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Submission from Griffith College Dublin, Cork and Limerick on the Reform of the HEA Act 1971

Introduction

Griffith College welcomes the public consultation by Minister Harris on updating the HEA Act. Amending the 50 years' old Act is necessary to reflect current thinking in governance, accountability and performance management and to ensure that Ireland's higher education system is geared to meet skills needs, improve access and guarantee that sufficient college places are provided to cater for increasing demand.

It provides an opportunity to address anomalies in official policies towards private HEIs which offer QQI accredited full-time courses through the CAO. These successful institutions also offer part time, short and micro credential courses through direct entry and cater for a total of 27,000 students in all.

This submission is made by the country's largest private HEI, Griffith College which has campuses in Limerick and Cork as well as two in Dublin. Griffith accesses HEA funding through competitive tendering for Springboard courses as well as other state funding via Skillnet and the July Stimulus Package.

We are subject to state regulations for accreditation of courses and for the provision of both academic and financial bonding arrangements. Yet, full time students in Griffith and other private HEIs are denied access to SUSI and other state supports, despite an All Party Oireachtas Committee recommendation.

The role and potential of private HEIs in helping the state to meet the demand for higher education places at a cost-effective price has been overlooked in most official documentation for decades with one notable exception - the Hunt report of 2011. It recognised the agility and flexibility of private providers, including those in the 'for-profit' sector and recommended that they be free to tender for provision of courses which the HEA decided were needed.

It added that this sector also offers an opportunity to periodically reassess the value for money and effectiveness of public providers; where private providers can offer better value for money, the State should consider using them to deliver on its objectives.

This recommendation should be examined again as a matter of urgency by the renewed HEA. Much can be learned from the successful interplay of public/private arrangements in the health sector



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which are supported by the State and which provide real choice for consumers. If public/private arrangements are acceptable public policy in areas such as health and transport what principled objection is there to similar provision in higher education?

Forthcoming legislation

There is only one reference to private HEIs in the otherwise very comprehensive update on the reform of the HEA legislation. This states that “It is intended that the co-regulation model in the reformed HEA legislation will find the correct balance between autonomy and accountability of both the publicly funded HEIs and the not-for-profit/private HEIs which are designated as institutions of higher education”.

Elsewhere the report lists some of the areas where changes will be made; for example, in the composition of governing authorities, creation of various sub-committees, developing codes of governance, writing strategy plans, policies and statements etc. However, no distinction is made between ‘designated’ and ‘non-designated’ HEIs and it is not clear if these provisions will apply to all public and private sector institutions or just those in the officially ‘designated’ category.

Clarification is required for the private HEIs which need to be informed if all of these provisions will also apply to them. It must be recognised that without state financial support these requirements would severely penalise some smaller private HEIs.

EDI - equality, diversity and inclusion

Griffith College supports the increasing emphasis in higher education on equality, diversity and inclusion. The finding seven years ago of huge disparities in participation in higher education in Dublin postal districts was a terrible indictment of our collective failure to grasp the enormity of educational disadvantage.

A HEA report at that time revealed that 99% of school leavers in Dublin 6 transferred to higher education compared with only 15% in Dublin 17 which covered Coolock and Darndale. While some improvement has been made since a lot more needs to be done for students in DEIS second level schools. There should be greater progression from further into higher education and greater use of private HEI provision to create more pathways for disadvantaged students.



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Regrettably, the improvements have not been extended to learners on all full time QQI accredited higher education courses who, on the principle of equality, should be entitled to means tested student grants.

This principle strongly underpins the recommendation of the All Party Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills to extend SUSI grants to all such QQI learners. The Committee was clearly conscious of the inequity suffered by many disadvantaged students who want to attend a private HEI to pursue CAO courses of their choice.

What is particularly distressing to them is the fact that the State allows grants for students in some private for-profit institutions such as BIMM when they are linked to public sector HEIs. This is yet another anomaly in the treatment of disadvantaged students in private HEIs.

SUSI awards act as a gateway to all student supports such as the €250 pandemic allowance given to students in public sector institutions but unfairly denied to those in private HEIs.

This inequality of support for students is one issue that should be looked at by the renewed HEA in the context of funding and providing additional places in higher education.

A further source of inequality for learners and employers is the exclusion of private HEIs from relevant bodies such as the Regional Skills Fora and regional clusters as well as the HEA itself. Our students will work in real world jobs when they graduate from courses designed to give them job ready skills. It is important for both employers and for learners that their teaching institutions both contribute to discussions on skills needs and are apprised of the latest information about specific regional and national employment trends.



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Conclusion

The Government's decision to proceed with HEA legislation is welcome. So is the decision to retain the name - the Higher Education Authority - as the original proposal to rename it the Higher Education Commission might have created confusion.

In his foreword to the Update on the Reform of the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971 Minister Harris writes that "It is vitally important that robust and refreshed legislation for the higher education sector is in place to coincide with the elevation of higher education and research to a central and more visible position at local and national level".

The report is emblazoned with the words A Shared Approach on its cover. Sharing implies equality of treatment. In all fairness, it must be asked if equality applies to the State's approach to disadvantaged students who are denied SUSI grants when they want to exercise their right to attend private HEIs.

The forthcoming legislation affords a timely opportunity to rectify this wrong done to disadvantaged students, to acknowledge the role private HEIs contribute to meeting the demand for higher education places and to allow their voices be heard in the regional skills fora and other official bodies where they can make a valuable contribution.

Griffith College is happy to elaborate on any of the points raised in this submission if requested to do so.

March 5th 2021