



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

Review of the main themes arising from the submissions to the public consultation on the Statement of Strategy

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science undertook a consultation process in advance of the development of the Statement of Strategy 2021-2023. This consultation process was launched on the 2 December and it closed on the 18 December. 132 responses were received to the consultation from a wide variety of respondents, including private individuals, further and higher education institutions, agencies of the Department and other public bodies. The responses to the consultation process were taken into account in the drafting of the Statement of Strategy.

A number of key themes arose in the responses to the consultation process and each of these is discussed below. These are in turn reflected in the goals detailed in the Statement of Strategy.

1. Research and Innovation

The importance of a focus on, and investment in, research and innovation was a central theme in the responses to the consultation process. The importance of enhancing the visibility of Ireland's research capabilities and the importance of research on matters pertaining to societal wellbeing were raised by respondents. Responses to the consultation noted that the use of research funding should be strategic and should deliver on the goal of positioning Ireland's researchers and research capability in a strong global position in the medium term. The investment required to reach these goals was highlighted in a number of responses.

The difficulties in maintaining Ireland's position as a key innovator, and the investment required to do so, was also raised. Some respondents had concerns about moving the investment portfolio away from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and they noted the necessity of maintaining links with SMEs and encouraging the SME sector to continue to innovate. Innovation in the higher education sector was also raised, and the importance of recognising innovation in this sphere. The need to forge innovation links between business and the higher education sector was deemed a key factor in the responses. The importance of a focus on innovation to the economy and the ability to attract Foreign Direct Investment was also noted by respondents.

2. Inclusion, access and literacy

One of the key themes that arose from the consultation process was the need for an education system that addresses the needs of the whole of society. This means an education system that has space for all those who wish to access it; those from different sectors of society, including more marginalised

groups. Respondents noted the review of SUSI was a key step in ensuring that access to further and higher education is available to all.

The question of access also arose in the context of allowing physical access to our further education buildings. Making further and higher educational facilities accessible to all, and ensuring that people with physical disabilities can have full access to the facilities they need to follow the educational path they wish to take was noted as a key issue by respondents.

On the theme of inclusion, respondents noted the importance of ensuring that further education and lifelong learning happens at all levels, including continued focus on ensuring that anyone that requires it can access assistance with literacy, allowing them to participate more fully in society. The recent launch of the new 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy was recognised as an important step in this process.

3. Equality

The issue of equality was raised across a number of areas within the Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science sector. The lack of an equal representation of women in leadership positions in higher and further education institutions was noted, as well as the need to ensure that gender equality is considered as a factor when strategic decisions for the sector are being made. Key issues raised in the responses included the need to increase women's participation in STEM, along with the need for funding to deal with gender-related issues.

The theme of equality arose in other contexts, including the need for equality of funding across both the higher and further education sector, as well as the use of targeted student supports to ensure equality of access to further and higher education.

4. Lifelong Learning

A number of respondents to the consultation focused on lifelong learning and the need to ensure engagement and inclusion for all learners. The need to increase the numbers involved in lifelong learning was noted. There were a number of suggestions as to how to ensure this, including the possibility of awarding micro-credentials to learners to keep them engaged, and to deal with the rapidly changing skills needs of the economy.

The need for funding for a wide variety of lifelong learning models including apprenticeships, blended learning and vocational education was raised. Respondents also noted that giving potential learners access to guidance was a key component in ensuring continued engagement in educational opportunities. Enabling employers to access accredited training courses to upskill staff was also included in the responses.

5. Competitiveness/changing needs of the workplace

A number of respondents commented that the area of investment in human capital was important to ensure the ongoing competitiveness of the Irish economy. The productivity gap between indigenous and foreign enterprises was also raised. The opportunities that will arise from both Brexit and the recovery from Covid-19, and the need for business to have the training and skills to capitalise on these opportunities was noted by respondents. In addition, several references were made to the Fourth Industrial Revolution more broadly, and how as a country, Ireland needs to be forward-thinking and

plan for the future in a way that prepares us to deal with ever-changing skills demands of a rapidly changing world.

6. Evidence and data for policy

Within the submissions received, a clear message emerged from the responses related to the use of evidence in policy formation, and the fostering of infrastructure to facilitate the use of data in the sector more broadly. The optimisation of data in the sector, including qualitative, learner informed data, was deemed desirable by the respondents. Those who submitted a response to the consultation from a research-oriented background were interested not only in improving our national data infrastructure, but also in participating in, and availing of, European data initiatives such as the European infrastructure project to handle population data on Covid-19. In addition to this, those coming from a national policy perspective wished to see an evidence-informed response to issues such as inclusion and access, research, innovation, and a wide array of other policy areas. In addition to this, the fostering of links between academia and policy-making was seen as potentially advantageous, and that National strategies should be underpinned by a strong evidence base.

7. Environment & Climate Action

Issues relating to the environment and climate action featured strongly in the submissions received during the consultation process. Ambitious targets have been set in the Climate Action Plan to reduce carbon emissions across Ireland's economy, and facilitate a transition to a low carbon economy. Central to these efforts are ambitions around energy efficient retrofit, heat pump installation, an expansion of onshore and offshore, as well as solar power generation, and the rollout of a comprehensive electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

A desire was expressed to see investment in education and training programmes to facilitate these actions nationally. There was a favourable response to the Department's commitment to the development of a Green Further Education and Training Action Plan.

8. Governance and Organisational Structure

The issue of governance and organisational structure, both within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and within the broader further and higher education sector was raised in the responses. The responses raised the issue of the work of the Department and how it interacts with the work of the HEA, and the possibility that new legislation may be required to fully clarify this division of work. The challenges in setting up a new Government Department, and the process of fully delineating the work of the new Department were noted in the responses.

9. Internationalisation

The question of Ireland's global reach in the areas of further and higher education, as well as in research and innovation, was raised by respondents to the consultation. Respondents noted that a strong commitment to international engagement in areas of mutual research was required. Respondents also noted the importance of promoting Ireland as a multicultural, inclusive community for to the economic and societal development of Ireland in the future.

10. Talent/Talent Pipeline

A number of issues were raised in the area of talent and the talent pipeline. These ranged from the necessity to manage student health and wellbeing in the current crisis, and to ensure that the current cohort of students continue to be supported to complete their studies. The importance of ensuring that there are sufficient graduates in high-tech disciplines including AI, robotics, IT and data analysis to support the growth in employers looking for these skills came through strongly. The necessity of attracting international talent to our further and higher education sector was also noted by respondents. The necessity of supporting high-quality, cutting-edge education and research across the diversity of established disciplines including the arts, humanities and social sciences was also raised.

Central Policy Unit

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