

Secretariat
Committee of Public Accounts
Leinster House
Dublin 2

14 April 2022

By email only to pac@oireachtas.ie

Ref: S0283 PAC33

A Chara,

I write with reference to previous correspondence in which it was advised that the HEA would meet with the HEI Representative bodies in order to agree a definition of occasional staff, with a view to collecting data in respect of these staff and sharing the information with the committee when available.

In the intervening period, the HEA engaged with sectoral representatives to explore how data on the use of occasional staff in Higher Education might be gathered in an effective and consistent way. A view was sought from the Central Statistics Office in respect of how 'occasional work' is defined and counted beyond the Higher Education Sector.

A single definition of 'occasional staff' which would capture the required numbers was difficult to agree. The Central Statistics Office confirmed that across the sector including Higher Education, defining and reporting 'occasional staff' is difficult and complex, and agreed that the Eurostat definition¹ does not adequately provide clarity and is not a sufficiently robust definition for 'occasional staff' to capture this cohort.

On foot of these engagements, the HEA issued a data request ('data collection exercise') to the institutions via their sectoral representatives, IUA and THEA. For the purposes of the data collection, some definitions were provided to support consistency of reporting across the institutions. The definitions were based on and/or informed by HEIs' policies for the recruitment and employment of hourly paid staff members.

The data request issued in October 2021, with a requested submission date in November 2021. Submissions were received between December 2021 and March 2022. As of April 2022, one HEI has yet to return data.

¹ 'Occasional work refers to a job without the features of continuity and job security. It is defined as a job that lasts less than three months (whatever the job is part-time or full-time, formal or informal) and had only one spell in time.'

Based on the available returns:

	Universities (7/7)	Technological sector (10/11)	Colleges (3/3)
FTE ² reported via Q3 2021 ECF ³ returns	17721.88	7362.36	698.7
FTE reported via Q3 2021 data collection exercise	18005.09	7078.71	702.93
Headcount of fulltime, parttime or sessional paid in Q3 2021	21799	8113	780
Headcount of hourly paid Q3 2021	4392	1136	332
Total headcount staff paid Q3 2021	26191	9249	1112
% of total headcount reported as hourly paid staff	17% ⁴	12% ⁵	30% ⁶

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Dr Alan Wall
Chief Executive Officer

Encl/1: Information note

² 'Fulltime Equivalent'

³ECF refers to the Employment Control Framework 2011-2014 which sets the mandate for staff data collection in the higher education sector

⁴ Range low/high: 3% to 31%

⁵ Range low/high: 2.22% to 31.81%

⁶ 37%, 26% and 0.7% respectively

Information note

Since July 2019 the Committee of Public Accounts (PAC) has requested data and information in relation to the use of occasional/hourly-paid staff in the higher education sector. Requests from the PAC have sought to clarify the numbers of staff involved.

In December 2019, the HEA issued a reporting template to the higher education institutions (HEIs), requesting data in relation to payments to occasional staff, for submission January 2020. 5 HEIs did not submit data, and data of limited usefulness was received from other HEIs.

The Employment Control Framework 2011-2014 (ECF) is the context within which staff data in the higher education sector is reported. The ECF is a pay and pensions monitoring mechanism which sets the parameters for the reporting of staff data by the HEIs. The ECF requires institutions (HEIs) to report staff full time equivalent (FTE) numbers on the basis of funding source and pension liability. Data returns are submitted to the HEA on a quarterly basis for onward transmission to DFHERIS Higher Education – Funding and Funding Reform section.

The HEA interrogated the ECF returns to assess whether this information could answer the questions posed by the PAC; however, the data derived from the ECF reports does not provide a full headcount or reflect the totality of staff employed in every institution.

In June 2020, a request for data in relation to ‘Categorisation of staff active as at [end quarter] in receipt of occasional hourly payments’ was included in the request for quarter 2 2020 ECF returns. This information was submitted by the HEIs to the HEA for quarters 2, 3 & 4 2020.

Having consulted with DFHERIS External Staff Relations (ESR), the HEA wrote to the PAC in March 2021 and provided summary data collected in quarters 2, 3 and 4 2020. The letter to PAC included the following points:

- Different information systems are utilised across the sector, and this presents challenges for consistent sector-wide data collection in respect of occasional hourly staff
- Employment of occasional hourly staff is common practice across all third level institutes and the numbers of and reasons for occasional hourly staff employed across the university/college sector and the IOT/TU sector varies from institution to institution
- Employment contracts are a responsibility for HEIs as employers; sectoral industrial relations are the remit of DFHERIS; the HEA seeks affirmation from HEIs regarding compliance with public pay policy via the annual governance reporting requirements but is not in a position to comment on concerns relating to casualisation of work, employment rights and job security of occasional staff in the higher education sector

In April 2021, the PAC requested ‘further clarification as to the total number of employees, including occasional hourly staff, in each of the three sectors.’

The HEA responded in May 2021 advising that the HEA would meet with the HEI Representative bodies (IUA and THEA) to agree a definition of occasional staff, with a view to collecting data in respect of these staff and sharing the information with the committee when available.

The HEA engaged with IUA and THEA representatives between June and October 2021 to explore how data on the use of occasional staff in Higher Education might be gathered in an effective and consistent way.

The HEA sought the view of the Central Statistics Office in respect of how ‘occasional work’ is defined and counted beyond the Higher Education Sector. The CSO confirmed that the difficulties in identifying this cohort are experienced beyond the higher education sector.

It was not possible to reach agreement in relation to a definition for ‘occasional staff’ which would facilitate reporting of a consistent data set, nor was it possible to reach agreement with the universities on a data collection methodology; it was advised that universities’ systems do not facilitate granularity in reporting of occasional staff.

IUA feedback on a proposed data collection methodology was taken on board and the data request issued to the sector in October 2021, with a submission date in November 2021.

14 institutions submitted data on time and the HEA has been actively following up with the sectoral representatives and the HEI’s to clarify queries and garner submissions. As at beginning March 2022, four HEIs (all IUA institutions) had yet to submit final returns. Three of these have since provided submissions. Data has not been provided by one HEI.

Regarding the data collection exercise, IUA reported that the consistent feedback from their member institutions was that it had been a very difficult and time-consuming exercise to complete.

Ends