

08/06/2016

Dear Minister

The University of Limerick welcome your plan to produce a three-year strategy for the Department of Education and Skills and a framework for measuring its progress in consultation with stakeholders. We also welcome this opportunity to provide initial commentary during this initial consultation phase of the strategy planning process. Inevitably, given the short time allowed for responses our comments will be relatively brief. However, we are confident that this represents the start of a dialogue between the Department and the higher education sector.

I should state at the outset that the University of Limerick remains fully committed to achievement of the objectives and targets as set out in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Hunt Report) and we will continue to work closely with the HEA in this regard over the lifetime of its implementation. Given our ongoing commitment to, and engagement with HEA, partner institutions and other stakeholders across the HE sector in the achievement of our shared objectives, we are somewhat disappointed with the relatively scant reference to higher education and the current challenges facing the sector in the consultation document.

That said, there is a welcome focus on “meeting the skills needs of the future”, and this speaks to the core of the University of Limerick mission. We have always placed employability at the core of teaching mission and positioned the addressing of skills needs as a central tenet of our distinctive approach to higher education in Ireland. Co-operative Education is a compulsory element of all our undergraduate programmes ensuring that we now occupy a position of unique strength with respect to graduate employability compared to other institutions: our graduate employment rate was 22% higher than the average for all other Irish universities in 2014.

Our particular approach to research and innovation, which focuses on the translational value and impact of our research outputs on industry, the economy and society, has also yielded significant sustained investments in recent years. UL has experienced unparalleled growth in research income (from €20 million in 2008 to €50 million in 2015), driven in large part by an acute focus on collaborative research, research commercialisation and the development industry/academic collaborative research centres addressing critically important sectors of the Irish economy such as pharmaceuticals, med-tech, software, food, communications, and

energy. Given our close alignment with this particular sector-wide objective, we make a number of points for your consideration:

- First and foremost, it is in the national interest to ensure that Ireland has an internationally reputable university sector which is capable of competing with the best in the world. Higher education is vital to national economic and social economic development. Our universities must continue to provide highly qualified graduate talent that will attract and retain both indigenous employers and foreign direct investment. Our experience at the University of Limerick is that the IDA frequently brings potential international investors to campus with a view to assessing the availability of graduate talent: potential employers are concerned to know that they will have a readily available stream of educated talent. Universities are also loci of innovation, entrepreneurship and translational research that are vital to support investment and economic development. There is a role for government in ensuring that universities remain internationally competitive and are regarded as being so. In the latter regard, the consequences of the measures enforced by austerity on the general ranking of Irish universities need to be reversed.
- International competitiveness cannot be achieved without appropriate investment. It follows that there is ***an urgent need to address the current funding challenges in the HE sector***. The €1 billion shortfall in funding across the sector is a matter of major concern. Funding for the sector has decreased from €2 billion in 2009, to €1.5 billion in 2014 - a reduction of 25%. At the same time student enrolment has increased steadily from the early 1990s in the main state-funded institutions, with full-time enrolments in 2013 reaching almost 165,000, and part-time enrolments reaching over 35,000. In real terms, enrolments have increased by 17% in an era when staffing levels have decreased by 20% over the same period. This deteriorating staff-student ratio raises serious concerns in relation to achieving the projected further increases in enrolments at the expense of graduate quality and international reputation.
- We therefore welcome a swift conclusion of the work the *Expert Group on Funding for Higher Education* (the Cassells Group) in order to precipitate firm decision-making that addresses the multitude of funding challenges facing higher education in Ireland.
- There is a need to increase the *flexibility of provision* across the sector. Whilst, Springboard, ICT upskilling and other labour market activation measures have particular merits, the scale of the current challenge will require a more systematic reorientation of the HE system; and this will not be realised without ***the incorporation of all part-time students into the recurrent grant allocation***.

- There is a need to align investments that address identified future skills needs in the Irish economy. The *Expert Group on Future Skills Needs* (EGFSN) has, in recent years, identified a significant shortfall of graduates and skills, particularly in the high-value and high-tech areas of the knowledge economy. Consideration might be given (i) to providing appropriate incentives to achieve these goals and (ii) to the role of the relevant industry sectors in encouraging students to pursue courses that will meet their skills needs.
- The *STEM Education Review Group* was established in November 2013 to review current modes and issues around education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in Ireland. The terms of reference were: the preparation of teachers (at primary and post-primary level) for STEM education in Ireland; the use of technology to enhance learning (especially on-line approaches); and sustained investment in STEM education research at third level. Whilst Ireland has embarked on widespread education reforms, a more concerted approach is still urgently needed in STEM subjects before we can realise our full potential in an era of rapid technological change. We therefore advocate for ***the publication and implementation of the findings of the STEM Education Review Group***, which were submitted to your predecessor in 2015.
- There is a need to ***sustain mission diversity across the HE sector in Ireland***. The current reform of the HE landscape posits the establishment of a limited number of Technological Universities comprised of merged Institutes of Technology across Ireland. Whilst broadly supportive of this reform agenda, we would caution that the criteria for designation as Technological Universities remains robust and acts as a clear differentiator from existing universities in terms of their future mission as institutes of learning in Ireland.
- International education in Ireland remains relatively underdeveloped. It is not obvious that the benefits of international education are properly understood. International students help institutions diversify their revenue streams; each international student spends c €8,000 per annum in Ireland (over and above tuition fees), representing a value to the national economy; on graduation international students broaden the talent base for employers; and international students are ambassadors for brand Ireland in their home countries. There is a need to bring about a **national sector-wide approach** to international education and there is a clear role for government in this regard. Governmental involvement is prominent in jurisdictions, such as New Zealand and Victoria, Australia, that are global leaders in international education. Ireland would do well to adopt these exemplars.

- We are broadly in support of the concept of “earned autonomy”. We accept that the price of autonomy is that universities must adhere to strict budgetary discipline, the need for transparency and the highest standards of governance. We welcome the idea of increased flexibility for institutions and, in particular, appropriate freedom of action in staffing matters. Universities must be allowed the necessary scope to manage their HR affairs. We do not see the need for further departmental or HEA involvement in these matters which are fully regulated by employment law and subject to review by relevant courts and relevant tribunals.

We look forward to further opportunities for engagement with you and your colleagues in the Department of Education and Skills and wish you every success in your new ministerial office.

Yours sincerely

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