institutions and the relevant stipulation within legislation and government policy. The new agency must take three core government policies as its reference points:

1. Government strategic priorities of climate action, housing, enterprise development, and the shared island.
2. The National Development Plan, with its strong emphasis on regional development and sustainable and balanced growth across the island.
3. Impact 2030, Ireland's research, and innovation strategy, which places innovation at the centre of Ireland's economic and social development for the foreseeable future.

The Committee will be aware of the strong emphasis in Ireland's research and innovation plan, "Impact 2030", on elevating Ireland's research performance. Especially important is the ambition to raise Ireland's international profile from one of a Strong Innovator to Innovation Leader in Europe by 2030. This requires very considerable enhancement of our research and innovation effort and infrastructure.

The creation of Technological Universities is seen as critical in Impact 2030, especially in improving regional innovation capacity and capability. As indicated in the Technological Universities Act 2018, with evolution from Institute of Technology to TU requires a step-change in research and innovation (R&I) of technological universities (TU) compared to their legacy institutions. Research and Innovation are clearly identified as core activities of the new Technological University with specifically defined metrics to be achieved in the first 10 years in terms of staff qualifications to PhD and postgraduate students.

We note not only that investment in the TU innovation capacity is needed to achieve the nationally agreed Impact 2030 targets, but also to realise the ambitions regarding regional development.

The National Development Plan highlights Ireland's commitment to balanced regional economic development that requires sustainable, high-performing regional economies. The THEA members and in particular the Technological Universities are catalysts for economic and social development delivered through their stakeholder partnership in research, innovation, and talent development. The sector has an unrivalled track record of partnership with its stakeholders for the delivery of regional economic and social advancement but needs to do more in the context of rapid technological change, increased mobility of talent, upskilling and reskilling the workforce, changing business paradigms and processes, and, most importantly, the Just Green Transition that will see radical transformation across many sectors in the years ahead.

This has been supported by the investment in knowledge transfer infrastructures such as technology gateway and innovation centres and the Regional Skills Fora. However, this investment needs to be complemented with equal investment in the upstream activities of knowledge production and talent development through leading edge research, innovation, and PhD research in line with the Technological University Legislation. The focus on strategic investment in the full research, innovation lifecycle provides protection to stakeholders and regional economies against future economic disruption by providing the knowledge and expertise to evolve as the markets evolve.

In summary we welcome that the proposed legislation commits to promote and support the contribution of such research and innovation to Ireland's economic, social, cultural and environmental development and sustainability. However while we recognise the need for a competitive funding process there needs to be a cognition that the identification of appropriate evaluation criteria which recognise wider and more inclusive evaluation metrics that identify impact in achieving national goals, which goes beyond the narrow academic publication metrics to include measures of social, economic and cultural impact on communities and regions and capacity building.

The commitment should be extended to a commitment to investment in research and innovation which enables balanced regional economic development. The legislation should explicitly recognise the role of the new funding organisation in supporting the legislative requirement of the Technological University act in relation to research and innovation through investment in capacity building in the new Technological Universities to realise the delivery of a balanced economic development. This would enable the new agency to target competitive funding schemes towards region economic development similarly to schemes developed in other developed countries (Norway, France, Australia for example).

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On behalf of the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)