



thea

TECHNOLOGICAL HIGHER
EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

THEA Strategic Plan

2018 - 2023



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It is with great pleasure that I pen this foreword for the inaugural strategic plan for the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA). This is the first occasion on which the technological higher education sector has united behind a mission and vision for its representative body. It delivers a clear mandate to the organisation to speak as the authoritative voice on behalf of a group of institutions united through core shared values. These values underpin an ambitious sector that is research-informed and characterised by the embrace of innovative pedagogies, a practical ethos, and, at the very core, a singular focus on the learner.

The preparation of this plan has been informed by an extensive and inclusive process leveraging the generous input from member organisations, stakeholders, and talented and committed staff throughout the sector. The process was designed to ensure that THEA, as the advocacy and representative body for an enterprising and connected sector, can support our constituent institutions in realising the ambitions set out for them within the current national policy framework. It is an important milestone for THEA and its member organisations as we embark on the first key objective to deliver a strategic vision for the technological higher education sector as a whole.

Our sector is defined through its connectedness. Our institutions and people are intimately engaged with their locale, their regions, and are key to sustainability, to social cohesion, and to economic wellbeing. This inaugural strategy recognises these characteristic strengths. A key part of THEA's remit in the coming period will be to provide a platform for our staff and those of our member institutions to shape the future of our sector in line with the pathway identified within this plan.

During the lifetime of this plan our sector will undergo an historic transformation, which presages momentous challenges, not only to THEA as the sector's representative body but to our member institutions. It will entail raising awareness of the complex character of the sector through, for example, foregrounding its catalytic role as the key educator and trainer in the arts, and its central contribution in the creative and innovative space. We will embrace even more diversity with the advent of technological universities being one of the most exciting developments on the landscape for many years. The national ambition for education, and in particular technological education, is at the heart of the *National Planning Framework Project Ireland 2040*, which in turn informs this development of the strategic plan for the sector. As an advocacy organisation, and contingent on winning the necessary resources, we are prepared to meet these challenges and to support our sector in achieving the policy objective of making Ireland's education and training system the best in Europe by 2026.

Finally, on behalf of the sector and the THEA team, I would like to express our sincere appreciation to our stakeholders and to our staff throughout the country for their contributions to this process; and we look forward to working cohesively with our many partners towards the successful execution of this strategy at a time of great promise and change within our diverse sector.

Dr Joseph Ryan
Chief Executive

Curious collaborators and critical optimists, tech-savvy innovators, makers and breakers of rules and things, story-tellers and creators...

Introduction

Overview

The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) is the representative body for the technological higher education sector in Ireland, which comprises fourteen institutes of technology, geographically dispersed across the country. During the lifespan of this, THEA's first strategic plan, it is envisaged that the sector itself will be transformed as a majority of its members merge to become technological universities, and others retain their status as autonomous institutes of technology. THEA, their representative and advocacy body, will work alongside this reimagined technological higher education sector, and continue to act on behalf of its members as they proceed through this period of transformation. As the single representative body, THEA will become deeply embedded in supporting its members in meeting their strategic objectives, while maintaining the integrity of the sector in this time of significant institutional change. THEA will also work with them in developing and articulating a new vision for technological higher education in Ireland which, building upon the best traditions of the sector, will set out how its members will meet the changing needs and expectations of the individual and of society, in a world where the provision of education services and the digital revolution are inextricably bound; and where engaged, knowledge-based organisations must embrace the challenges presented by rapid technological development, globalisation, and environmental change.

Established in late 2016, and formally launched on 3 April 2017 at a national conference in Croke Park, THEA is a forward looking organisation which, in line with its members' individual and collective ambitions, acts as the authoritative voice of the sector. As such, THEA is dedicated to supporting its members' efforts to enhance the quality of Irish higher education and research, and to intensify their engagement with industry and enterprise, their local communities and regions, and their international partners. THEA likewise supports the institutes' endeavours to provide flexible and equitable learning opportunities for all students, including those who may not otherwise consider higher level education. In summary, THEA's mission is to provide sectoral cohesion, and to advocate for a group of higher education institutions that play such a critical role in promoting a more equal and prosperous Ireland.

This strategic plan is intended to provide a roadmap for the organisation in fulfilling its mission over the period 2018 to 2023. It sets out a series of high level goals, key objectives and key actions, which will provide an overarching framework for the work of the organisation over the next five years, and against which its effectiveness will be monitored. It is not anticipated that these high level goals, key objectives and key actions will change radically within the lifespan of the plan. However, the projects and other work activities that underpin them will. The latter will be articulated and renewed each year in an annual work plan prepared by the THEA executive and approved and reviewed by the THEA board. The annual process of review and renewal will enable the organisation to refresh its immediate priorities each year, so that the high level goals and key objectives are met over the five years of the plan.

The role of THEA

THEA's strategic plan is the result of an extended period of consultation and reflection that has been informed both by the initial discussions concerning the establishment of THEA in 2016-17, and a subsequent, more formal, strategic planning process instituted by the new organisation.

The focus of this consultation and reflection has been on the nature of technological higher education in Ireland and its place in the broader higher education system. Within that context, a thorough exploration and examination took place on the role that the sector's representative body should play in:

- the further development of the sector;
- promoting a greater appreciation of the value of technological higher education; and
- advancing the individual and collective interests of its members.

The high level goals, key objectives, and key actions presented in this plan represent the considered views of the THEA board, the THEA executive, and the broader THEA community on how the representative body should fulfil its role over the next five years.



Transformative effect of technological universities

Throughout the consultations for this plan, THEA's board and executive, and the wider THEA community, have given consideration to the many environmental factors that will impact upon the sector over the next five years, but none more so than the advent of technological universities. The announcement in July 2018 of the designation of the first technological university, Technological University Dublin - and the central place that TU Dublin and the planned technological universities for the South-West, South-East, and North-West have been assigned in driving regional economic development under *Project Ireland 2040* - represents a huge vote of confidence in the technological higher education sector. Not only does it acknowledge a longstanding commitment and responsiveness on the part of the institutes of technology to providing the essential educational supports that underpin the economic, social, and cultural growth of Ireland; but it also recognises the capacity of those institutions to change and innovate. The creation and establishment of technological universities is therefore a cause of genuine optimism for the sector. Their advent marks a very significant milestone in the technological higher education sector's evolution, which THEA, as its representative body, has consistently and actively advocated for, not only since its establishment but, before that, in its prior incorporation as Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI).

Within the timeframe of the plan, 2018 to 2023, it is envisaged that ten out of the fourteen institutes of technology will come together to form the four aforementioned technological universities. Four institutions will retain their current institutional configuration as autonomous institutes of technology. As a result, the technological higher education sector will assume a greater institutional complexity and diversity. However, all will retain the unifying features of a shared heritage, grounded upon core educational values, that defines and shapes the technological higher education sector in the present, and which will continue to do so into the future.

In preparing this plan, THEA held a series of bilateral discussions with its key external stakeholders. Some of these stakeholder organisations identified this new form of institutional diversity as a potential threat to THEA, their fear being that the parallel existence of two types of technological higher education institution may undermine the representative body's efforts to enhance sectoral cohesion and to establish a single, coherent voice for and on behalf of its members. Others celebrated the prospective diversity within a sector that is fundamentally united by core educational values, which positively shape and inform the outcomes for students, staff, and regional and national stakeholders.



Common unifying factors in a diverse sector

The existence of institutional diversity is nothing new within the technological higher education sector. The fourteen institutes of technology are not homogenous. They have always displayed differences, whether in relation to their particular historical origins, their size, their specialist remits or their favouring of differing academic specialisms, in how they respond to their respective regions' social and economic needs, or the distinctive preferences and approaches they adopt in areas such as the building of their research profiles, or the provision of apprenticeship programmes. Such diversity has always been a strength of the sector, and is at the heart of the institutes' capacity to change, innovate, and be responsive in a rapidly changing environment in which many varied and sometimes competing demands are made of them.

Yet all of THEA's members also share core educational values that have not only retained their currency to the present day, but are now widely accepted, arguably more so than ever before, as the key ingredients in building a successful, technologically-driven, and socially inclusive economy and society. These core values are visible in the unique system of education the sector offers which, rooted upon a strong STEM foundation and innovative approaches to education in the arts, media, the humanities, business, social sciences, and services, allows students to progress through pathways to graduation, ranging from apprenticeship and short-cycle qualifications to bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees (Levels 6-10 in the National Framework of Qualifications). They also shine through in the sector's links with industry and community, which ensure that its students have a range of flexible employability skills and traits, and are well-attuned to meeting the needs of the global workplace at the point of graduation; and that its research activity is practice-based and translational, performed with and on behalf of industry and community partners. They are also reflected in its championing of equality, diversity, and inclusion, which are achieved both through the development of equal and diverse organisations, and through the provision of educational opportunities for learners, firmly embedded in equitable and inclusive admissions' policies that actively target those who would not otherwise enter higher education. Together, these core values bind THEA's member institutions more closely than any actual or potential institutional differences might drive them apart. Ultimately, they remain the basis for THEA's confidence that it can serve its members' interests and maintain sectoral coherence, including through the achievement of the goals and objectives set out in this strategic plan.

The institutes have traditionally maintained a representative body that has functioned successfully in the midst of transformation, diversity, and uncertainty. Through this strategic plan, THEA will proceed, with a renewed and determined focus, to foster the sectoral cohesion that is desired both by its own members, and the body of well-disposed and supportive stakeholders with whom it engaged in the course of preparing it.



Methodology

An extensive audit and consultation process was undertaken to facilitate the preparation and finalisation of THEA's first strategic plan.

The THEA executive, staff members from technological higher education sector institutions, and stakeholders from across government departments, state agencies, and representative organisations were each consulted during the emergence of the substantive text of the plan.

The process was overseen by the THEA executive, together with a Strategic Planning Steering Group, which drew upon the experience and expertise of senior colleagues from member institutions. Consultations with THEA members and amongst the THEA executive were facilitated by an external consultant, Mr Michael Donnelly of Perspectivity. Interviews with stakeholder organisations were facilitated and recorded by THEA staff.

The milestone events in the creation of the strategic plan included:

- **Establishment of Strategic Planning Steering Group to oversee and draw together the process, including finalisation of draft plan**
- **THEA Presidents' Think-In**
- **THEA Registrars' Residential workshop**
- **THEA Staff workshop I**
- **THEA's Strategic Future – Heads of Functions workshop**
- **THEA Board and Executive workshop**
- **THEA Research, Development, Innovation and Engagement Strategy Day**
- **THEA Staff workshop II.**

External interviews with representatives of major stakeholder organisations carried out by the THEA executive were recorded and minuted.

The organisations consulted were:

- **Ibec**
- **Union of Students of Ireland (USI)**
- **SOLAS**
- **Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)**
- **Higher Education Authority (HEA)**
- **Department of Education and Skills (DES)**
- **Enterprise Ireland (EI)**
- **Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)**
- **Irish Universities Association (IUA)**
- **Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)**
- **Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)**
- **Fórsa**
- **Irish Research Council (IRC)**
- **Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI).**

The outcomes from each of the consultations and external interviews was used to frame the output of the process. Drafts of the strategic plan were reviewed by the Strategic Planning Steering Group and the THEA executive before being ratified and adopted by the Council of Presidents in September 2018.

The external environment



Overview

THEA's strategic plan 2018-2023 has been prepared at a time of great transformation and adjustment for the technological higher education sector. The transformative effect that the establishment of technological universities will entail for the sector has already been discussed in the introduction to this plan, and over the course of the next five years the issue will remain a central strategic focus of the majority of THEA's members and, by extension, their representative body. However, there are many other environmental factors that will impact THEA's members in the same period. A fundamental aim of this plan is to ensure that THEA is well-positioned, and organisationally fit for purpose, to support its members in navigating their way through an ever changing and unceasingly complex external environment. To achieve this, THEA must necessarily scan the environment on an ongoing basis. Such environmental scanning is not only essential in determining the high level goals and objectives that are at the heart of this plan, but it will also be critical in shaping the projects and other work activities that THEA will put in place each year to achieve its organisational goals. The following paragraphs set out a number of the key environmental issues that will likely impact upon THEA's members in the lifetime of this plan. It is an indicative rather than exhaustive list, and concentrates, in particular, on those issues that are likely to remain at the forefront of the sector's concerns during the next five years, and which will also determine how THEA implements its strategy.

The disruptive present and future

Higher education, no less than any other sector or industry, is subject to the disruptive effects of the digital revolution and other prospective technological changes. The traditional model of teaching and learning undertaken in corporeal spaces, in which lecturer and student are physically present, is being challenged by an exponential growth in the availability of knowledge online. Whether that knowledge is accessed informally or through free online programmes, the traditional hegemony of the teacher/expert and the classical academic institution is being challenged in a previously unimagined way. By the same token, the digital revolution, and the application of new technologies to teaching and learning, also provide more opportunities for knowledge-based organisations, such as higher education institutions, to be innovative, and to become leaders in exploiting and integrating all the possibilities afforded by digital learning into their own design and delivery of programmes. How higher education institutions should do this, and what resources they should invest in undertaking their own digital revolutions, are matters of significant debate locally, nationally and internationally. It is certainly a central concern of the technological higher education sector, which is ideally positioned to play a key role in leading change in this arena in Ireland. To this end, it was identified as one of four key pillars requiring targeted multi-annual investment, in a collaborative Budget submission submitted by THEA to the Minister for Finance ahead of Budget 2019. It will remain a focus for THEA and its members during the lifetime of this plan.

The education and training policy framework

Over the past decade or so, government departments and state agencies have put in place an extensive policy framework for education in Ireland. Some of this framework relates specifically to higher education, including the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, which provides a long-term vision for higher education and its central role in making Ireland a country recognised for innovation, competitive enterprise and academic excellence. It also includes the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-20*, the second in a series of system performance frameworks, that seeks to measure the performance of the higher education system as a whole in delivering national priorities; and to allow individual higher education institutions to determine their own particular contributions to the overall system objectives, which are then set out in performance compacts agreed with the HEA.

Side by side with the core policy framework for higher education, there are policy documents that encompass the broader education and training system, in particular, the *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*, which sets out the strategic direction and goals of the Department of Education and Skills for the system, and articulates an ambition that it will become the best education system in Europe by 2026. Other policy documents are more narrowly focussed, including key policy statements on research, development, and innovation (*Innovation 2020*); skills identification and supply (*Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025*); equity of access to higher education (*National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*); work-based learning (*Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020*); and the internationalisation of Irish education (*Irish Educated, Globally Connected. An International Education Strategy for Ireland 2016-2020*).



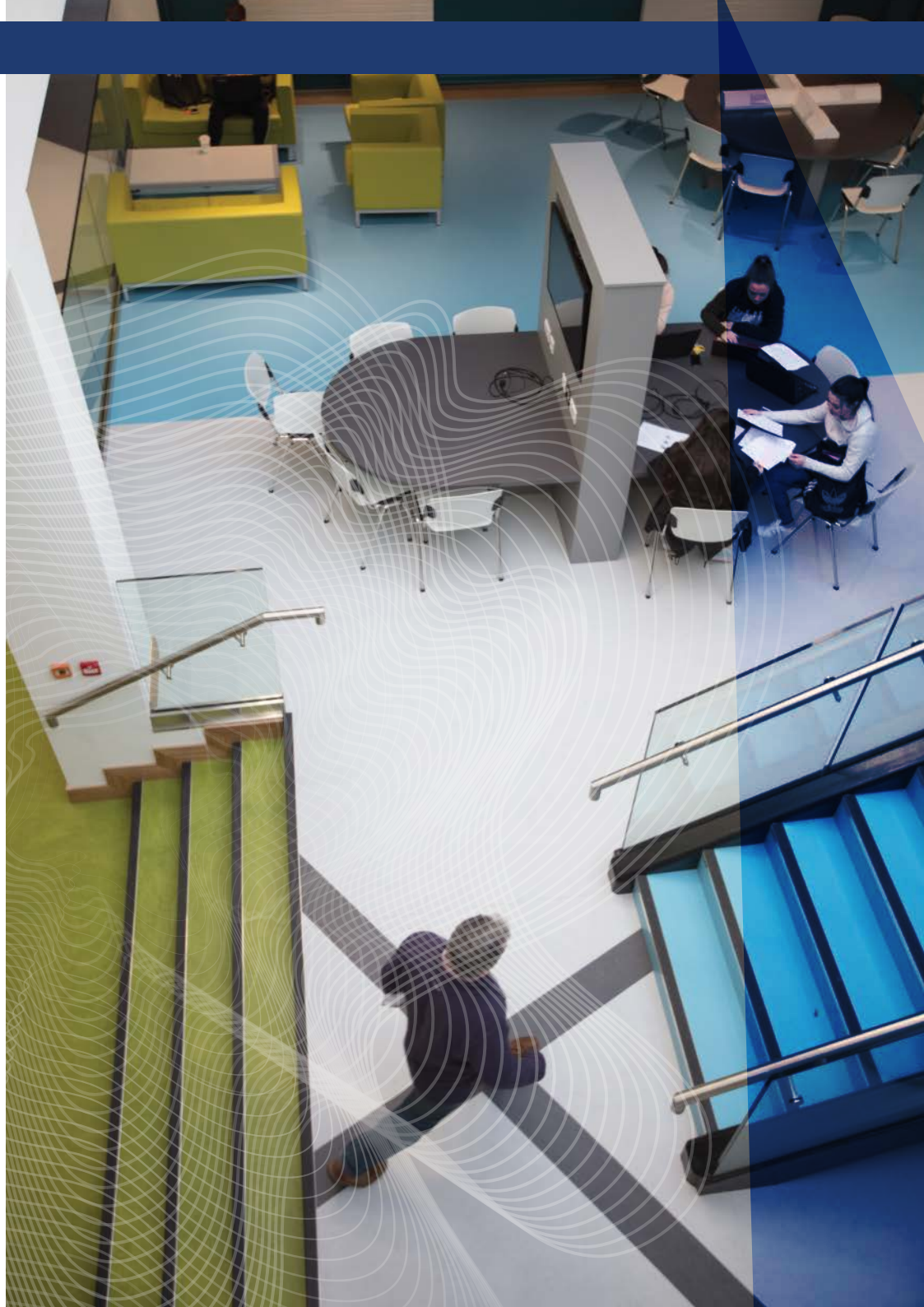


To these may be added the extensive policy suite developed by the national quality assurance agency, QQI, which underpins Ireland's robust national and internationally bench-marked quality assurance system, and which sets out the policies and processes that THEA members are required to use in fulfilling their quality assurance obligations under national legislation.

It is evident, even from this brief description, that higher education institutions, including THEA's members, operate within a very wide-ranging, detailed, and interlocking policy framework. This is reflective of the fact that higher education is recognised by the Department of Education and Skills, and other Government Departments concerned with the development of Ireland's human capital and economic wellbeing, as an indispensable contributor, whether this relates to the direct provision of skills through initial and continuous learning, to equipping people with higher order skills, or to knowledge discovery and the generation of knowledge-based enterprise. This recognition, of course, will continue throughout the duration of THEA's strategic plan, and we can expect that the supporting policy framework will be replenished and added to during the same period. THEA will continue to monitor such policy developments on behalf of the sector and will also work collaboratively with policy makers to ensure that the sector is enabled to contribute to policy formulation, especially in those areas where policy impacts directly upon its business.

Funding for higher education

Although it is widely accepted that the higher education system plays a critical role in developing Ireland's talent pool for its knowledge economy, it is also widely documented that the country's competitiveness in higher education has been eroded over the past decade. This has been particularly acute in the technological higher education sector. THEA gratefully acknowledges that additional funding has been made available to the sector since 2016, but currently in 2018, as this plan is first published, the system generally, and the technological higher education sector in particular, remains chronically underfunded, and well short of the funding requirements identified by the Expert Group, chaired by Peter Cassells, to provide a sustainable, fit-for-purpose higher education system for the twenty-first century (*Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education. Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education*). Finding a solution to the funding challenges of higher education, and ensuring that the system is put on a sustainable financial footing, will continue to be a major strategic focus for THEA during the lifetime of this plan, and the organisation will collaborate with all of the key stakeholders in pursuing this end.



Gender equality

In 2016, the HEA published its *National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions*, which found that, notwithstanding the fact that some efforts had been made by the institutions to address gender inequality, the under-representation of women among staff at senior levels remains 'intractable', and that there is a need for new and more radical approaches to tackle the issue. In late 2017, a Gender Equality Taskforce was established by Mary Mitchell O'Connor TD, Minister of State for Higher Education, to oversee a national systems review of the recruitment and promotion policies and practices currently in place in higher education institutions, and to prepare a prioritised three year action plan, in consultation with stakeholders.

The achievement of gender equality is a key strategic concern for THEA and to this end the organisation has recently published (August 2018) the first Gender and Diversity Statement for higher education institutions, which will inform policy across all fourteen institutes of technology in Ireland. The statement includes six primary objectives that seek to eliminate disparities in education by supporting a culture of inclusion; to address the imbalance amongst staff and the student body in disciplinary areas which are traditionally male- or female-dominated; to establish structures which allow equal opportunity for all to advance in their career; to support all staff who have caring responsibilities and ensure that these responsibilities do not negatively affect their career progression; to recognise that there is a specific issue regarding women progressing to senior roles and to work to remove any actual or perceived barriers; and to promote gender balance in the statutory decision-making committees, Governing Body and Academic Council.

The achievement of these objectives will be a key strategic focus for THEA during the life of this strategic plan, in tandem with the implementation of recommendations arising from the Gender Equality Taskforce, and the provision of support to member institutions applying for Athena SWAN awards, the internationally recognised gender equality benchmark for higher education institutions.



Political uncertainty: BREXIT

The decision of the people of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union in March 2019 has created great uncertainty about the nature of future engagements between Ireland and the United Kingdom in many different spheres, including the future of economic cooperation between the two countries and North-South relations. How future cooperation on higher education and research matters will proceed, whether in a purely North-South Ireland context, or in the context of the two islands, is also a matter of uncertainty and varying degrees of concern. For some observers and commentators, the United Kingdom's impending exit from the European Union is perceived as an opportunity that will allow Ireland to become the centre of English-speaking higher education and research in the European Union, provided commensurate investment is made in the system by government. Others are less sanguine and have identified potential difficulties for the system around people, access to networking and funding, and the consequences of changes in regulation and the broader economic environment. For THEA members situated close to the border with Northern Ireland, there may also be issues relating to their cross-border relations with other institutions. One fundamental prerequisite for protecting education linkages is the maintenance of the common travel area (CTA). The CTA is a long-standing arrangement between the United Kingdom, the Crown Dependencies, and Ireland, which has its origins in the 1920s before either country joined the European Union. The CTA ensures that British and Irish citizens can move freely between and reside in these islands, as well as enjoying the associated rights and entitlements, including access to education. THEA will continue to monitor developments in the lead-up to, and in the aftermath of, BREXIT. It supports the maintenance of the CTA and will seek to empower the sector to maximise any benefits that may be realised, especially in the area of research and international student recruitment.

European and international engagement

THEA's role as an advocacy and representative body is not confined to the national stage, but also has a strong international dimension. Arising, in part, from the fact that its own members are internationally engaged, and active partners in a range of transnational alliances and international networks with higher education institutions in Europe and beyond, THEA is mindful that the European and broader global higher education and research policy and funding environment is a key reference point for its representative and advocacy work. Furthermore, with the advent of technological universities, and the transformative effect this development will have upon its members, THEA must ensure that it is well-positioned with key international stakeholders to advance the recognition of the Irish technological higher education sector internationally, to leverage its changing status in order to maximise existing and future funding opportunities, especially under the EU programmes, and to ensure that its approaches to research and innovation, skills provision and the ongoing modernisation agenda in higher education are cognisant of European and wider international policy developments. To these ends, THEA is committed to identifying and allying with those international stakeholders that share THEA's ambitions for technological higher education, or are best placed to support its further development.





The National Planning Framework: Project Ireland 2040

Project Ireland 2040 is the overarching policy and planning framework for the social, economic, and cultural development of Ireland, and includes a detailed capital investment plan for the period 2018 to 2027. Overall, the planning framework seeks to address the challenges of population growth, and the changes in demography and work and life practices that will impact upon the country in the next two decades. *Project Ireland 2040* firmly places education at the centre of Ireland's economic and social development. The technological higher education sector, in particular, is uniquely placed to deliver on the aspirations for Ireland's third level institutions. With their strong regional presence and connection to employers and industry and enterprise, THEA's members have been identified as key agents for delivering the economic, technological, social, and cultural progress that is sought in the planning framework. For THEA's members, there is a strong alignment between the vision and objectives enunciated in *Project Ireland 2040* and their own individual ambitions. This alignment will remain an important reference point for the sector throughout the lifespan of THEA's strategic plan and beyond.

Conclusion

In developing its Strategic Plan 2018-2023, THEA has been mindful of the many and varied environmental factors that will affect its members and the broader higher education system in the upcoming period. THEA has had regard to these factors in formulating its strategic goals and objectives, and will continually scan the environment throughout the duration of the plan, so that its annual work plans are kept under review and lead to the realisation of its strategic objectives.

Partnerships



THEA's effectiveness as an advocacy and representative body is wholly dependent on its ability to maintain strong working relationships, not only with the THEA community, the fourteen institutes of technology, but also with an extensive group of external stakeholder organisations. Chief among the latter are the Department of Education and Skills, and its agencies, which collectively are responsible for establishing and implementing the policy framework for higher, further, and general education in Ireland; for the funding, regulation and evaluation of these systems; and for helping learners navigate their way through the different parts of the education and training system in a seamless fashion, especially through collaborative endeavours such as the Transitions Reform process. The technological higher education sector also has important links with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, especially through its agencies, which play key roles in the funding of research, development, and innovation, and the promotion of Ireland as a preferred destination for international students. THEA will continue to work in close partnership with these, and other state bodies, on major issues affecting the sector, throughout the duration of this strategic plan.

THEA also has strong links and shared interests with other representative bodies, both within the education sector and beyond. Its partnership and collaborations with the IUA, Ibec, and ETBI are particularly valued. THEA is committed to deepening these relationships during the lifetime of this plan for the mutual benefit of the organisations themselves, and in the interests of creating strong, excellent and more permeable further and higher education systems in Ireland.

At the heart of THEA's work is the learner. Without students, there would not be any technological higher education institutions, and no representative body for the sector. THEA's relationship with the Union of Students in Ireland is especially important in this context, and the two organisations are committed to establishing an appropriate vehicle to facilitate a regular discussion of the priorities of both organisations, to ensure that both are aware of each other's policies, and to explore where they might work more closely together.

In a similar vein, THEA also engages closely with the staff representative associations in the technological higher education sector and, in this strategic planning process, is mindful that they share an interest in exploring the possibilities for more collaborative engagement in the future. THEA is committed to pursuing such collaborative engagement, both for the betterment of the student and staff experiences in its member institutions and the general enhancement of the quality of Irish higher education.

Looking outside of Ireland, THEA will build upon existing relationships with European and international partners and forge new relationships via its membership of European associations in higher education and research and, where appropriate, directly with the European Commission, and national government ministries and agencies.

Mission, functions, & operating principles





THEA'S MISSION

To increase awareness and understanding of the unique attributes of technological higher education in order to influence policy on behalf of our members



THEA functions and activities

The THEA executive currently comprises a core staff of ten people, which operates across seven broad functional areas: the CEO's Office; Academic Affairs; Corporate Affairs; Research, Development, Innovation, and Engagement; International; Communications; and Data Analysis. These functional areas work closely together to deliver shared strategic objectives across three broad categories of activity or work areas: advocacy and representation; member networks; and the provision of services to the THEA community. In addition to its core functions, THEA also supports other services affiliated to the organisation, including the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) and the Technology Gateway Programme, by providing offices and administrative support to their staff members.



Advocacy and representation

THEA's work as a representative and advocacy body for the technological higher education sector encompasses the following activities:

- Advocating for the sector at national level using three axes of support – the insights of the institutes' leaders, the expertise of staff within institutes, and the skills, expertise, experience, and network of the THEA executive
- Providing strategic representation and advocacy for the technological higher education sector to government and government agencies
- Representing the sector, alongside other higher education and further education bodies, at a national level with a unified and authoritative voice
- Helping the sector cohere around common policy positions and sectoral objectives
- Raising the profile of the sector with key stakeholders and the general public
- Influencing and shaping the higher education policy agenda through our interactions with policy makers and other stakeholders, including formal communications such as policy papers and submissions
- Influencing and maximising funding for the sector
- Building strategic relationships and alliances, including with business leaders and their representatives, that help the sector to progress
- Issue-specific work e.g. internationalisation, advancing the national research, development and innovation agenda, driving quality enhancement in higher education
- Seeking innovation and debate on complex issues facing the future of higher education.





Member networks

THEA supports collaborative networking amongst its members through the following activities:

- Facilitating the common working agenda of over 20 sectoral committees and working groups
- Organising sectoral workshops, colloquia, and conferences
- Convening and coordinating specialist groups to collaborate on the delivery of better services within institutes, or the achievement of policy, funding, and other sectoral objectives
- Providing secretariat services to sectoral committees and working groups.

Services to the THEA community

THEA provides a range of services to the THEA community through the following activities:

- Supporting capacity building within the THEA community to improve its effectiveness:
 - in delivering high quality third level education
 - in producing excellent, purpose-driven research
 - in engaging with local communities and businesses
 - in meeting the standards of governance and planning expected of publicly-funded higher education institutions in the twenty-first century
- Offering advice on policy and operational matters in the areas of the THEA executive's functional expertise
- Offering specialist services in areas such as data analysis and HR/IR matters
- Liaising with State bodies and other organisations on behalf of individual members
- Communicating information on policy and reporting requirements to individual members.



Operating principles

The extended period of reflection undertaken to develop this strategic plan has allowed THEA to think about how it does its business in some detail.

One recurring theme of the deliberations of the board, executive, and wider THEA community, which was also reaffirmed in discussions with external stakeholders, was the extent to which the organisation's traditional culture and values were determinants of what it did, and whether they had in the past prevented it from conducting its business at a sufficiently high level.

In particular, there was a sense that previous incarnations of the institutes' representative body, perhaps reflecting the needs of its members at an earlier point in their development, were focused more on operational matters, rather than on the strategic requirements of the sector. Whether this was entirely the case or not, it clearly is not what the sector wants now, nor is it how the THEA executive sees its role.

In framing operating principles that drive the strategic goals, objectives, and actions of this plan, THEA is committing itself to a single overarching ambition: to prioritise the ***Strategic*** over the ***Operational***. All of the work it undertakes will be tested against this single overarching ambition.



THEA will also support this fundamental operating principle with four supporting principles. Thus, THEA will:

- **Be collaborative** - we collaborate with our stakeholders, both within and without the THEA community, to enhance and promote the value of technological higher education
- **Be future-oriented** - we look forward in order to reflect the dynamic nature of our members and the innovative possibilities of technological higher education
- **Add value** - we seek to add value so that our members and other stakeholders derive tangible and distinct benefits from our work
- **Seek consensus but act decisively** - we seek to build consensus among members on key issues facing the sector but have agreed mechanisms on how to proceed in the absence of consensus.

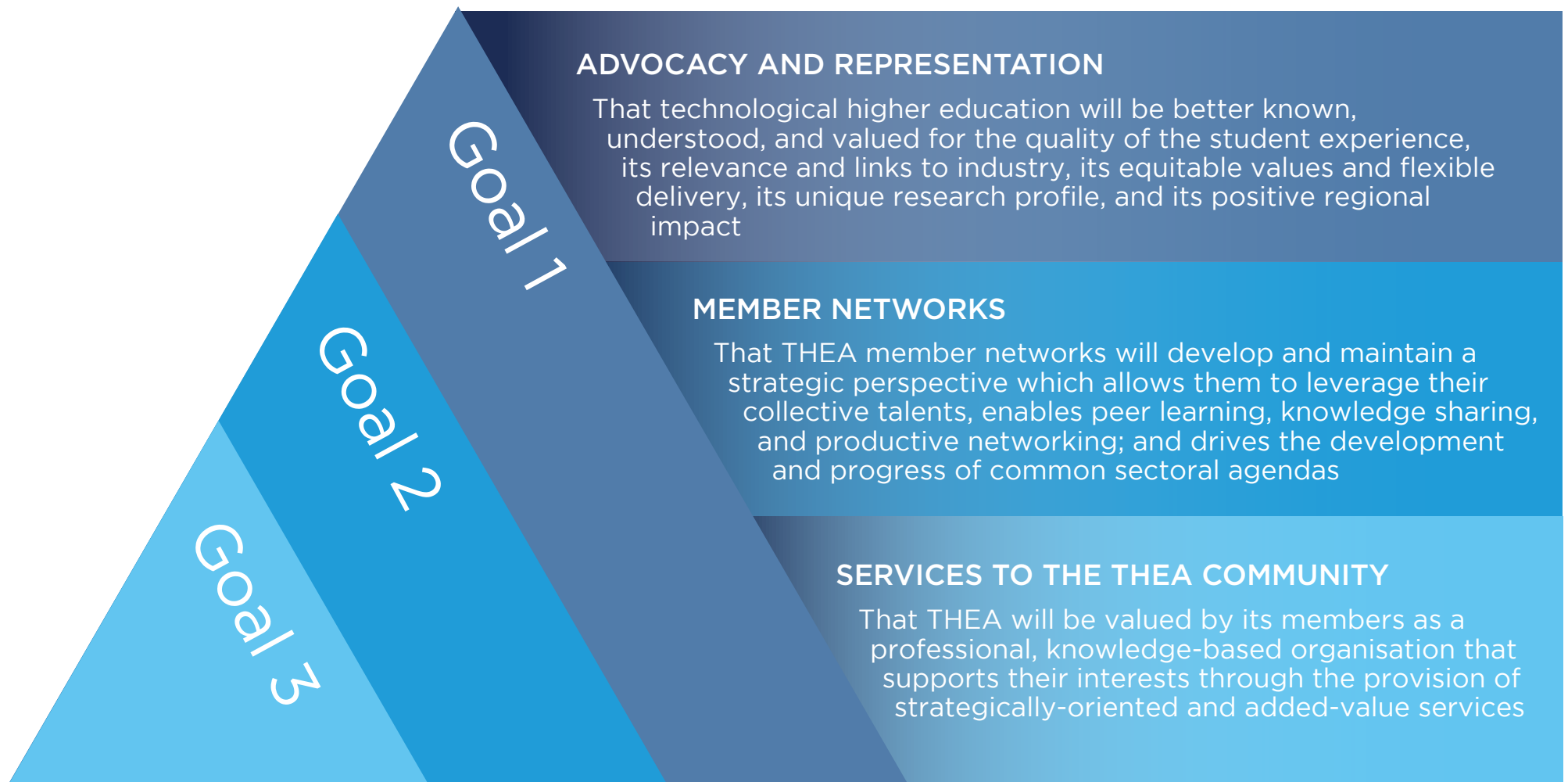




Goals,
objectives,
& actions

High level goals 2018-2023

Following an extensive consultation with the THEA community, executive, and key external stakeholders, THEA developed three high level goals, one for each of its broad work areas. Under each of the three high level goals, THEA also developed key objectives and actions that will help it achieve these goals, and guide the development of its annual work plans.



GOAL 1: ADVOCACY AND REPRESENTATION

That technological higher education will be better known, understood, and valued for the quality of the student experience, its relevance and links to industry, its equitable values and flexible delivery, its unique research profile, and its positive regional impact

Key Objectives

KO 1 That a clear, distinct, and forward looking vision for technological higher education is articulated

KO 2 That the excellence of the technological higher education sector is broadly recognised

KO 3 That a sustainable funding model is put in place for technological higher education

KO 4 That gender equality and diversity is actively encouraged, supported, and promoted in the technological higher education sector

KO 5 That THEA articulates and clearly communicates authoritative sectoral positions and messages on the key higher education and research policy issues, so that development and implementation of such policy is informed and influenced by the technological higher education sector

KO 6 That policies which affect the technological higher education sector are framed at source with THEA's involvement

KO7 That THEA will clearly position technological higher education internationally, both in relation to higher education and vocational education

Key Actions

THEA will convene a cross-functional group of thought leaders from the sector to articulate the vision within the first year of this strategic plan

THEA will actively promote and showcase the strengths and benefits of the technological higher education sector to policy-makers and other key stakeholders

THEA will collaborate with key stakeholders to develop a sustainable funding model for Irish higher education

THEA will produce action plans and work programmes that support each of the six key objectives outlined in THEA's Gender and Diversity Statement (August 2018), and will support the efforts of the institutes to achieve Athena SWAN awards

THEA will proactively represent all institutes of technology and technological universities at national level conversations and will engage with the leadership of all institutions in order to establish commonality on sectoral positions

THEA will seek to ensure that the sector is represented at the highest level of structured engagement and decision-making

THEA will build a strong, clear, and distinctive brand identity for the sector internationally, which is applied consistently, references graduate attributes and the Irish quality assurance framework and is promoted widely, including through social media channels

GOAL 2: MEMBER NETWORKS

That THEA member networks will develop and maintain a strategic perspective which allows them to leverage their collective talents, enables peer learning, knowledge sharing, and productive networking; and drives the development and progress of common sectoral agendas

Key Objectives

KO 8 THEA will achieve sector-wide engagement and agreement towards developing and enhancing the strategic perspective of its key member networks

KO 9 THEA will ensure that the member networks it supports are effective, strategic in approach, harness the talents of the THEA community and operate as part of a national body

KO 10 THEA will increase strategic capacity within the technological higher education sector

Key Actions

THEA will support collaboration among its members in delivering high quality teaching and learning to their students; in developing their research, development, and innovation activities; and in enhancing their positions as engaged higher education institutions

THEA will encourage the development of sectoral identity amongst the THEA community, and enable a sense of ownership for addressing key strategic issues at a sectoral level

THEA will support collaboration among its members in developing leadership capacity, and best practice in the areas of governance (including academic governance), gender equality, and financial and strategic planning



GOAL 3: SERVICES TO THE THEA COMMUNITY

That THEA will be valued by its members as a professional, knowledge-based organisation that supports their interests through the provision of strategically-oriented and added-value services

Key Objectives

KO 11 THEA will be an effective and efficient organisation

KO 12 THEA will provide high quality and value-added services to its members

K13 THEA will support the professional development of its executive

Key Actions

THEA will review its internal governance and the operations of its executive to ensure that they are fit for purpose and support the delivery of its strategic plan

THEA will ensure that the services it provides complement and enhance, rather than duplicate, functions and operational activities carried out by its members

THEA will introduce a programme of customised professional training and education for all of its staff



Summary & next steps

This strategic plan is the culmination of an extensive consultation process that included THEA's member networks, key external stakeholders, and the THEA executive.

It distils THEA's operational functions into three core areas:

- advocacy and representation;
- member networks; and
- services to the broader THEA community.

These work areas have been agreed across the THEA community as the core areas of activity for the organisation. Each work area has been assigned a high level goal which, in turn, is broken down into key objectives and key actions. Together, they will define the organisation's workflows over the next five years. Work that is carried out by the THEA executive will be directed towards achieving each of the high level goals and the associated objectives and actions.

Adopting this strategic plan is a significant milestone in recasting THEA's role as the representative and advocacy body of the technological higher education sector, and it will drive a number of targeted initiatives that will immediately take effect. THEA will develop an Annual Work Plan (October-September) for each of the five years of the plan, which will set out projects and other activities that the executive will undertake in those years. These projects and work activities will be aligned to the high level goals, key objectives, and key actions in the strategic plan. They will also be monitored on a continuing basis, and reported to and reviewed by the THEA board using a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures.

THEA as an organisation exists to support a higher education sector. The strategic plan for the organisation cannot exist in a vacuum. To ensure that it does not, there is a commitment at the heart of the plan to initiate a project that may prove to be the most significant piece of work to emerge from the planning process. The THEA executive will work collaboratively with its members to articulate and frame a vision for technological higher education under Key Objective 1.

The process of arriving at this point has been deliberately consultative and collegial. Understanding stakeholder perceptions of THEA, and the technological higher education sector that it represents, has been an essential part of refining the core areas of activity that have become the focus of our strategic goals. Achieving consensus across the THEA community was an overarching aim behind articulating the key objectives and key actions that make up the strategic plan, and a similar approach will be taken while developing the vision for the sector as a whole. The implementation of this strategic plan, including the development of a vision for the sector, will coincide with a period of change that will see the technological higher education sector change in terms of both member numbers and scale. Our strategic plan and the associated goals, objectives, and actions will be the guiding principles that will determine how successfully we will navigate the next five years.



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