



An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

Opening Remarks from Minister Harris, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Skills

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education

Meeting - 24th May 2022

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Introduction

Thank you Chair for the invitation here today to discuss our plans for the sustainable future funding of the Higher Education Sector, the major reforms around the technological universities and other important initiatives we have underway in DFHERIS.

I previously stated to this committee that neither I nor the Government would be found wanting when it comes to addressing the question of sustainable funding for higher education. It has profound impacts for our economy, society and the citizens we all serve.

The European Commission DG Reform sponsored Review was undertaken in early 2020 and I recently brought the Report to government for approval and publication. I would like to publicly thank the Commission and the

Independent consultants for their extensive support and work in developing this comprehensive assessment.

It provided a clear and detailed economic assessment to the Funding options presented in the 2016 Cassell's report, requested formally by this Committee in 2019. And on that note I want to thank this Committee, current and former members, for your own drive and ambition to see a sustainable model of funding for higher education, a truly important strategic national asset.

I'm delighted to be with you here today to discuss our policy response to the issue, *Funding the Future*, which I published with Minister Collins on May 4th. As colleagues will be aware, I also published the Review of the Student Grant Scheme on the same day in fulfilment of our Programme for Government commitment.

Funding the Future is the Department's landmark policy document which settles the question on both the funding model and the funding gap once and for all.

First, I want to be very clear about what the Government decided *not* to do in *Funding the Future*.

We have ruled out the possibility of introducing student loans into the system.

We have decided that the higher education system will not be funded by one pot only into the future.

Rather it will be a multi-funded model of additional Exchequer investment and employer contributions through the National Training Fund.

The Student Contribution will be retained but I am committed to reducing it over time.

With it, we have put in place a twin-track approach:

- (1) a funding gap figure - €307m identified - and a plan on how to fund higher education with a reform process, and
- (2) progress in addressing the cost of education for higher education students in Ireland.

Our plan for the future revolves around effective system performance and universal access to education. In prioritising core funding increases, the intention is that quality of outcomes will improve, the agility and responsiveness of higher education will be strengthened and the reputation of Ireland's higher education system will be enhanced, including in international rankings. We will move back towards European and OECD norms in terms of staffing ratios.

By focusing on access to education, we will bring our third level education system into line with the State's universal access approach of primary and secondary education.

Hand in glove with the increase in funding, there will be a reform process, overseen by an Implementation Group, which I will talk to some more shortly.

First I want to speak to the cost of higher education for students and families.

Costs for students and families

The SUSI Grant Scheme Review was a very significant piece of work and we now have an evidence-base for progressing student supports over the next number of years. Colleagues may be interested to hear that over 9,000 people participated in the consultation.

Already as a result of the Review, I have already made some early progress in addressing some of the Review's recommendations around the cost of living.

For the first time in over a decade there will be significant changes to the rates and eligibility for students accessing the Student Grant Scheme. There will be an increase to all student grant maintenance payments of €200 per year, there will be an increase in the income threshold to qualify for the stand rate of student grant by €1,000, and the non- adjacent rate of grant will be available to qualifying students who live 30km or more from college. This will apply to students from this September.

However, we can't shy away from the finding that the cost of living (as at the 2020/2021 academic year) for students has increased. The Report has highlighted that while Ireland has achieved high rates of attainment, other changes during this time, including student costs & inflation have the potential to impact some of these important gains.

The research also confirms that without the student grant support many would not have attended third level education.

However, it does show that the system works well at the moment in targeting those most in need.

We need to do more and I propose to address this through the Cost of Education paper and changes to the SUSI Grant Scheme and student contribution over time through the budgetary process.

Starting this year, my Department will continually assess the cost of education for the people who use the system by publishing an annual Cost of Education paper in advance of the budget.

This will be a key lever for this Government to transparently and accurately consider the costs involved in accessing third level across the population.

It is my honest belief that student representatives have a legitimate point when they say that the single most effective

option to advance access to education is to address upfront costs for students. Those families who do not qualify for SUSI may also need policy responses to soften the blow of rising costs of living.

I am strongly committed to ensuring the younger generations have their voices heard and their lived experience expressed in policy outcomes. It is crucial in my opinion that this Government and my Department have all policy levers available to them to reduce the burden on families subject to annual budgetary decisions.

Reform pathway

This is an exciting time for higher education in Ireland. We plan on providing more funding for universities, new technological universities in the regions and an ongoing reduction in student costs as well as increase in student supports.

There are a number of reforms we will progress over the coming years also under this new policy plan.

I am establishing an Implementation Group to provide guidance to my Department in the rollout of the Funding and Reform Framework and focus on creating a unified system and improving pathways between further and higher education. I am delighted to chair this group alongside my co-chairs Professor Tom Collins and Professor Anne Looney, both experts in the field. The inaugural meeting of the implementation group is being finalised for tomorrow 25th May 2022.

The group membership is comprised of enterprise, student, societal and Government/agency representatives. I am really excited about what this Group can achieve for our third level system for our younger generations but also as adults learning through life.

I'm happy to advise the committee that, working with the Implementation Group, I will implement a fivefold approach to drive accountability and improvements in our Higher Education sector in tandem with core funding reform.

Strand one will focus on enhancing quality and the international standing of the higher education system across the three missions of teaching and learning, research and engagement. This will include an increase in the staff-student ratio.

Strand two will focus on driving skills and engagement, with a particular focus on essential public services.

We have commenced a process of supporting delivery of essential public services with government partners, to ensure skills needs for the country are met including for public services workforce planning. This will be expanded and

progressed over the coming period. I also want to bring to the Committee's attention the work my Department (and the sector) is doing with the OECD at present – following on from my commissioning last year of an OECD review of our national skills architecture.

Strand Three will focus on enhancing student participation and success with a focus on under-represented groups. We will ensure more people from under-represented groups attend university and higher education. Shortly I will bring a memo to government on the New National Access Plan. This will provide supports for priority groups who are underrepresented in higher education. These include people with disabilities, people who are socio-economically disadvantaged, and members of the Traveller & Roma communities.

Strand four will create a third level system which is balanced and integrated. I have just updated cabinet colleagues on this today. We will link courses in further

education colleges and universities so that students who want to continue their studies to get a further qualification or move between courses can do so. More choice and opportunities for learners to get where they want to in life. A workforce trained in skills employers need.

The system will be characterised by clear and extensive pathways for learners, renewed qualifications frameworks, increased use of micro credentials, incentivisation for higher and further education to collaborate. As this new policy platform has just been brought to Government today, I am happy to return to the House to inform colleagues in more detail of these plans at a later date.

Strand Five will address cost as a barrier to higher education and improve student supports. Work under this strand will inform the progressive implementation of measures to address costs as a barrier to education, within the overall context of Government policy towards costs of

living and other relevant strategies including those related to access and participation in education. It is my intention that in this area, we would look at changes to postgraduate and part time fees.

Finally, before I conclude, as this Committee knows well, the HEA Bill is an essential part of the reform agenda and will implement a system of appropriate governance, oversight and performance frameworks. We are on track to have this concluded in 2022.

Technological Universities

To date 5 TUs have been established, with our newest TU in the South East opening its doors earlier this month.

These universities are designed to bring higher education into every region of the country and create hinterlands of talent and opportunity.

TU's promote access to higher education, they foster lifelong learning, and they embed themselves regionally.

Not only do they train apprentices, conduct research of all types, they engage with industry ensuring the courses offered match the skills business and enterprise need.

This transformation has been supported by continued targeted investment which amounted to €60 million in 2020 and 2021 and a further €30 million will be allocated in September 2022.

Together with the HEA we have secured €40 million for period 2022- 2024 under the National Recovery and Resilience Fund. This will be used for TU education and training reforms programmes which will assist c. 4,000 staff and 9,600 students.

I know that this is only the beginning of the story of Ireland's technological universities and I see the changes already

happening as I travel around the country, just yesterday visiting TUS in Limerick.

As we develop a third level system of higher, further education, research and apprenticeships, TU's will be at the heart of integration providing students with opportunities and employers with the skills they need.

Conclusion

Finally, colleagues across the Houses, can I say again how grateful I am for the support and input you have given over the years in keeping the issue of sustainably funding Higher Education alive.

As I have said in this House numerous times, education is the greatest of levellers and it is for all our families and not just the sector itself, that we are putting Higher Education on a sustainable path for the long term.

The policy sets out the vision and direction of higher education funding, our commitment to addressing legacy issues in higher education, adopting to sectoral transformation and development of Technological Universities and detailing our ambitious plans for investment and reform.

This is a landmark period for students, their families and the future of higher education in Ireland.

We are finally settling the question of how to fund our universities and higher education institutions for the benefit of our economy and society into the future.

ENDS