



Submission on behalf of the
Technological Higher Education
Association on the Reopening
Further & Higher Education in a
Safe & Sustainable Way

Reopening Further & Higher Education in a Safe & Sustainable Way

Technological Higher Education Association

July 2021

Chairman, members of the Joint Committee, we're seeing much of each other this week and I appreciate again this opportunity to address you.

Context

Covid is democratic in its reach. The experience for learners, their families, and for our staff has been taxing over the past 16 months; two academic years have been impacted and most learners have had little true student experience over that period. It says much for fortitude and the willingness to work collaboratively and with admirable flexibility that we have now successfully completed yet another year.

Inclusive approach

I record appreciation to the Department of Education and Skills which in March 2020 established a COVID 19 structure to manage and progress work that had begun to take place across tertiary education, and this structure has been modified under the new D/FHERIS and continues to oversee challenges and solutions at a national level to complement the work taking place in institutions.¹ The key to the success has been inclusivity as it comprehends the department, its relevant agencies, representative associations, social partners, and the student voice. Arising from this, the technological sector moved earlier this year to establish the POSITS forum (Partnership of Stakeholders in the Technological Sector) and that has proved efficacious in supporting the successful conclusion of the current academic year through inclusive social dialogue and it is currently focused on implementation of the plan for safe return.

¹ Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science

In reflecting, I pay tribute to the cohesive approach that has served well at a most challenging time. In essence, we negotiated the period through the dedication and innovation of the staff concerned. We have witnessed an admirable volume of quiet, caring, and innovative work that has been essential to ensuring that so many students remain connected to their institutions and programmes. In return, there is equally warm recognition of the support from government and its agencies for the financial support that facilitates this.

The experience to date

If Covid is democratic in its reach, we also know that it can impact unevenly. Considerable attention has focused on vulnerable students, and it has resulted in the significant additional supports referenced; but this cannot ameliorate the complete brunt of the pandemic.

I am struck by how our practitioners are requesting THEA to bring to wider awareness their sense that while many students have resilience in the moment to weather immediate pressure, the professional anticipation is that the fuller financial & mental health impacts of this pandemic won't become evident until the coming years. For that reason, the unanimous ask from frontline colleagues tasked with the care of students is that the current welcome supports be extended to cover the coming two years to meet the demand that is expected.

The Plan for 2021/22

The prime commitment is to keep our communities safe. To that end we adhere unfailingly to prevailing public health advice.

The development of the plan has seen a detailed and inclusive process. As such, we fully support and take joint ownership of the plan and will seek to implement it with input from all partners. The plan rests on key principles including the government's stated ambition of 29 April last to realize a significant increase in on-site activity. That education is deemed essential is also recognized. Finally, the plan secured the endorsement of the Chief Medical Officer and this is adjudged key to building shared confidence.

Planning approach

The challenge always was in formulating a plan for implementation some three months ahead during a dynamic pandemic. This required cross-government support for preparing in a manner where institutions are necessarily required, for the very purpose of planning, to anticipate a world beyond current public health advice. Effectively this involved agreeing an assumption base founded on the predicted course of the virus, including variations, and with especial cognizance of the vaccine rollout and the suite of mitigations that will be available.

Discretionary Framework

Under the discretionary framework, institutions are engaging in their own risk assessment exercises which will inform the balance between on-site and remote approaches but with the overriding commitment to achieve the maximum in-person activity. We will retain the learnings from the experience to date, including the power of technology and some element of a blended approach is predictable as we carefully phase the return to campus.

Enablers

The minister has acknowledged that these plans will require resourcing support and has committed to same. In return, we acknowledge the considerable support that was provided last year and which effectively ensured the maintenance of the system.

Antigen testing remains contested space. Focused rapid testing in higher education was a recommendation from the Report of the COVID-19 Rapid Testing Group. THEA strongly welcomes advance on this as it is perceived within the confines of the academy as an additional weapon for the protection of our communities.

The success of the vaccine rollout and recent changes offering single-dose option for the younger cohort are significant advances.

Attention to ventilation is one aspect within the suite of mitigation measures. Variations of concern may be a continuing factor and thus ventilation must command increasing attention.

The international student market has been severely impacted by the pandemic. Some good collective work is underway currently but there is the danger that Ireland may find itself outpaced by competitor countries who have moved more nimbly to agree protocols for safe inward travel.

Conclusion

Thank you chair and members. We have been afforded opportunity to shape this plan and unambiguously support the determination to realize a comprehensive return to campus for the coming academic year. The plan is under constant review and prioritizes public health and safety, and we are ever mindful of the proven power and adaptability of this virus. Our purpose is to work cohesively and in full partnership with all stakeholders, and especially students and staff, to build the confidence that together we can deliver a safe and holistic experience for our communities of learners and researchers.