

19<sup>th</sup> June 2020

**Ref: SCC19R-I-0194**

Ms Aileen Fallon,  
Clerk to the Committee (Work Programme),  
Coiste Speisialta um Fhreagra ar Covid-19,  
Teach Laighean,  
Baile Átha Cliath 2,  
D02 XR20.

Dear Ms Fallon,

Thank you for your letter of 10<sup>th</sup> June and invitation to make a written submission from the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response.

On behalf of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) I attach a submission for circulation to the Members of the Special Committee.

The HEA is working closely with the institutions, the representative bodies for the sector (IUA, THEA) and directly with the Department of Education and Skills, to manage the challenges posed by COVID-19.

To date higher education institutions, have prioritised student completions such as final year exams and international students. They are currently mapping plans towards reopening in Q3 2020, in accordance with public health advice.

Aside from the financial implications, there are other impacts, economic and social, which are expected to feature in the coming months and years as a result of COVID-19 and which will need to be addressed or mitigated.

Yours sincerely,



---

Dr Alan Wall

Chief Executive Officer, Higher Education Authority

**Higher Education Authority**  
**Written Submission to the**  
**Special Committee on Covid-19 Response**

## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction .....   | 1  |
| 2. Maintaining & Progressing Higher Education in a Time of COVID-19 ..... | 2  |
| 3. Teaching and Learning .....  | 3  |
| 4. Students .....   | 3  |
| 5. Access and Mitigating Educational Disadvantage .....                   | 4  |
| 6. Staff.....   | 6  |
| 7. Capital/Infrastructure .....   | 7  |
| 8. Upskilling and Reskilling.....   | 8  |
| 9. Research.....  | 9  |
| 10. International Education / International Students.....                 | 10 |
| 11. Financial Challenges.....   | 11 |
| 12. Summary.....  | 11 |

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 Pandemic has affected all facets of life in Ireland and beyond. The full economic and social impacts have yet to be determined. The European Commission, in its Spring [2020 Economic Forecast](#) projects that the euro area economy will contract by a record 7¾% in 2020. Consumer confidence is also low, with fears over job losses, income streams, business and supply chains. In Ireland, the latest Ibec [Quarterly Economic Outlook](#) Q2 2020 forecasts a contraction in GDP of 11% in 2020 and for consumer spending to fall by 14%. Meanwhile, beyond the immediate health impacts of the Covid-19 virus, schools, colleges, and other societal norms have been curtailed, disrupting the lives of many people.

The higher education experience has been no different. The sector has responded quickly and comprehensively in the face of unprecedented challenge as a result of the current health crisis, implementing a number of swift and positive actions in order to ensure the continuity of provision of education and to ensure that adequate supports are in place for their student and staff bodies.

The primary objective of the sector has been the safety of students and staff, in the first instance. A secondary objective was reducing disruption to students and staff to the greatest extent possible. This has been achieved through an emergency transition to online programme delivery, putting in place alternative arrangements to facilitate student teaching and assessments and facilitating remote working for staff.

This response was sufficient to complete end of year programmes but is not, according to the institutions, adequate for the delivery of a full year's academic provision.

The HEA has continued to work with the higher education sector and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to manage the crisis, and to protect learners, staff and the system.

It is broadly accepted that the impact of COVID-19 will have long-lasting implications for the economy, for society and for higher education. While higher education will have an important place in economic and social recovery, it will need to be empowered and enabled to play its part. The response to this crisis will need to be significantly different to the response following the global financial crisis in 2008.

## 2. Maintaining & Progressing Higher Education in a Time of COVID-19

HEA data for 2018/19 suggests there were over 230,000 students enrolled in Irish higher education last year. It is estimated that in the region of 46,000 new entrants will commence in 2020.

A recent HEA report on graduate outcomes ([Graduate Outcomes Survey: Class of 2018](#)) found high levels of graduate employability for the 2018 graduate cohort, who were seeking employment at the end of 2018 and early 2019. For 2018 graduates, 80% were working or due to start a job (compared to 78% for 2017 graduates), 13% were engaged in further study (compared to 14% for 2017 graduates), 4% were unemployed (compared to 5% for 2017 graduates) and 3% were engaged in 'other' activities (compared to 4% for 2017 graduates).

When HEI enrolment and graduate data are compared to international data, Ireland continues to be placed much higher than the OECD average. The most recent OECD [Education at a Glance](#) reports that tertiary educational attainment was 53% for young adults (25-34 years old) in 2017 compared to OECD average of 44%. [Eurostat](#) also provides data on tertiary attainment across 28 EU countries. In 2018, tertiary education attainment was at 55.4% (provisional figure) among 30-34-year olds in Ireland while the figure for 2017 was 54.5%. This compares to an EU average of just over 40%.

Irish higher education institutions, with State support, have invested in this capacity to enrol, progress and graduate a large cohort of the Irish population over the last five decades, subsequent to the introduction of free second level education in September 1967.

Inequalities and barriers to access persist, and in some cases these barriers have been reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic. It will therefore be necessary to protect the most vulnerable student groupings such as non-traditional entrants, those from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, and persons with disabilities. Support also needs to be given to international students, both those here and the Irish abroad, who's education programmes or plans have been disrupted.

The continued operational success, and responsive nature of the sector, despite the financial constraints imposed following the last financial crisis, has left the sector depleted in terms of financial and managerial resources. There is no spare capacity in higher education at present, and certainly nothing of the scale required to weather the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There also remains a high degree of uncertainty in relation to the 2021 academic year. For higher education, CAO outcomes, international admissions and the latest guidelines regarding social distancing will all impact.

### 3. Teaching and Learning

The sudden closure of educational facilities in March 2020 has been managed by higher education institutions to minimise the risk to student health and to allow students to progress in their studies to the maximum extent possible, using online resources as an emergency response. Institutions have sought to address concerns around learner disadvantage while continuing to provide access to education through online learning.

Attempts to maintain academic standards and a commitment to quality teaching and learning and student engagement has been a feature of the higher education response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The sudden shift in practice to online delivery has been a challenge for institutions, staff and students. The [National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education](#) which seeks to enhance the teaching and learning for all students in higher education and acts as an advisory body to the HEA has been to the fore in promoting targeted responses and in the sharing of best practice.

The HEA, working with the Forum, plans to target the annual Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund at the teaching and learning needs of higher education institutions as they recover from the unforeseen effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This initial fund will support the further responses and adaptations institutions will need to consider with regard to curriculum, learning design, professional development and support for enhanced teaching and learning practice. The fund will also target HEI responses to the findings of the recent report from the Irish National Digital Experience ([INDEx](#)) Survey which captured the first national picture of the shared digital engagement, experiences and expectations of Irish higher education students and those who teach them.

### 4. Students

For students in Ireland, the spread of coronavirus has been a new and challenging event, and many are anxious and stressed and confused as to their options for the future. In response, the Union of Students in Ireland has compiled a list of useful [resources](#) for students. There are also several dedicated services such as Jigsaw.ie or SpunOut.ie which offer advice and support to people going through a difficult time. There are also great resources on *mind your mental health during the coronavirus pandemic* at [hse.ie](#).

Many students will also face challenges in respect of transport and accommodation. It is assumed that public transport and student accommodation will continue to be available but may be subject to public health protocols.

In reduced campus time scenarios, students may not wish to enter long leases or other such accommodation commitments. For international students, it will be important to allow flexibility for those who might be bound by travel or self-isolation restrictions.

The Covid-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate effect on already disadvantaged and vulnerable persons, not just socio-economic groups, but also students or staff with disabilities and/or health conditions who may need additional supports. These impacts and challenges are addressed in a section below.

Since late 2019, the HEA has also been leading a working group on suicide prevention in higher education which was convened in response to the HSE / National Office for Suicide Prevention's '[Connecting for Life – Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020](#)'. A National Framework for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in Higher Education, drafted with input from key stakeholders, is now nearing completion. As a response to this work, the Minister for Higher Education allocated an additional €2 million annually to mental health supports in higher education with effect from Budget 2020.

As part of the national response to the pandemic, the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), a partnership initiative jointly developed by the HEA, QQI, and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), produced [student engagement guides](#) to support institutions during Covid-19. These resources are aimed at assisting staff, students, and institutions to find short-term solutions to student engagement issues, while also informing thinking in the medium-term as planning begins for an uncertain 2020/2021 academic year.

As the national agency responsible for qualifications and quality assurance, QQI have released a number of documents in response to COVID-19, setting out the general approach from a QA perspective and providing some guiding principles for assessment. QQI have outlined the need for alternative assessment to be based on the learning outcomes for the programme, and have placed emphasis on considering the needs of students in an awarding-year of the programme, as well as ensuring that there is flexibility built into assessment for diverse learners e.g. learners with connectivity issues, students with disabilities etc. QQI's advice for institutions places particular emphasis on upholding the long-term integrity of the awards that students achieve<sup>1</sup>.

## 5. Access and Mitigating Educational Disadvantage

The National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015 -2019) ('National Action Plan') identifies six target groups of students whose participation rates in higher education have been historically low - students with disabilities, students from socio-

---

<sup>1</sup> Union of Student in Ireland, [COVID-19 No Detriment Policy Briefing](#), 2nd April 2020.

economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Irish Travellers, first-time mature students, further education award holders and part-time flexible learners.

From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic the HEA has been concerned about the impact on students from the target groups. In order to better understand this impact, the HEA has carried out two surveys of access offices and services in higher education institutions. The first survey was carried out in April and sought to identify the immediate challenges facing students and how institutions were addressing these. The second survey was carried out in June and focussed on how end-of-year examinations and assessments went for target group students as well as learning more about how access offices will work differently starting in September and beyond.

The surveys of HEIs has also been supplemented by work carried out by other organisations to establish the impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged students. AHEAD, which works to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities, has published the findings of a 'Learning from Home' survey of learners with disabilities in further and higher education. In collaboration with the HEA and Department of Education and Skills, Pavee Point hosted an online forum at the end of May the implications of COVID-19 for current and prospective Traveller and Roma students. The purpose of this forum was to discuss the challenges faced by students and inform responses by Department, HEA and HEIs.

Through the HEA's surveying of HEIs, as well as the work being carried out by other organisations, several key issues arise for National Access Plan target group students in relation to the impact of COVID-19:

- Financial – the loss of employment (either by students or their families) has had a disproportionate effect on target group students. There is likely to be increased demand for supports such as SUSI or the Student Assistance Fund;
- Technology – access to laptops or other IT supports has proven to be a significant impediment to target group students. Many HEIs have done their best to purchase or loan out laptops to students but demand continues to be high and will likely increase for the start of the next academic year. This is compounded by the absence of broadband or poor connectivity in some settings;
- Environmental – many target group students live in challenging home environments e.g. overcrowded homes, halting sites, direct provision. Many rely on campus facilities such as libraries to work and study. With campuses closed, these students now lack an adequate physical space to study;
- Health and social impact – due to COVID-19, many students are experiencing isolation and uncertainty and other mental health concerns. For students with underlying conditions, their own vulnerability to illness will impact on their ability to participate in higher education. Many target group students also have other responsibilities such as employment or caring for other family members which means they may have priorities other than education at this time.

The HEA has found that HEIs have responded as best they can to the crisis as regards supporting vulnerable students, but significant challenges remain for the future. HEIs have

adapted their work practices in order to ensure a continuity of support as well as often 'going the extra mile' for students in most of need.

The HEA and other groups have brought the issues outlined above to the attention of the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group that reports to the Department's wider COVID-19 Tertiary Education Sector Steering Group. The issues also form part of recent discussions of the National Access Plan Steering Group and are a key source of information in order to determine responses to the current situation in respect of access to higher education by students from target groups.

Such responses to date have included the Department of Education and Skills working with other Departments, HEANet and telecoms companies to make a number of relevant websites "zero rated" to allow students to access these sites with no data costs. The Department also coordinated technology supports to disadvantaged students in further and higher education such as a donation by Dell of 100 laptops and 70 desktops for students who otherwise would not have access to a device.

## 6. Staff

In general, staff at all levels in higher education institutions have been highly responsive to the crisis, demonstrating flexibility in the circumstances, to continue to provide the best possible levels of service to students and other stakeholders.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum) has collated and published a number of resources in support of academic staff making the rapid transition to online such as [Embedding Data Use for Supporting Students](#) and [Selecting Online Alternatives to Common Assessment Methods](#).

Higher education institutions are in ongoing consultation with their local student unions, staff representatives and broader stakeholder groups and they have indicated that all appropriate steps will be taken to minimise disruption to the students' experience.

As above, the safety of staff, students and the wider community is paramount; at all times, providers continue to be guided by and adhere to public health advice. In planning for a return to provision, the exact nature of which is as yet unknown, aspects of industrial relations and human resource implications may arise.

Not all staff have been retained through the crisis. Some research contracts have been unable to proceed, impacting research projects but also the teaching and learning dividend that is derived.

In respect of higher education staff, the issues and challenges arising are not particular to academics. Professional and support staff are also impacted. Issues to be discussed / resolved include appropriate supports for home working, access to infrastructure, contract flexibility, etc. This will be an issue across all workplaces in the future. In certain areas of provision, there will also be a need to consider if staff / students will require PPE and if so, the cost implication of such provision.

Finally, the sudden changes in work practices brought about by the pandemic have resurfaced many issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education and elsewhere. Many workers with caring responsibilities are now caring for dependents in the home and may still be asked to work remotely to a normal schedule.

As is well documented, caring responsibilities predominantly fall on female staff, and the current situation may have detrimental effects both in the immediate term (on a person's health and well-being) and in the longer term (lack of productivity hampering career progression).

The HEA [Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality](#), in collaboration with the National Committee for Gender Equality, has encouraged HEIs to continue to put gender equality initiatives to the fore. The Centre is working with Advance HE on [Athena SWAN](#) and with HEIs on [the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative](#) as well as collating staff data by gender and preparing for the imminent launch of a call under the Gender Equality Enhancement Fund to encourage innovative approaches to addressing gender inequality across HEIs. Applications that address the gender equality implications of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic are particularly encouraged under the call.

## 7. Capital/Infrastructure

In respect of capital and infrastructure, issues arise in respect of the management and use of buildings and facilities and the need for appropriate information technology infrastructure to facilitate greater use of online and distance provision. Investment in IT infrastructure will be required to underpin this transition. Staff will also need to be innovative and will need to be assisted in the development of skills and new ways of teaching and interacting with the student population in a high-quality way in the digital or blended environment.

Public health directives will restrict the number of students and staff on campus at any one time. This will necessitate changes to delivery, particularly on programmes with large class sizes. It is expected that provision will be on a more blended basis, than would be the norm.

The extent of distancing required (1, 1.5, 2M) will significantly impact the physical capacity at HEIs. It is likely to require the adaptation of large classrooms/theatres to accommodate significantly smaller groups of students while maintaining social distancing requirements. Measures might also include reserving campus access on certain days to different learner cohorts.

The balance between face to face and online provision will vary across programmes and disciplines with larger lectures being delivered online, and on-campus face-to-face time being prioritised for small group teaching (seminars, tutorials, laboratory classes, studio time, etc.).

Issues also arise for current and planned building projects (construction industry restrictions, project phasing, increased costs, repurposing / capital planning). Public Private

Partnership (PPP) facilities (e.g. usage specifications) and planned projects will also be impacted. These issues may require:

- Additional, targeted investment in IT infrastructure;
- Review/renegotiation of all building contracts and PPP agreements;
- Renegotiation of all European investment bank loans;
- Identification of costs relating to above items;
- Review/establishment of borrowing frameworks for the whole sector.

## 8. Upskilling and Reskilling

The social and economic impact of the pandemic will require a targeted response through worker re-engagement, up-skilling and re-skilling. There are also specific concerns emerging around precarious employment in areas reliant on discretionary domestic consumer spending, such as tourism and hospitality. Workers in such vulnerable sectors, are disproportionately female, part-timers, younger and sometimes those with lower levels of education. These people may be more significantly affected by the impact of the pandemic than those in other sectors of society and the economy.

Following the economic and social crisis of 2008, Irish higher education played a pivotal role in supporting people to get their lives back on track. Specific instruments such as Springboard + assisted people experiencing unemployment to remain as close as possible to the labour market by accessing flexible higher education and training opportunities to up-skill or re-skill in areas where sustainable employment opportunities arose as the economy recovered. Higher education institutions, through Springboard and other courses, have continued to work closely with Government and enterprise to align courses and skills needs, regionally, locally and nationally.

As the Irish economy reopens, following the COVID-19 downturn, graduate demand is also expected to rise. Data on graduate experiences through the last recession was captured in a 2018 report, [Higher Education Outcomes – Graduates of 2010-2014](#), as a result of a collaborative project between the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and HEA. The report found that graduates are significantly less likely to be unemployed than those with lower levels of educational attainment. The report also showed that throughout that recession, the higher the level of educational attainment, the higher the propensity was to have a job and remain in employment.

However, not all traditional jobs may return post pandemic and the world of work may be quite different. For example, there are concerns that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows into Ireland may slow, and some projects might not proceed, according to the most recent EY European Attractiveness [Survey](#). According to the [IDA](#), an estimated 20% of all private sector employment in the State is directly or indirectly attributable to FDI. It is obvious therefore, that maintaining a high skilled, well-educated and adaptable workforce will be essential to our economic recovery.

For all these reasons, there will need to be a dedicated skills response to the pandemic, alongside the traditional full and part-time offerings available in the higher education sector.

As of writing, in the region of 13,000 Springboard+ places will become available over the summer months with a commencement date of September 2020. Those in receipt of a social welfare payment will be prioritised for these places which are free of charge to this cohort. Courses are designed in collaboration and with the support of regional and national enterprise and higher education providers so that the skills disciplines on offer are in key skill need areas of the economy both regionally and nationally.

The Human Capital Initiative (HCI) will also come on stream in September and January offering Level 8 and Level 9 higher diploma and postgraduate diploma places for those already holding a level 8 qualification. These courses are open and prioritised for those on a social welfare payment however it is assumed that they will also be of interest to recent graduates who are unable to gain employment post-graduation. These courses will enable them to upskill and reskill in areas of key skill needs. Approximately 2,000 places will be available. These courses are free of charge to those on a social welfare payment and subsidised for recent graduates and those in employment.

Both Springboard + and the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) are carefully aligned with the focus areas of the Future Jobs Ireland [strategy](#) (Embracing Innovation and Technological Change; Improving SME Productivity; Enhancing Skills and Developing and Attracting Talent; Increasing Participation in the Labour Force; Transitioning to a Low Carbon Economy). Furthermore, upwards of 90% of these programmes are provided flexibly, offer a mix of blended and online options.

Finally, the Covid-19 crisis has presented an urgent need for the higher education sector to engage with new forms of delivery, teaching and learning through digital transformation. The rapid shift in provision has provided learning opportunities for higher education institutions too as they look to future *modus operandi* or *modus vivendi*. The Human Capital Initiative Pillar 3 call currently under assessment will provide support to enhance innovation and agility in response to future skills needs and new innovations in teaching and learning.

## 9. Research

The higher education sector underpins Ireland's research, development and innovation (RDI) system and directly contributes to our national ambition to be a global innovation leader. Activities range from bespoke and applied research on immediate challenges (via Innovation Vouchers and in collaboration with industry) to basic and fundamental research via masters and PhD studentships and to individual curiosity-driven and researcher-led projects on new or emerging areas of societal or economic relevance.

Researchers, including contract staff (such as those referenced under the staff section above), play an important role in progressing research projects and ideas. In their work, they generate new knowledge and develop their scientific and social disciplines.

Importantly though, many researchers also make a significant contribution to the progression of students and the transmission of knowledge through their teaching and engagement.

At present, the national research funding agencies (such as SFI, HRB, IRC, etc.) are liaising closely with the research community. A working group of research funding agencies chaired by the Irish Research Council is examining ways in which they can continue to support Irish research.

Most research funding agencies are also examining their competitive funding awards and are working with their grant holders to identify where costed extensions are justified (on a case by case basis).

As with students, the HEIs are now actively looking at researcher return to campus. Health and safety is the paramount driver and the return is being managed appropriately at a very local level (given the very specific needs of different types of research, closeness to completion of some projects, e.g. for doctoral students, and industry contracts), with very strong oversight of the Heads of Research to ensure consistency and fairness in approaches being taken. It is currently estimated that, once labs are back to a “steady state” capacity, they will only be operating at in the region of 20%-25% of pre-pandemic capacity.

It should be a priority to retain research staff and to ensure that quality research activity and as many quality researchers as possible are retained.

## 10. International Education / International Students

While the expected loss of income from fee-paying international students will be acutely felt by the sector, it should also be borne in mind that international students contribute very significantly in many other areas.

The loss to the local and national economies in terms of air travel, accommodation, expenditure on food, recreation and other spends may also be significant. It was estimated some years ago that each incoming Erasmus+ student generates 3-4 visitors to Ireland while such students are on a mobility to this country. With over 8000 Erasmus students coming to Ireland this is a potential loss of circa 30,000 visitors in the coming year.

The classroom dynamic is greatly enhanced by the presence of a multi-cultural, multi-national student population and contributes to the overall quality improvement of HEIs. Irish HEIs are able to identify at first hand talented students who may be suitable Masters and/or PhD candidates. Disruption of this pipeline is a further loss of future revenue.

As Ireland is an open economy, reliant on international trade to build sustainable long-term growth, building international relationships through incoming and outgoing education and cultural exchange is important and as reflected in [\*Irish Educated, Globally Connected, an International Education Strategy for Ireland 2016-2020\*](#). The strategy notes that seeds of collaborations are often sown during student mobilities in Ireland. Such continued student, teacher, researcher, manager collaborations with European partners

are particularly important if Ireland is to contribute to and draw from the European Education Area which was established by the European Council in 2017. This concept is likely to occupy a greater role in the future. The European Universities Alliances project will receive a further stimulus from the events of the past 6 months or so where the expertise of higher education staff and institutions has played such a key role in tackling the problem of COVID-19.

The student experience in Ireland creates hugely positive goodwill towards the country, its people and its higher education teaching and research sectors. The impressions formed by such students can be lasting.

## 11. Financial Challenges

Institutions, particularly universities, rely on commercial activities and a number of ancillary activities to subsidise core activity. The financial challenges posed by COVID-19 for Irish higher education institutions are very significant. Institutions are facing substantial losses in revenues from international students, student accommodation, visitor attractions, conference and sporting events. In addition, they will incur increased costs due to social distancing protocols, delivery of on-line and blended modes of teaching, learning and assessment, research project overruns, contractor claims due to site closures, as well as the costs of public health safety equipment, including the provision of personal protective equipment, sanitisers and higher cleaning bills.

The HEA is working with the sector to carry out an assessment of the financial impact of COVID-19. More accurate figures will evolve towards October 2020 as student numbers and operational realities become more apparent.

## 12. Summary

Aside from the financial implications, there are other impacts, economic and social, which are expected to feature in the coming months and years as a result of COVID-19 and which will need to be addressed or mitigated.

To date higher education institutions, have prioritised student completions such as final year exams and international students. They are currently mapping plans towards reopening in Q3 2020, in accordance with public health advice.

The HEA is working closely with the institutions, the representative bodies for the sector (IUA, THEA) and directly with the Department of Education and Skills, to manage the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Higher Education Authority

19<sup>th</sup> June 2020