

8 June 2016

Mr. Richard Bruton, T.D.,
Minister for Education and Skills,
Marlborough Street,
Dublin 1

Dear Minister,

I refer to your invitation to provide a submission to the Government's Strategy for the Department of Education and Skills. The HEA greatly welcomes this opportunity. On 17 May I wrote to you on behalf of the HEA setting out the key priorities as we see them for the higher education system. Those remain our priorities. In our submission on the strategy we address issues of broader strategic importance which would form the framework within which those priorities would be advanced.

Rather than use the on-line template we are providing a memo setting out a number of strategic issues, as this lends itself to more effectively communicating our views. The memo is attached.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Boland
Chief Executive.

cc. Ms. Mary Doyle, Deputy Secretary.

Submission on Strategy Statement for Education and Skills 2016 – 2018

1. Strategic issue A “joined-up” tertiary education system

One of the most significant developments in recent years in the education and training sector has been the transfer of responsibility for skills training and development, formerly carried out under the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, to the Department of Education and Skills and a new agency, SOLAS. It is important to capitalise on this development through the development of a post second level education and training strategy, comprehending in one coherent statement further and higher education, as well as apprenticeship. While the ambition for closer collaboration is clear in all of the current strategies (including the National Skills Strategy which goes some way down this road) the reality is too often one of duplication, competition for resources and lack of transparency and progression for learners. Such a combined system would, for instance, support greater co-ordination in the provision of level 6 and 7 qualifications. There are potential benefits for learners, institutions and the economy if the early levels of post second level education are provided in further education settings. This would allow graduates from such courses to exit with relevant skills and/or to transfer to higher levels of education through clearly articulated pathways. Underpinning these changes should be the putting in place of a broad transfer agreement to allow for competency based transfer across all post-second-level education and training institutions, all courses and disciplines.

2 Strategic issue Funding for quality, skills development and equity

The arguments for increased higher education funding to secure and enhance the quality of teaching and research in the sector have been addressed in a number of reports, most recently by the Expert Group chaired by Peter Cassells. This is made more urgent by the strong evidence of growing skills shortages in the economy, and the likelihood for further such shortages as the demand for skilled labour increases into the future, while at the same time there is increased demand for higher education places arising from the increases in the second level population.

A further, and important argument that should also be considered is that of equity. Access to higher education is, in socio-economic terms, very uneven with those from the upper end of the socio-economic profile very heavily represented but much less so those from other socio-economic groups. However, given that higher education is today still largely funded from the public purse, this represents a transfer of resources from general taxation to favour those already better off in society. This is an aspect of an approach to funding that should be given careful consideration and is addressed by options in the Expert Group report.

3. Strategic issue: Maintain momentum in the reform agenda as it relates to outcomes and landscape restructuring for greater impact.

The focus in the letter of invitation on measuring progress is welcome and chimes well with current developments in the higher education sector where the HEA is leading major change in how the funding of higher education is deployed to meet national objectives. In particular, the HEA now agrees 3 year compacts with the HEIs, which allows for a clear focus on performance by the institutions against agreed goals and targets. It also allows the HEA to assess the capacity of the HEIs to set strategic goals, to manage resources to deliver against them and to manage in an environment of ongoing change – which given the turbulent and competitive environment of higher education in Ireland and internationally is an essential capacity for the future.

The initial framework covered 2014-2016 and is now due for renewal. The HEA considers that the development of an education strategy provides a valuable opportunity to assess system goals and where necessary update the framework to take account of changed goals. At a macro level, it will be important to take account of the capacity of the system to continue to deliver enhanced outputs, particularly in terms of increased student numbers, improvements in widening access and research performance, without a sustainable funding base.

The HEA is also engaged in managing major change in the landscape of higher education, through a series of institutional mergers, particularly in the institute of technology sector, and in providers of initial teacher education. Based on engagement with the HEIs concerned, the HEA considers that this process will continue through 2016 and 2017, and, depending on the enactment of proposed Technological Universities Bill, may go beyond that.

These reforms need regular and consistent strategic oversight as well as leadership by the HEA and the Department of Education and Skills.

4. Strategic issue: Reform of HEA funding allocation model to better support national objectives

The current approach to funding higher education via the HEA has long been respected as a transparent and fair means of allocating available resources. However, it was designed at a time when there were two relatively fixed types of institutions and where there was a greater reliance on Exchequer funding, with an expectation that this would grow year on year. With a rapidly evolving landscape, an increased focus on differentiating the offerings of HEIs, clarity on the objectives which Government expects to be met from higher education and a process (strategic dialogue) which offers the capacity to direct public funding to drive performance and required system change, it is an opportune time to review the funding allocation model to ensure its fitness for purpose in a changed environment.

5. Strategic issue: Asserting/re-asserting the role of the Department of Education and Skills and the HEA in supporting the research function of higher education.

The HEA has a core objective to provide a foundation for excellent research and innovation across the entire higher education system. It does this by allowing institutions to deploy a significant proportion of core funding to ensure that appropriate research support mechanisms are in place, that key PIs can be offered the security of permanent tenure and that research-informed learning can be embedded across all disciplines. The strategy provides a timely opportunity to emphasise these dynamics and synergies which tend to be overlooked in the debates over prioritisation and inter-agency rivalry.

6. Strategic issue: Reform at second level with a focus on improved outcomes for STEM and broader development.

Although the process of managing reform at second level is not a HEA function, the HEA recognises the importance of the ongoing reform process in terms of its impact on higher education. Two issues are particularly important. The first is the measures being taken to enhance the take up of, and interest in, STEM subjects at second level, particularly in relation to information technology. The second is the reforms to improve the senior cycle experience for students, to move away from a focus on the terminal exam to one where there is a broader opportunity for the development of the individual student. This latter change would assist those students who transition to higher education, and further enhance their learning and development experience in higher education.

7. Strategic issue: The student experience – enhancement of quality teaching and learning

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* identified the need to ensure that all higher education students ‘have an excellent learning experience, informed by up-to-date research and facilitated by a high-quality learning environment, with state-of-the-art learning resources’. The realisation of the vision of ‘a well-skilled, adaptable and innovative workforce’ set out in *Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025*, will depend upon the enhancement of teaching and learning at all levels of education as well as on the delivery of ‘more flexible, innovative and interdisciplinary skills provision’.

The Department of Education and Skills support for the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning has ensured its responsiveness to these emerging policy-priorities. Without prejudice to the outcomes of the planned review of the National Forum in 2017, there is a strong imperative for the continued support of its key objectives and functions, including in particular: to build the digital capacity of the sector to support the enhancement of teaching and learning; while enhancing the flexibility of the delivery of programmes; fostering the integration of teaching and research; and supporting the professional development of those who teach in higher education. Strengthening the governance arrangements of the National Forum to give it autonomous legal status would consolidate its position as the key system-level infrastructure for enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education.

The National Forum’s *Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015–2017* calls for the establishment of ‘a digital education foresight group to bring together representatives from across the education sector to [...] enable convergence and integration of the digital learning experience at important points of transition in the educational lifecycle’. Facilitating such initiatives would maximise the impact of the work of the National Forum across the continuum of education.

8. Strategic issue – The further development of international education

The pursuit of internationalisation by the higher education institutions needs to be a holistic strategy, whereby adopting an international approach provides a benchmark of quality, courses are enhanced through the inclusion of relevant international case studies and perspectives, and the employability of graduates is increased by their international perspective and knowledge, in particular languages. Incoming students increase diversity on campus as well as providing an alternative source of income and effective integration into Irish life complements their formal learning and research experience.

9. Strategic issue – Enhancing leadership capacity of our institutions

The success of our higher education system depends upon the on-going quality of institutional leadership at senior and middle management level. The HEA review of gender practices will form the basis of a new approach to equality and diversity, developing and utilising the talent of everyone within the sector. In addition, providing more support for leadership training and succession planning will help underpin capacity and capability building to help ‘future proof’ the system to meet the challenges of today and into the future. This also includes developing career structures to attract and retain the best talent, from home and abroad.

10. Strategic issue – Enhanced data for assessing performance and for evidence based policy making

Without a capacity for adequate data collection, management and analysis the education system is “flying blind”. Considerable improvements have been made in recent years at all education levels. The strategy needs to support further development, including enhanced capacity for cross sectoral exchange of data and a capacity to track students through the education system and into the world of work. The HEA, pursuing our own data strategy, has plans to develop a data base of staff, a data base of graduate outcomes (to include the institutes of technology and a capacity for longitudinal outcomes) and improved data on international education. The HEA will also develop our institutional profile data, with respect to teaching & learning, RDI, and regional and local engagement, to incorporate information on system and institutional impact and contribution to/for Irish society and the economy.

11. Strategic issue – Mainstream Springboard as a model of work-based learning

The Springboard Programme has been a very successful as a labour market activation initiative. As the pressures of unemployment begin to ease, there is an opportunity to adapt this programme and its resources to a broader programme of work-based learning and the development of workforce skills.