



**Oifig an Aire Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
Office of the Minister for Education and Skills

30 May 2013

Mr John Hennessy  
Chair  
Higher Education Authority  
Brooklawn House  
Shelbourne Road  
Dublin 4

Dear John,

With reference to the advice received dated 17<sup>th</sup> April 2013 from the Higher Education Authority on system governance, inter-institutional collaboration and a future configuration of the higher education system, I would like to extend my warmest appreciation to the members of your Authority and to the Executive of the HEA for this valuable piece of work.

I have considered the report in detail and would like now to set out my response to the Authority in a number of key areas relating particularly to system governance and configuration. My colleagues in Government have noted this response and details of implementation as part of the wider higher education reform agenda.

You have set out very clearly the necessity of a whole-of-system approach to the governance of the Irish higher education system. I concur fully with this approach. A new relationship between the State and the higher education institutions will be implemented that will allow the system to deliver the outcomes that have been identified as essential for Ireland's social and economic well-being. Key to the delivery of these objectives by a mission-diverse, well-co-ordinated system of higher education institutions will be a new performance framework and a process of strategic dialogue between the Higher Education Authority and the higher education institutions.

The Higher Education Authority will mediate the accountability for performance of the institutions against a set of clearly defined national priorities and key system objectives that I will outline below. These new parameters will inform the HEA as you enter into dialogue with the higher education institutions and agree performance compacts.

It will be incumbent upon all publicly funded higher education institutions to engage fully with the implementation of the new system governance and performance framework and the configuration as set out here. I expect the HEA to align public funding and develop the mechanisms necessary to facilitate the delivery of agreed outcomes. An appropriate proportion of public funding to the institutions should be

set aside as performance funding to support the delivery of system objectives which will be reflected in the institutional performance compacts agreed through strategic dialogue.

### System Governance and Performance Framework

The current national priorities of Government as set out in the Programme for Government and noted this week by Government can be summarised as follows:

1. Economic renewal and development at national and regional levels
2. Social cohesion, cultural development and equity at national and regional levels
3. Public sector reform towards greater effectiveness and efficiency and the restoration of trust in Ireland's civic and public institutions
4. Restoration of Ireland's international reputation

The higher education system will make a significant contribution to meeting these national priorities if the following key system objectives, which have been agreed with the HEA for 2014-2016 are met:

1. To meet Ireland's human capital needs across the spectrum of skills by engaged institutions through a diverse mix of provision across the system and through both core funding and specifically targeted initiatives;
2. To promote access for disadvantaged groups and to put in place coherent pathways from second level education, from further education and other non-traditional entry routes;
3. To promote excellence in teaching and learning to underpin a high quality student experience;
4. To maintain an open and excellent public research system focused on the Government's priority areas and the achievement of other societal objectives and to maximise research collaborations and knowledge exchange between and among public and private sector research actors;
5. To ensure that Ireland's higher education institutions will be globally competitive and internationally oriented, and Ireland will be a world-class centre of international education;
6. To reform practices and restructure the system for quality and diversity;
7. To increase accountability of autonomous institutions for public funding and against national priorities.

I will be entering into a process of formal review with the Higher Education Authority and will be asking you to report on an annual basis on the collective performance of the higher education system against these national priorities, system objectives and the set of high level system indicators which are currently under consideration by my Department in consultation with the HEA and other stakeholders. I will convey these to you in writing when they are finalised in the coming weeks.

## System Configuration

In relation to the proposed set of system configuration recommendations set out in your report, I am in broad agreement with the advice you have submitted and set out my instructions for implementation below with reference to:

1. The institute of technology sector;
2. The university sector;
3. Other colleges and
4. Regional clusters

### *1. The institute of technology sector*

I am in agreement with the recommendations and advice of the Higher Education Authority relating primarily to:

- Proposals for consolidation, designation and the establishment of technological universities;
- Proposals for standalone institutes of technology and their alliances within regional clusters and bilateral cross-sectoral alliances with universities:

In relation to the proposals for consolidation from the three groups of institutes of technology<sup>1</sup> who have expressed an interest in proceeding to the second stage of the published process for designation as a technological university, I agree that these institutes should be allowed to advance to the planning stage and ask my Department and the HEA to engage in further discussion with the institutions involved. This approach is consistent with the commitment in the Programme for Government to explore the establishment of a multi-campus university in the South-East. I expect that financial planning and costing will be incorporated into the preparation of plans to meet the criteria for technological university status which will be based on a legally binding memorandum of understanding between each group of institutions describing their consolidation into a new single institution.

I agree that institutes of technology who wish to remain as stand-alone institutes<sup>2</sup> should participate fully in regional and thematic clusters with higher education institutions and other education providers in their regions. Cross-sectoral alliances with universities should be kept under review to ensure appropriate diversity in the system is maintained.

As set out in the report, the HEA will ensure that deep links are forged between the institutes of technology in the Connacht-Ulster alliance<sup>3</sup> and kept under review so as to facilitate moving towards a full merger in the medium term.

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<sup>1</sup> Dublin Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology Tallaght, Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown 2) Cork IT and IT Tralee 3) Waterford IT and Carlow IT

<sup>2</sup> Limerick IT, Dundalk IT, Athlone IT and IADT

<sup>3</sup> Galway Mayo IT; Sligo IT and Letterkenny IT

## 2. *The university sector*

I am in agreement with the recommendations and advice of the Higher Education Authority relating primarily to:

1. Emerging and existing strategic alliances between universities;
2. Strategic bilateral alliances and agreements between universities and neighbouring institutes of technology and participation of universities within the proposed regional clusters;
3. Some rationalisation of relationships between universities and allied colleges primarily driven by the implementation of the recommendations of the Initial Teacher Education Review and the review of the Creative Arts in the Dublin region;

I agree with the advice given by the HEA in relation to the strengthening and ongoing review of the strategic alliances between the universities.

I also request the HEA to proceed with the implementation of the Initial Teacher Education Review and the Creative Arts review in the Dublin region and also agree with the recommendation for a deeper relationship, up to full merger for NCAD and UCD.

## 3. *Other Colleges and institutions directly funded by the Department of Education and Skills*

In line with the recommendations of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, I confirm that in the future, when the necessary legislative changes have been made, direct funding of institutions by the Department will cease and institutional and free fee funding payable to institutions will be channelled through the HEA.

For those colleges who fall within the recommendations of the Initial Teacher Education Review, the HEA is to implement that review as agreed. This includes undergraduate provision in St Patrick's Thurles, which is to be discontinued while the contribution that the college can make as a private provider to the Limerick centre of excellence is to be explored.

Of the remaining colleges and institutions that are in receipt of core grant funding only<sup>4</sup> or core grant and free fees funding<sup>5</sup>, I agree that they can remain as standalone institutions but that no extension of core funding is to occur. Funding will be allocated through the HEA either directly or through a university and kept under review.

Of those in receipt of free fees only and not included under the recommendations of the Initial Teacher Education review<sup>6</sup>, I agree that the HEA can progress incorporation of Shannon College into NUI Galway, subject to this being done on a

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<sup>4</sup> RIAM, Dublin Dental Hospital, DIAS

<sup>5</sup> NCI, Pontifical College Maynooth

<sup>6</sup> Shannon College, St Patricks Carlow and All Hallows

cost-neutral basis. In relation to the other two institutions I instruct my Department and the HEA to review the current provision of those institutions in the context of existing provision in the publicly funded sector before making a recommendation on that funding. My Department will contact you in relation to developing a work plan and timescales for these reviews.

#### *4. Regional Clusters*

Your report recommends four regional clusters covering the South, Mid West, West and a Dublin/Leinster cluster with two pillars. I accept the recommendations of the report in relation to the regional cluster formation with the following proviso:

- In relation to the two separate clusters proposed for the West and the Mid West, the advice from the HEA notes that these two clusters could potentially operate as one. I concur with this and instruct the HEA to establish a cluster that will span both of these areas bringing major benefits to the Atlantic Corridor region, building upon and leveraging the existing alliance between NUI Galway and the University of Limerick. It is my view that this cluster in the West/Mid west and North West region will be considerably strengthened if the Connacht-Ulster Alliance moves towards a full merger in the medium term.

As is noted in your report, in the Dublin region, a high priority will be to ensure the successful consolidation and major restructuring of Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tallaght, and the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown. A staged implementation of regional cluster planning in the Dublin region will facilitate this.

The Higher Education Authority should now move towards the staged implementation of the regional cluster arrangements with the following initial priorities to be addressed in the regional plans of institutions in the clusters as set out in your report:

1. Shared, co-ordinated academic planning which will address the development of joint programmes, the creation of centres of academic excellence at undergraduate level, the removal of unnecessary duplication of provision, the co-ordinated approach to research and research programmes and regional collaboration on structured PhDs.
2. Regionally co-ordinated approach to transfer and progression pathways which will incorporate bilateral, multi lateral and formalised arrangements for progression and credit transfer between higher education institutions within the cluster and arrangements between higher education, second level and further education institutions in the region covering access arrangements and transition into higher education programmes.

Further objectives following a period of capacity building will be to:

1. Develop a co-ordinated approach to enterprise, the community and regional development;
2. Share services and facilities with harmonised systems and processes;
3. Share a co-ordinated approach to the presentation and promotion of the region internationally;

I believe there is also significant potential for institutional collaboration on a North-South basis to advance cross-border regional development and strategically advance Irish higher education on an all-island basis.

In addition to the implementation of the thematic cluster proposed for creative arts and media provision in the Dublin region, in paragraph 5.6 of the report, thematic reviews of provision should be undertaken by the Higher Education Authority in the short term, in the areas of Engineering and Nursing Education with terms of reference to be agreed with my Department. I understand that a review of Dental Education is already underway.

It is my expectation that the Higher Education Authority will revert to my Department indicating the timescales for regional planning for the establishment of regional clusters and for the thematic reviews outlined above. A detailed work-plan with actions and timescales for implementation for the new organisational proposals being advanced should be submitted to my Department for discussion and review before the end of October 2013.

I believe the new configuration will support our higher education institutions in working collaboratively to deliver the highest quality research and teaching with full engagement with their local, regional, national and international communities. Implementation of the new performance framework will also usher in a new era of transparency for the system and will also contribute to its development and international reputation as better information and a spirit of mutual trust and dialogue act to form a firm foundation for dynamic public engagement with our higher education institutions into the future.

We are embarking on a very significant programme of change in relation to the development and governance of our higher education system. This will involve not only a new relationship between the HEA and the higher education institutions, but also a new relationship of engagement and accountability between my Department and the Higher Education Authority with systematic reporting on progress against the milestones and timeframes agreed in terms of implementation of system configuration and governance reforms.

When the ongoing process of engagement between the Department and the Executive on the implementation of the new system of governance is finalised in the coming weeks I will confirm the parameters and structures of this new relationship. My Department is continuing its efforts to secure staff with the additional skillsets for the Executive which have been identified through this process as being necessary to implement the new system of governance.

In relation to the legislation necessary for these wide-ranging reforms, I can assure you that the preparation of supporting legislation to enable full implementation of the reconfiguration of the system and the new agreed process of system governance is underway and legislative proposals will be brought to Government in due course. My officials will be asked to continue their discussions on matters relating to the future funding of the system.

I again convey my thanks to the Authority and the Executive of the HEA for the unprecedented and intensive period of consultation, analysis and deliberation that has resulted in such a comprehensive report on the configuration of a higher education system that is designed to meet the very considerable challenges that are being faced in higher education now and into the future.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ruairi Quinn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ruairi Quinn, T.D.,  
Minister for Education and Skills