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

Tertiary Education Strategy

2026–2031

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Minister's Foreword

Ireland's tertiary education and research system plays a vital role in driving economic growth and fostering social cohesion. The Tertiary Education Strategy 2026–2031 marks a moment of strategic realignment across the further education and training, higher education, and research and innovation sectors to meet the major challenges of our time, such as economic uncertainty, climate change, social inequality and digital transformation.

The Higher Education Authority Act, 2022, required that I develop a strategy for tertiary education setting out objectives and outputs for further education and training, higher education, and research. Preparations for this strategy began in 2023 and have involved significant consultation and dialogue with the leaders of the further and higher education and research sectors as well as an online public consultation from which nearly 100 submissions were received.

This strategy sets out a vision for a tertiary sector which is unified around four pillars, *Competitiveness and Economic Success*, *Equality and Opportunity*, *System Performance, Governance and Adaptability*, and *Transformational Growth and Lifelong Learning*.

Together, these pillars reflect how Ireland can harness the full potential of our education and research systems to drive national and global success.

We are committed to supporting learners by removing barriers to access and fostering a more connected, accountable system that promotes excellence. At its heart, this strategy champions diverse pathways to learning and a lifelong educational journey that nurtures curiosity, critical thinking, and creativity. By strengthening the links between education, research and industry, we can equip individuals with the skills needed to fuel innovation, enhance national competitiveness and thrive in a rapidly evolving world.

To realise this vision, I have outlined a number of strategic objectives and a series of actions, aimed at driving innovation, enhancing performance, and building on our existing strengths. These ambitions will shape the future of our tertiary system, ensuring that every learner and researcher benefits from a transformative experience.

We will strengthen institutional supports, invest in modern facilities and technologies, and advance research infrastructure, including high-performance computing and enhanced capabilities at centres such as Tyndall.

I am confident that by 2031, Ireland's tertiary system will not only continue to deliver meaningful outcomes but will have led the way in shaping a more unified, inclusive, innovative and competitive future. Building on the strong foundations and success already achieved we can unlock new opportunities for our learners and researchers allowing them to realise their full potential. I look forward to working with Minister Harkin, my Department, and our partners across government and the sector to bring this strategy to life.

James Lawless, TD
Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister of State's Foreword

As the Minister of State for Further Education, Apprenticeships, Construction and Climate Skills, I am pleased to see these issues placed so centrally within this Tertiary Education Strategy. A strong skills system fuels our economic growth. Investment in our people ensures that Ireland can continue to keep delivering the skills, knowledge and talent needed to remain competitive globally.

This strategy recognises the central role that the Further Education and Training sector plays in equipping learners with the skills and knowledge needed in an ever-changing world. It recognises and places a strong emphasis on apprenticeships which provide a practical, high-quality path into employment, particularly in sectors which are critical to Ireland's future such as construction and the green economy.

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges we face as a society. This strategy commits to developing a workforce that is agile, resilient, and ready to lead Ireland's transition to a sustainable future.

Through targeted investment in green skills, innovation, and lifelong learning, we will empower learners to contribute meaningfully to climate action and environmental leadership.

I look forward to working with Minister Lawless, the Department, and all our partners to deliver on the ambitions of this strategy. Together, we will continue to strengthen the system's capacity to empower learners, meet evolving skills needs and be a force for progress in Ireland's economic, social and climate future.

Marian Harkin, TD
Minister of State for Further Education, Apprenticeships, Construction and Climate Change

Executive Summary

Context

The Tertiary Education Strategy, 2026–2031, has been developed during a period of rapid national and global change, marked by geopolitical uncertainty, shifting demographics, evolving learner needs, and transformative technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI).

Since the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was created in 2020, substantial reforms have reshaped the Tertiary Sector. A clear strategic direction, centred on high quality learning experiences with greater flexibility, improved access and inclusion, and stronger responsiveness to learner and labour market needs has been established.

Legislative change, including the *Higher Education Authority Act, 2022*, the *Research and Innovation Act, 2024*, and the *National Training Fund (Amendment) Act, 2025*, have modernised oversight and governance. Together, they strengthen alignment across the higher education, research and skills sector, support excellence in teaching and research, and enhance long-term system capacity.

Global megatrends – deglobalisation, digitisation, demographics and decarbonisation – will continue to challenge Irish society and our economy well into the future. These megatrends demand new approaches and are redefining the skills required across all fields of learning.

The vision for the system by 2031 is one with robust institutions, operating in a diverse landscape which deliver in quicker and more flexible ways. Our Institutions will be equipped to thrive and navigate a changing labour market and deliver across a diverse research agenda. They will serve a broader cohort of learners, where no one is left behind. Stronger support will be provided throughout the system, ultimately delivering the talent and skills needed for a changing world.

Ireland's ability to respond across economic, social and environmental fields is central to our overall resilience.

The Strategy is built around four pillars:

Together, they aim to enhance national prosperity, reflect learner diversity and deliver a future focused, high performing tertiary system.

Pillar One

Skills and Research for Competitiveness, Social Development and Economic Success

Over the next five years, Ireland will invest up to €750m through the INSPIRE research infrastructure investment package addressing deficits in local institutional infrastructure and in large equipment which can be shared across a number of higher education institutions and with external industry users.

In addition under INSPIRE, by investing in High Performance Computing through the procurement of a new mid-range supercomputer and the establishment of an AI factory Antenna, Ireland will continue to drive advancements in technology, science and industry.

The Government recently approved the expansion of Tyndall National Institute. This is a key step in supporting Ireland's ambition to build a smart economy, enhancing engagement between academia and industry and stimulating innovation.

All Island and international linkages will be reviewed to ensure Ireland has access to organisations which align with our research interests and to build connections which will advance research and contribute to our national competitiveness.

Ireland needs a skills system that is adaptable, forward looking, and able to respond quickly to change. Without this, skills gaps may persist, posing risks to our economic performance and limiting opportunities for individuals to reach their full potential. To avoid this, policy decisions about the skills landscape must be grounded in solid evidence and supported by a robust, high quality data environment.

The National Skills Observatory will provide comprehensive skills and labour market intelligence, enabling a systemwide approach to identifying emerging needs.

The FET College model will also support regional and national skills need development and drive collaboration across the sector. Centres of excellence such as the National Demonstration Park for Modern Methods of Construction and Research Ireland Research Centres Initiative, SPOKES Programme, Co-Centres (Shared Island) Programme and ARC hubs programme will allow for knowledge sharing, research and innovation.

DFHERIS is responsible for overseeing the skills response to whole-of-Government objectives in areas such as construction, digitalisation and health. The Department will continue to progress initiatives which offer flexible upskilling and reskilling opportunities in high priority skill areas and promoting and sustaining the sectors of our economy which foster creativity and design and promote the Irish Language.

By supporting our researchers and broadening opportunities through increased research activity in our Technological Universities, Ireland's research talent pool will continue to expand and support industry and academic advancements.

Executive Summary continued

Pillar Two
Equality and Opportunity

Across the further and higher education sectors, strong progress has been made in widening access and participation for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, supported by targeted student supports and dedicated access programmes.

However, socio-economic disadvantage continues to shape who participates in further and higher education and the educational pathways people choose. In recent years, rising living costs and the ongoing housing crisis have created additional pressures that fall most heavily on learners already facing disadvantage.

The Tertiary Education Strategy aims to foster a more inclusive and equitable system by reducing financial, structural, and systemic barriers, ensuring that all learners regardless of background can access, engage with, and complete their chosen education. This includes broadening targeted supports, funding mechanisms, and access initiatives to better meet the needs of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.

Over the course of this Strategy, we will continue to strengthen pathways from Youthreach into other tertiary education programmes. We will also conduct a review of Youthreach and the Community Training Centres to determine how to best align the offering for learners.

Recognising the critical role of student accommodation in enabling access is a central part of this effort, and a coordinated, long-term approach to improving both the availability and affordability of student housing is being pursued.

Significant pressure is placed on students, particularly those applying for high demand courses and those experiencing educational disadvantage by the "points race". Information and access to clear, detailed, accurate information on pathways and supports is a government priority. Supporting students to progress, complete and thrive across their educational journey is an investment that brings both personal, societal, and economic benefits.

Supporting people with disabilities accessing tertiary education plays a key role in creating an inclusive society in which everyone can reach their full potential. A policy framework will be developed to support learners with disabilities in transitioning at key educational points; provide flexible, responsive, tailored supports and services; and assist learners on the pathway to work.

We will continue to work to make college more affordable, with targeted measures to ensure that socio-economic circumstances never disadvantage or deny anyone the opportunity to pursue education.

Pillar Three
System Performance, Governance and Adaptability

The actions in the Tertiary Education Strategy aim to support institutions and agencies to deliver national priorities in more coherent, faster and flexible ways, aligned with economic and social needs.

They seek to balance institutional autonomy and distinct missions with the State's responsibility to provide strategic direction and system-wide coordination. They will promote greater collaboration and coherence across the tertiary system while sustaining institutional diversity and innovation.

The objective is to ensure institutions are financially strong, well-governed, internationally competitive, and equipped with modern, sustainable campuses including greener buildings and smart infrastructure. The Strategy emphasises continued support for high quality education, tailored research and engagement missions, improved curriculum design, digital and AI-enhanced innovation, staff development, targeted capital investment and sustainability. It will also enhance the contribution of research to evidence-based policymaking and the public good.

To strengthen collaboration and coherence across sectors, the Department will enhance system coordination through stronger policy guidance, including an annual statement of priorities, a stakeholder forum, and deeper engagement with agencies.

Improving the capacity and capability of staff employed across the system is one of the aims of the Strategy. Establishing professor grades in the Technological Universities will contribute to Ireland's research talent base, grow research capacity, address balanced regional development and thereby ensure economic competitiveness.

The development of and implementation of new staffing structures across the Further Education and Training system will drive transformation and increase the sector's responsiveness to evolving societal and workforce needs. By adopting new pedagogical and technological approaches, learners will be equipped to respond, adapt and thrive in changing and evolving work environments. Continuing to strengthen the responsible use of new AI technologies, with a strong focus on providing AI literacy training across further and higher education is one of the objectives of the strategy.

The department will continue to work with the sector to develop funding allocation mechanisms aligned to policy priorities, considering the future direction of education and the desire to have more flexible models of teaching and learning. Measuring outcomes and impact will be key to this work.

In July 2025, the government committed under the National Development Plan (NDP) 2026-2030 to provide €4.55 billion in capital allocation to DFHERIS. Funding received through the NDP review process will support transformative projects that contribute to economic growth, job creation, research and innovation, balanced regional development, decarbonisation, and the global competitiveness of Ireland's further and higher education sector.

The Department will support a more coherent, flexible, and unified tertiary system by advancing a strategic approach to consolidation across the sector. This will include engaging with smaller and specialist institutions in the pursuit of their strategic ambitions, regional specialisation, alignment, and examining system-wide developments to identify opportunities for further integration.

Executive Summary continued

Pillar Four

Transformational Growth and Lifelong Learning

As Ireland faces rapid economic and technological change, lifelong learning has become increasingly important, leading to strong growth in flexible and accessible learning options. Ongoing upskilling benefits individuals, strengthens businesses, and supports evolving professions.

Ireland's tertiary system now includes a wide array of learning pathways, from community education and adult literacy to apprenticeships, micro-credentials, PLC courses, and degree programmes. While each part works well, there is potential to create a more coherent system with easier, more flexible progression routes. This includes recognising prior learning, enabling learners to build credits over time, and supporting participation at every life stage.

To achieve this, work will continue to understand learners' decision making. The system will also expand flexible pathways through measures such as new tertiary programmes, an enhanced part-time fee scheme, and broader apprenticeship opportunities. Together, these steps aim to support lifelong learning and open progression routes to more learners.

Literacy, numeracy, and digital skills are essential for adults to thrive in a modern society and the workforce. Launched in 2021, the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy is Ireland's 10-year strategy, which aims to ensure that every adult has the literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy needed to participate fully in society and reach their full potential. Continued implementation of the ALL Strategy is critical in allowing adults with unmet literacy needs to meet the demands of a changing world.

Continuous learning allows people to avail of new opportunities, including for those most at risk of marginalisation. Continuing to promote a culture of lifelong learning is a priority for the department. Flexible learning options like micro-credentials, micro-qualifications, Springboard+ and Skills to Advance all support a range of upskilling and re-skilling learning opportunities. A review of the pilot part-time fee scheme will take place to examine the success of the pilot and explore changes which could make it more accessible to part-time students.

Tertiary programmes are a new kind of educational pathway that allow students to begin a Level 8-degree course in further education and training, before transitioning on to complete their degree in a higher education setting. Entry is independent of the CAO system providing another route to attaining a degree. The review of the tertiary degree programme will aim to examine the success of the pilot programme, identify areas of good practice, and areas for improvement, and explore how to transition the tertiary programmes from a pilot into a mainstream pathway.

Since DFHERIS was established, apprenticeship numbers have grown from 17,800 apprentices on 60 programmes to 30,100 apprentices across 78 programmes.

This expansion will continue, with a government target of 12,500 new registrations each year by 2030 to meet national skills needs and support major infrastructure delivery. Reaching this goal will require a stronger, high quality, and more responsive apprenticeship system.

Conclusion

The higher education, research, further education and training systems are the engine that drive Ireland's knowledge economy.

By understanding the needs of the workforce of the future, enhancing our research and innovation capacity and aligning skills development with national priorities, the development of a more coherent and connected system best placed to meet the needs of learners, employers and society is supported.

The next five years will ask even more of the system with greater flexibility required to address emerging issues and technological advances. Ireland's tertiary system will continue to deliver strong outcomes while helping to shape a more cohesive, inclusive, innovative, and competitive future. By building on the solid progress already made, we can open new opportunities for learners and researchers and support them all in realising their full potential.

Tertiary System at a Glance

Budget

€4.97bn[1]
DFHERIS Budget 2026

6th largest
Government Department by Revenue in 2026

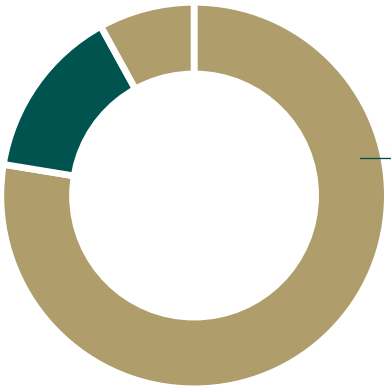
6th largest
Government Department by Capital in 2026

Higher Education[2]

272,670
Learners

Full-time	211,540
Part-time	39,265
Other	21,865

8,873[3]
Springboard Enrolments



Full-time	
23 and under	169,805
Over 24	41,730
Male	94,360
Female	115,810
Non-Binary/ Prefer not to say	1,370

Further Education and Training[4]

230,007
Learners

Full-time	66,486
Part-time	149,336
Online	14,185

Under 25	70,439
25 to 34	34,033
35 to 44	41,561
45 to 54	33,091
55 to 64	24,332
Over 65	26,551

[1] Budget 2026 – Budget 2026: Expenditure Reports: **Expenditure_Report_2026_V2_14th_Oct.pdf** page 87–91

[2] HEA: statistics on Higher education enrolments by mode of study, by age, by gender. **Key Facts & Figures | Statistics | Higher Education Authority** Note the figures presented here exclude the National College of Ireland.

[3] Education Indicators for Ireland, July 2025 (Indicator D.28, Page 44) Prepared by Departments of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Education and Youth and Department of Children, Disability and Equality: **2025_Report_Education_Indicators_for_Ireland.pdf**

[4] CSO: **https://data.cso.ie/table/SOL03** and **CSO: https://data.cso.ie/table/SOL02** learners by mode of study and by age and SOLAS Facts and Figures Report

Research and Development[5]

€1.158bn

Government R&D Budget 2023. 58% contributed by DFHERIS (€669m)

€1.165bn

Estimated Government Spend 2025

R&D Personnel 2024

Skillnet[6]

90,136

People Trained

24,035

Companies Supported

€76m

Total investment in Irish workforce, including €28m in Enterprise Contributions

Institutions

14

Higher Education Institutions

1,500

Buildings

3rd largest

Public Sector Footprint

16

ETBs (Education and Training Boards)

Apprenticeship[7]

29,772

People Trained

78

Programmes (25 craft)

Levels 5–10

Butcher – level 5
Engineer – level 10

[5] Government Research and Development (GOVERD) and Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) surveys – data collected by DFHERIS

[6] Skillnet Annual Report 2024 – Driving Ireland's Competitiveness Through Talent– link here **Skillnet_Ireland_Annual_Report2024.pdf**

[7] Education Indicators for Ireland, July 2025 (Indicator C.74, page 36) Prepared by Departments of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Education and Youth and Department of Children, Disability and Equality: **2025_Report_Education_Indicators_for_Ireland.pdf**

Introduction

Ireland's tertiary education and research system is fundamental to our country's social and economic progress. In providing the required skills, knowledge and innovation, the tertiary system is a critical driver for economic growth and social cohesion, while enhancing our capacity to address major national challenges. A thriving education and research culture adds to our national life in a myriad of ways.

The Higher Education Authority Act, 2022 (HEA Act 2022) was enacted in November 2022, and includes a requirement under Section 33, for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to 'prepare a strategy …for the provision of tertiary education, which shall identify the objectives and outputs for the further education and training system and the higher education and research system, and it shall relate to such period as the Minister considers appropriate, being a period of not more than 10 years.'

This legislative requirement is explicit in its requirement on the Minister to produce a Strategy for tertiary education in Ireland, encompassing further education and training, higher education, and research. This represents a departure from previous approaches that were characterised by reviews, strategies and action plans relating to sub-sectors such as Higher Education, Further Education and Training, or Research and Innovation. The aim, therefore, is to set out a strategy which takes an integrated approach, and which takes full account of the linkages between these elements of the further and higher education systems, as well as the research ecosystem matched by a set of strategic actions.

The Tertiary Education Strategy provides an opportunity to strengthen and support the further education and training, higher education, research and innovation system through the creation of a coherent vision and objectives.

A more joined-up system will significantly benefit learners, employers and other key stakeholders, by helping increase awareness of offerings and pathways.

During the last 15 years, a wide range of reviews and strategy documents have been published, and significant policy and legislative actions have been initiated, across the further and higher education system as well as the research system.

The present Strategy, therefore, builds on a substantial base including:

- The Hunt Report – National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, 2011
- Student Support Act, 2011
- The establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2012
- The Further Education and Training Act 2013 and its establishment of SOLAS
- The Education and Training Board Act 2013 establishing Education and Training Boards (ETBs)
- The Technological Universities Act 2018, consolidating Ireland's Institutes of Technology (IoTs) into Technological Universities (TUs)
- The Technological Universities (TU) Research Network (TURN) report Connectedness & Collaboration through Connectivity, 2019
- Community Education Framework. Transforming Learning, 2024
- Future FET: Transforming Learning. The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, 2020
- The creation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), 2020
- The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025, 2021
- Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, 2021
- Impact 2030 Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy, 2022
- Action Plan for Competitiveness and Productivity, 2025
- Higher Education Authority (HEA) Act, 2022
- Funding the Future – Investing in Knowledge and Skills: Ireland's Competitive Advantage – A Funding and Reform Framework for Higher Education, 2022
- OECD Review of Technological University Academic Career Paths, Contracts and Organisation in Ireland, 2022
- OECD Skills Strategy Ireland, 2023
- Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills, and Knowledge, 2022
- National Access Plan 2022-2028, A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education, 2022
- Research and Innovation Act 2024, establishing Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland
- Global Citizens 2030, Ireland's first Talent and Innovation Strategy, 2024
- Capital initiatives such as the Technological Sector Strategic Projects Programme (TSSPP) and the FET College Major Capital Programme
- National Training Fund (Amendment) Act, 2025

The legislative requirement to produce a new Strategy provides an opportunity to stand back from and reflect both on the significant progress achieved, and on the rapidly changing national and international context.

In a busy and fast changing landscape, it is important, from time to time, to take stock, and to decide on the appropriate strategic direction for the sector in the future.

A Changing Environment

Ireland's economy and society have fundamentally transformed during the last 30 years, spurred by a wave of social development, technological change and globalisation from the 1990s onwards.

During the last three decades, income per capita has more than doubled and the number of people at work has increased by over a million, with income inequality gradually decreasing.[8] The contribution of the tertiary education sector to Ireland's social and economic transformation has been fundamental.

Ireland's society has developed from a society in which third level education was confined to a small elite, to one where it is now the dominant transition destination out of second level.

The impact of that change on our economy and our society has been profound. This significant expansion in skills, knowledge and education was and continues to be critical to economic growth and social transformation.

Digital Transformation is increasingly impacting on all aspects of our lives. Labour market requirements across many sectors are changing in line with rapid digitisation. Closing the digital divide and ensuring that everyone has basic digital literacy skills is becoming increasingly important for economic success and social cohesion.

Digital transformation not only impacts skills requirements, it also fundamentally changes the ways people learn, teach, and do research, necessitating the development of new approaches and processes, as well as the upgrading of existing infrastructure to make full use of technological advances.

Tertiary education and research remain core drivers of Ireland's modern advanced economy and are arguably particularly important in an era of growing **deglobalisation**. In recent years, rising military conflicts and protectionist trade policies have curtailed globalisation, heightened economic volatility and undermined cross-border collaboration.[9]

For a small open economy such as Ireland, fostering and attracting talent, and promoting innovation has never been more important to remain competitive in this increasingly uncertain environment.[10]

The growing **competitiveness challenge** and related pressures on productivity create a fresh focus and demand on the tertiary system, to deliver the skills and innovation needed to strengthen Ireland's economy.

A growing number of fields are evidencing skills gaps, including priority areas such as construction, digital transformation, healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and green and climate action skills.

Supply and demand factors are complex and linked to additional dynamic variables within workforce sectors.

There is scope to anticipate and meet skills needs on a more sustainable basis by expanding skills forecasting beyond immediate supply and demand factors, in taking into consideration the modernisation of work practices, digitisation, productivity and innovation.

Given the dynamism of skills needs, there is potential for enhanced skills insights to improve the tertiary education system's responsiveness to skills demand and to ensure that its response is underpinned by a strategic, joined up and coherent approach.

Ireland is currently in the midst of significant **demographic change** with ageing and migration rapidly changing Ireland's population profile. Ireland has experienced substantial population growth since the 1990s, propelled by increased immigration from EU, Non-EU and returning Irish citizens. Concurrently, Ireland's population is also ageing with recent estimates indicating that by 2050, a quarter[11] of the population will be aged 65 or older, leading to increased skills demands in areas such as health and social care.

[8] Central Statistics Office (2025). Income Inequality Rates 2004-2019 **https://data.cso.ie/table/SIA47** and Income Inequality Rates 2020-2024 **https://data.cso.ie/table/SIA75** (last accessed 4 November 2025)

[9] Egan, P., & Roche, F. (2025). *The Impact of Deglobalisation and Protectionism on a Small Open Economy– The Case of Ireland*. ESRI Working Paper 798, Dublin: ESRI. **www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/WP798_1.pdf**

[10] European University Association (2024). *Trends 2024 – European Higher Education Institutions in Times of Transition*. Geneva: European University Association. **www.eua.eu/publications/reports/trends-2024.html**

[11] Department of Finance (2024). Population Ageing and the Public Finances in Ireland – Demographic Projections Dashboard. **https://dfineconomics.shinyapps.io/Ageing** (last accessed 4 November 2025)

Population growth combined with the demographic bulge stemming from higher birth rates from 2008 to 2011, is resulting in increasing numbers of post-primary school graduates entering tertiary education.

In addition, more people engaging in lifelong learning, and new groups entering tertiary education may further increase learner numbers. As a result, the tertiary education system faces increasing demand for services, resulting in greater resource requirements in terms of facilities, energy usage, and new technological infrastructures which need to be carefully balanced with economic and environmental sustainability objectives. In the wider context of decreasing birth rates, this medium-term growth in learner numbers may be short lived, and consideration needs to be given to how the system can adapt once this demographic bulge has passed.

Social inequalities persist across a wide range of dimensions,[12] with fewer children and young people affected by poverty following pathways from secondary to further education and training and higher education. These learners face several progression barriers, including the variability of funding and student supports across different programme types. While young people with disabilities also face significant difficulties when attempting to enter further education and training and higher education, young adults with disabilities from affluent backgrounds are more likely to progress into these sectors than their less privileged peers. This poses the question of how tertiary education and its system of pathways, programme structures, funding arrangements, supports, modes of delivery and assessment can work more effectively for everyone.

Climate change and its social and economic impacts continue to intensify. Ireland's climate is projected to become more unstable, rates of sea level rise and the frequency of extreme weather events are likely to increase.[13] These developments pose growing risks to communities, infrastructure, and public finances.

Responding to and mitigating the effects of climate change means that skills profiles across domains are changing rapidly, the demand for cutting-edge research and strong leadership is growing and there is potential for the tertiary education, research and innovation sectors to drive climate action and adaptation.

The tertiary sector will be shaped and impacted by a number of influencing factors over the duration of the Strategy:

- Labour market demands will continue to require all sectors to adapt to respond to meet skills shortages and emerging needs particularly across areas such as healthcare, disability, therapies, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, automation, and construction.
- Learning provision will need to allow for the further development and understanding of Ireland's response in the fields of sustainability, climate, and equality, access and inclusion to meet national and international targets and agreements.
- Technological advances are changing the delivery of teaching, learning and research meaning that educators, learners and researchers must continuously adapt and evolve their approaches to stay current in an ever-changing technological landscape.

[12] Roantree, B. et al. (2025). *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Fifth Annual Report*, Jointly-published Reports 14, Dublin: ESRI and Community Foundation Ireland, **https://doi.org/10.26504/jr14**

[13] Thorne, P. et al. (2023). *Ireland's Climate Change Assessment: Synthesis Report.* Dublin: Environmental Protection Agency. **www.epa.ie/our-services/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/irelands-climate-change-assessment-icca**

Strategic Approach and Period of the Strategy

The purpose of this Strategy document is to set out, as clearly as possible and in line with the legislative obligation, the objectives of the tertiary education and research sectors, and how these can best be achieved, having regard to the changing national and international context, and through the deployment of existing resources and such additional resources as may reasonably be expected to become available during the period of the Strategy, with the latter being strictly a matter for government.

The realisation of strategic objectives will be assessed through the combined performance of interlinked sectoral outputs. The Strategy document identifies a comprehensive set of targeted outputs that the Strategy aims to achieve, which will function as performance metrics.

Preparations for this Strategy began in 2023, when the Department engaged in a series of Regional Dialogue Meetings with the leaders of our further education and training, higher education and research sectors to discuss the strategic objectives for the tertiary system.

The Tertiary Education Strategy will help to guide decision making, investment and innovation across Ireland's tertiary landscape. It covers all publicly funded higher education institutions, the further education and training sector as well as all those involved in research within higher education.

The Strategy spans the next five years and seeks to achieve a balance between long term ambition and short-term adaptability.

Following a comprehensive scope and analysis of past, present and potential future tertiary system outputs, an online public consultation was held throughout August and September 2025.

The 96 submissions made during this consultation phase have informed Strategy objectives, actions and intended outputs.

Pillars and Objectives

The Strategy is aligned with the department's mission, which is to harness education, skills, research and innovation as drivers of the economy, resilience and inclusion.

Pillar 1
Skills and Research for Competitiveness, Social Development and Economic Success

Strategic Objective 1:
Utilise research, innovation and skills as an economic driver and as a means to strengthen Ireland's economic prosperity and global competitiveness

The Tertiary Education Strategy will further advance the development of Ireland's globally competitive research and innovation system in order to pursue curiosity-driven inquiry, expand knowledge boundaries, strengthen research commercialisation and develop real-life solutions to major societal, economic, and environmental challenges. The Strategy will promote research talent at all career stages, invest in modern infrastructure, and foster collaboration across academia, enterprise, and government.

Realising the full potential of innovation and economic productivity depends on a workforce equipped with the right skills.

The Strategy will enable individuals to:

- learn relevant skills,
- implement new ideas,
- adapt to evolving technologies, and
- drive sustained productivity across all sectors.

Building a responsive, future-ready skills system will be a core concern of the Strategy. This includes anticipating future labour demand, closing skills gaps, fostering all-island collaboration for innovation and skills, and supporting critical public services and national priorities such as housing, digital transformation, climate action, social and health care, and the Irish language.

Pillar 2
Equality and Opportunity

Strategic Objective 2:
Supporting equality and opportunity for all learners

The Tertiary Education Strategy will build a more inclusive and equitable tertiary education system that reflects the full diversity of Irish society.

In working towards reducing financial, structural, and systemic barriers and by ensuring that all learners, regardless of background, can access, participate in, and successfully complete their education, is at the heart of this Strategy.

This includes

- expanding access routes,
- increasing financial and non-financial supports,
- improving access to and sharing of information, and
- fostering a welcoming, learner-centred environment across further and higher education.

Pillars and Objectives continued

Pillar 3
System Performance, Leadership and Adaptability

Strategic Objective 3:
Leading a sustainable, connected, and accountable tertiary education system

Strengthening sustainability, governance, and strategic leadership across further education and training, higher education and research is a core objective of the Strategy. The Strategy aims to ensure that institutions and agencies have the tools, clarity and frameworks needed to deliver on national goals. A more joined up, collaborative, responsive, and strategic approach will deliver for learners, society and the economy.

This includes:

- maintaining environmentally sustainable delivery models,
- decarbonisation, and
- delivering on climate targets.

The Strategy will support institutions to provide excellent learning, promote student success, and respond to evolving needs. This includes embedding digital and AI-enhanced innovation, investing in staff and infrastructure, and supporting institutional sustainability.

Pillar 4
Transformational Growth and Lifelong Learning

Strategic Objective 4:
Provide high-quality further and higher education

The Tertiary Education Strategy will advance a high-performing, resilient and future-focused tertiary education system that delivers for learners and society.

Equipping all learners with the essential knowledge and skills to support sustainable development, uphold human rights, advance equality, bolster workforce participation, encourage global citizenship, and value cultural diversity is a key priority of this Strategy.

The Strategy will support lifelong learning in providing a network of flexible, accessible and seamless learning pathways and provide a space in which learners pursue personal growth, new ideas and excellence throughout their life course. To that end, the Strategy aims to support a learning environment that promotes curiosity, critical thinking and creativity, along with other key transversal skills.

Implementation and Metrics

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has responsibility for overseeing the delivery of the Tertiary Education Strategy, setting overall objectives and targets.

Strategy actions and outputs will be delivered in partnership with state agencies, as well as further education and training, higher education, and research institutions. The department will establish a National Dialogue Forum consisting of DFHERIS agencies, institutions, learner and researcher representative bodies, trade unions, community and industry representative bodies, to support the implementation of the Strategy.

This National Dialogue Forum will support shared ownership of the delivery of actions, foster sectoral leadership, and ensure that Strategy development is responsive to a changing policy context.

The department will measure and monitor progress made through a fixed set of indicators.

At mid-term, the department will conduct a progress review of the Strategy. This will assess Strategy progress against defined objectives and targets and may refine these based on changing policy context.

Pillar 1
Skills and Research for Competitiveness, Social Development and Economic Success

The combination of a strong and resilient research eco system and a robust pipeline of skilled workers forms a powerful driver of innovation, investment and employment. Together, they play a vital role in Ireland's global competitiveness.

In this era of rapid digital transformation and heightened economic uncertainty a step change is needed to ensure that the country can keep delivering the skills, innovation and knowledge required for Ireland to remain competitive and resilient.

To deliver on this challenge, we will invest in high quality and cutting-edge research infrastructure including high performance computing to boost Ireland's research capacity.

We will strengthen research collaborations and foster knowledge exchange, by supporting enterprise, all-island and international linkages. We will grow our research talent base by investing in researchers, supporting PhD candidates, and strengthening research in our Technological Universities and across further education and training.

We will bring skills development, cutting-edge research and workplace innovation more closely together by building institutional capability to drive specialisation, and we will improve the tertiary education system's analysis of and response to areas of high skills demand.

We will continue to respond to skill demand in priority areas such as digital, construction, climate and healthcare, by equipping graduates with a balanced mix of specialised and transversal skills.

We will support enhanced provision of skills training and education for enterprise and public services and promote the teaching and use of the Irish language at tertiary level.

Strategic Actions – Pillar 1

1. Invest in National Research and Innovation Capacity

Ireland's research and innovation system supports local enterprises, attracts foreign direct investment, and drives innovation and employment across all sectors of the economy.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and other Research Performing Organisations (RPOs) are the backbone of the public research and innovation system. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland support, fund, and promote research activities within HEIs. The HEA provides strategic leadership and allocates core funding to HEIs enabling broad research activity. Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland delivers competitive research funding, targeting excellence across all areas of research activity and driving benefit for Ireland. This ensures the best possible outcomes from the HEA's investment, building on the core investment, attracting FDI and delivering economic and societal returns. We will continue to support Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland in its mission to deliver competitive research funding and in particular to advance its new strategy around its three pillars of talent, economy and society.

This period of heightened economic uncertainty creates a fresh focus on how we can strengthen Ireland's research and innovation capacity to safeguard our economy.

1.1 Design and Deliver a New Programme of Investment in Research Equipment and Facilities Using Funds Allocated in the National Development Plan

High quality and accessible research infrastructure is essential to any research and innovation system and is especially important in ensuring the competitiveness and economic resilience of Ireland's knowledge-based economy.

During the last decade, *Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland* (previously SFI and IRC) disbursed in the region of €20m annually through the agency's Research Infrastructure Programme. This investment was insufficient for meeting system requirements, resulting in ageing and increasingly obsolete research equipment across the higher education research and innovation system.

An expert group, established by the Minister in March 2025, undertook an analysis of the existing infrastructural stock across both the established universities and technological universities. This group found that over one third of the equipment in the established universities is over fifteen years old, with nearly 60% of equipment over ten years old. The working group estimated that by 2030, nearly 80% of the equipment will be obsolete.

To address these chronic deficits and to ensure that Ireland's higher education research infrastructure is fit-for-future-purpose in helping drive Ireland's economic competitiveness, a €750m research infrastructure investment package was secured through the National Development Plan review undertaken in 2025. The INSPIRE programme – launched in November 2025 – will invest at least €750m over 2026–2030 in two broad categories of research equipment, in line with the recommendations of the expert group, as well as in digital research infrastructure and the Tyndall National Institute expansion. Firstly, it will address the deficits in Local Institutional Infrastructure, i.e. routine equipment that is used by an institution for both teaching and research purposes. Secondly, INSPIRE will invest in bigger-ticket equipment that is appropriately shared across a number of higher education institutions and, critically, with external users such as industry.

This focused investment will ensure that Ireland's research infrastructure can continue to meet the needs of, and ambitions for our national research and innovation system.

Strategic Actions Pillar 1

1.2 Invest in High Performance Computing and Establish an AI Factory Antenna in Ireland

Investing in High Performance Computing (HPC) is central to our national research infrastructure need, as it drives advancements in technology, science, and industry.

Since 2005 the Irish Centre for High-End Computing (ICHEC) has provided HPC resources to researchers in Irish third-level institutions, as well as those in industry and the public sector.

Following the decommissioning of Ireland's last supercomputer, Kay, in 2023, Ireland no longer has an indigenous HPC infrastructure, leading to a reliance on an interim outsourced access model.

HPC infrastructure is vital for data, AI and quantum technology. Re-acquiring national capacities in HPC is therefore a priority in fostering innovation and competitiveness across sectors. Following the signature of a hosting agreement between the European High Performance Computing Joint Undertaking and the University of Galway, Ireland is positioned to access €20M in European funding to aid the procurement of a new mid-range supercomputer, CASPir (Computational Analysis and Simulation Platform for Ireland). The necessary arrangements to enable this procurement to move forward are now being put in place.

In addition to that, Ireland can benefit from its ability to access European high performance computing infrastructure. In 2025, the EuroHPC Joint Undertaking approved Ireland's application for the establishment of an AI Factory Antenna in Ireland, linked to the French and Luxembourg AI Factories. AI Factories are European centres of excellence in Artificial Intelligence, where startups, SMEs, and researchers access high-performance computing resources to build, test, and scale advanced AI systems. The Irish 'AIF IRL-Antenna' will give Ireland direct access to advanced computing infrastructure in EU AI Factories, AI expertise, and collaborative opportunities.

We will continue to invest in Ireland's HPC capacity with the aim of enhancing Ireland's AI Capabilities, strengthening the public data infrastructure, enabling SME innovation and growth, and helping position Ireland as a technological leader.

1.3 Support Tyndall National Institute

Tyndall National Institute is Ireland's flagship institute in semiconductor and deep tech research. In recent years, the institute has established itself as a significant actor in the European semiconductor research and innovation system. The Institute drives semiconductor research activity across the full value-chain from fundamental to applied research, driving and supporting innovation and commercialisation for spin-outs, start-ups, scaling SMEs and FDI companies across Ireland. Tyndall provides a bridge with industry and academia, helping to drive advanced skills development and translate research in areas such as semiconductors and photonics into new technologies and products for markets including electronics, communications, energy, health, agri-food and the environment.

Semiconductor and deep-tech research and innovation are at the heart of digital transformation, enabling breakthroughs in computing power, energy efficiency, and connectivity that drive the evolution of smart technologies and data-driven industries, and represents therefore a key growth area for Ireland.

We will continue to support the delivery of the Tyndall National Institute expansion to enhance its capacity in semiconductor research and innovation, supporting the implementation of Tyndall 2030 as a key step in delivering on national ambition in semiconductor and deep-tech innovation and enabling the institute to play a vital role in expanding Ireland's competitive advantage in the global semiconductor industry.

2. Promote All Island and International Linkages

2.1 Strategically Advance Ireland's Membership in International Research Organisations

Under Impact 2030, the government has committed to further optimising Ireland's membership of international research organisations (IROs), ensuring that engagement reflects existing and emerging strategic priorities. As part of this optimisation Ireland has recently joined the Associate Membership of the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN). We will conduct a strategic review of IROs to identify, and target, appropriate organisations which align with Ireland's research interests.

2.2 Support Ireland's Participation in the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation – Horizon Europe

The EU Framework Programmes have become an integral part of Ireland's R&I ecosystem, allowing Irish researchers and innovators to develop strong and well-diversified collaborative links with a wide range of international partners. Participation in the EU Framework Programme projects allows the national R&I community to engage with the best researchers globally to drive research excellence and maximise the economic and societal impact of R&I.

Ireland is performing well under the current Horizon Europe programme with over €1 billion drawn down to date and is on track to meet the target of €1.5 billion agreed in the national R&I strategy, Impact 2030. To help achieve the Horizon Europe target, DFHERIS has developed a Horizon Europe Action Plan, which will build capacity, address barriers and enhance participation in Horizon Europe across the R&I system.

Enabling Technological Universities to fulfil their expanded mission and strengthen their research capacity will further enhance Ireland's ability to engage with global partners and increase its participation in Horizon Europe projects.

2.3 Support All-island Linkages

Leveraging the Shared Island fund, we will continue to build on the linkages established between institutions and stakeholders on a North-South basis, across further and higher education, as well as in relation to research, innovation and science, to promote shared learning and mobility across systems.

Furthermore, following the historic Ireland-UK summit between the Taoiseach and the UK Prime Minister in March 2024, we will look at ways of extending similar links with the rest of the UK. We will support the government commitment to shared Ireland and cross border projects by enhancing balanced regional development across the island of Ireland through supporting the strategic partnership between Dundalk Institute of Technology and Queen's University Belfast.

This strategic partnership will strengthen educational, research, and innovation capacity across the North-East and the wider higher education sector. Through targeted policy support and coordinated engagement with sectoral partners, this collaboration will deepen institutional impact and contribute to a more cohesive and regionally responsive tertiary system.

Strategic Actions Pillar 1

2.4 Roll Out TrustEd Ireland

Positioning Ireland as a first-choice destination for international learners is central to strengthening the country's skills and research talent base.

TrustEd Ireland – the International Education Mark (IEM), launched in September 2024, is a new education quality mark, which for the first time will be awarded to higher education and English language education providers who have demonstrated that they meet national standards to ensure a quality experience for international learners.

TrustEd Ireland builds on existing quality assurance procedures already in place in Irish higher education, and for English language education, the scheme establishes statutory quality assurance and regulation measures, a significant development for the sector.

The TrustEd Ireland scheme has been designed to work in tandem with other newly introduced processes aimed at protecting the welfare of international students:

I. Due Diligence' evaluation process for examining the capacity and capability of private education providers to quality assure and deliver education programmes.

II. A national scheme for the protection of enrolled learners by private education providers, which is underpinned by a new statutory Learner Protection Fund.

The first cohort of 28 higher education institutions were successful in obtaining authorisation to use the TrustEd Ireland mark in February 2026, following an assessment process in 2025. Decisions on applications made by English language providers in the first application cycle are expected end Q1 2026. The second application cycle for the TrustEd Ireland mark will be implemented in 2026.

The Department will continue to support QQI in rolling out the TrustEd Ireland scheme to ensure that international learners enrolled with Irish higher education and English language education providers are protected and receive a quality, consistent learning experience, from enrolment through to the completion of their education programme.

2.5 Strengthen Ireland's Qualifications Recognition System

To enhance international academic mobility, simplify qualification recognition, and strengthen Ireland's global reputation in higher education, DFHERIS is leading Ireland's engagement on accession to two international qualifications recognition agreements.

i. The Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (GRC)

This Convention developed by UNESCO provides for fairer and faster recognition of qualifications, improved access to postgraduate study and employment, and reduced administrative burdens for institutions. It supports displaced students, promotes diversity, and aligns with existing conventions such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Ireland's accession to this Convention will support the attraction of international talent, foster global partnerships, and support inclusive mobility, while maintaining quality assurance and recognition standards.

DFHERIS, where appropriate, is embedding, into legislation under the Department's remit, a requirement for full transparency on the processes and procedures to recognise training, experience and qualifications in line with the recognition of professional qualification's Directive 2005/36/EC.

ii. Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications

This Treaty aims to simplify the recognition process for higher education qualifications across participating countries and ensures that qualifications such as bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees obtained in one signatory country are automatically recognised in the others, maintaining the integrity and standards of each country's education system.

The Treaty aims to simplify administration for qualification holders covered by the Treaty, remove barriers to studying or working in other Treaty countries, and improve comparability of study levels to support employment opportunities.

This Treaty is an initiative of the Benelux Union and Baltic States and is a frontrunner in implementing automatic recognition, building on the provisions and instruments of the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as the Bologna Process underpinning the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Accession to this Treaty will be beneficial to Ireland in meeting its European commitments, building closer ties with European partners as well as facilitating academic mobility and benefiting the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.

The department will continue to engage with national stakeholders and international partners on the accession to and implementation of these international agreements. The department will also work with QQI as the host of Ireland's National Academic Recognition Information Centre, to further strengthen the infrastructure to support the recognition of qualifications in Ireland, improve coordination and build awareness and understanding of recognition, access and admissions among higher education institutions.

3. Advance a National Skills Intelligence Ecosystem

Global megatrends such as globalisation, technological change, climate change and an ageing population will continue to challenge and affect Irish society and our economy well into the future.

To effectively navigate these evolving demands, Ireland requires an agile, responsive, and future-focused skills system. Without such a system, we risk persistent skills mismatches potentially undermining our economic growth and the ability of our people to realise their full potential. It is imperative that policy decisions in relation to our skills system are informed by evidence and underpinned by a high-quality data ecosystem, enabling a comprehensive cross-ecosystem approach to emerging needs of the economy and society.

3.1 Establish a Skills Observatory

A sophisticated skills intelligence system is essential in developing effective, targeted policies and fostering a competitive, attractive workforce so people can thrive in the world of tomorrow.

The OECD Ireland Skills Strategy Report (2023)[14] highlights that Ireland's current methods of collecting and sharing skills and labour market data may hinder accurate forecasting and responsiveness to evolving skills needs.

The report recommends several specific actions for Ireland to improve the range and granularity of information on current skills needs, to strengthen information on training outcomes and enhance skills forecasting; and to enable more effective exchange and use of existing skills data and promote systematic skills policy evaluation to support evidence-based skills policy making.

As Ireland's skills data is fragmented across multiple agencies, the ability to generate real-time labour market intelligence is limited. This hampers effective policymaking and the alignment of education and training with workforce needs. A more coherent approach to skills analysis and forecasting will be a key enabler for the tertiary system.

In line with these recommendations, we will establish the National Skills Observatory – a centre for skills and labour intelligence to support an in-depth understanding of the various labour market forces at play that shape national skills demand.

The National Skills Observatory will be uniquely placed to add significant value in informing skills development, contributing to labour market policies, education and training provision, lifelong learning and career guidance.

[14] OECD (2023). *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*. OECD Skills Studies. Paris: OECD Publishing. **https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en**

3.2 Optimise Wider Skills Intelligence Ecosystem

The findings of the OECD Skills Review highlight scope to improve the navigability of Ireland's complex and intricate skills ecosystem – which involves a diverse array of government departments and agencies, private sector and social partners, training and research providers and international collaborators.

As the strategic partnership platform on skills policy, the National Skills Council is an important means of capturing the voice of enterprise in addressing our skills challenge.

Similarly, the nine Regional Skills Fora foster engagement and collaboration by providing an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions.

Skillnet Ireland also plays a key role in supplying skills to the Irish workforce by collaborating with enterprise and agencies to develop new innovative programmes that address both current and future skill needs. In recent years, Skillnet Ireland have expanded their provision with a particular focus on SME upskilling and digital.

The Enterprise Connect initiative and direct engagement with stakeholders at institutional level will further inform the responsiveness and agility of provision to respond to emerging needs, building on models such as Skills to Advance.

We will maintain and strengthen our partnership approach between the tertiary system and enterprise. It is crucial that we enable the coherent functioning of our skills ecosystem as a whole, enhancing the ability of providers to do so by identifying a holistic response to identified needs which provides clear pathways for learners at all levels and all stages of their career journey.

This will be supported through the National Skills Observatory, which is being developed to serve as a central repository for labour market and skills intelligence, helping to shape policy responses. This will be augmented through industry engagement mechanisms noted above and also including skills roundtables with industry representatives.

4. Drive Specialist Skills and Innovation

A balanced mix of specialist and transferable skills helps workers adapt to changing labour market requirements and is essential for a resilient, innovative, and competitive economy.

4.1 Grow Specialisation and Centres of Excellence

Centres of excellence are important hubs for knowledge sharing, research, and innovation.

Currently there are research centres, funded through several competitive Research Ireland initiatives such as the Research Ireland Research Centres initiative, the Research Ireland Spokes Programme, the Co-Centres (Shared Island) Programme, and the ARC Hubs programme. Each programme fosters cutting-edge research.

Skills building centres of excellence such as the National Demonstration Park for Modern Methods of Construction see research and innovation inform reskilling and upskilling initiatives in an area of strategic priority.

We will work with the ETBs to designate national leads in areas of specialisation, enabling a FET College model that supports regional and national skills needs, foster innovation, and enhance collaboration and synergies across the sector. ETBs will partner across the tertiary system in building this capacity.

This approach will ensure a more coherent and responsive system that leverages local strengths while contributing to national priorities.

4.2 Invest in Areas of Priority Skill Needs for Enterprise and Public Services

Ireland's well educated and highly skilled workforce is key to strengthening Ireland's competitiveness on the global market by attracting foreign direct investment and supporting the growth of indigenous enterprises. Investment in tertiary education and training will foster a skilled and adaptive workforce and ensure that our economy remains competitive and future-proof.

Digital and technology skills are of critical importance for Ireland's economic future and the welfare of society. Ireland has a high demand for advanced digital skills, particularly in AI, cybersecurity, cloud computing, and data analytics. Technology skills and innovation talent will be supported through initiatives such as Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland support for research masters, the development of industry PhDs and connecting our talent pipeline with Irish based companies through ARC hubs, Tyndall National Institute and others. In addition, there is a fundamental requirement to embrace digital literacy as a foundational transversal skill for all to support the digital transformation of our workplaces and digital social inclusion.

DFHERIS is responsible for overseeing the skills response to Whole-of-Government objectives in areas such as construction, climate action and health.

The Delivering Homes, Building Communities policy aims to build over 300,000 new homes by the end of 2030. An October 2024 update to the Report on Skills for Residential Construction and Retrofitting estimated that delivering 50,000 new homes and retrofitting 63,444 homes annually would require 78,885 additional skilled construction workers. The adoption of Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) could lower the demand for skilled construction workers to 68,869.[15] While the construction and construction-related apprentice population has reached 25,000 in 2025, a 63% increase on 2020, a further expansion will be needed to meet Programme for Government targets which sets out a headline target of 12,500 new apprentice registrations per year by 2030, with two-thirds of these to be in craft and construction-related programmes.

Green Skills are essential for ensuring Ireland achieves the targets set out in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, requiring the State to transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable and climate neutral economy by 2050. Meeting the demands in renewable technologies in areas such as solar, offshore wind, heat pumps, retrofitting, and grid infrastructure requires a robust and skilled workforce.

Ireland is currently experiencing significant workforce shortages across key public service sectors, particularly in health, disability, and education. These shortages include essential roles such as doctors, nurses, and Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCPs), with acute gaps in therapy disciplines vital to disability services – namely Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, and Physiotherapy.

To respond to these challenges, over 1,200 additional training places were introduced between 2022 and 2025, with further expansion planned for 2026. However, sustained and strategic growth in education and training capacity will be required to meet the evolving workforce demands and to fulfil the Programme for Government commitment to double the number of places in key disciplines.

To support workers in navigating rapidly changing labour markets, we will balance the provision of specialist skills with the promotion of transversal skills across disciplines. Transversal skills include skills such as communication, digital literacy, problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, and adaptability and will enable graduates to swiftly adapt to new labour market requirements. DFHERIS will continue to support the implementation of the ESD to 2030 strategy as an enabler to the promotion of transversal skills, and the achievement of economic, social and environmental sustainability.

DFHERIS will continue to invest in areas of critical skills needs; we will modernise and update our skills base, informed by workforce planning, and continue to foster a sustainable graduate pipeline from further and higher education into high demand skill disciplines.

[15] Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2024). *An Update to the Report on the Analysis of Skills for Residential Construction and Retrofitting.* **https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/an-update-to-the-report-on-the-analysis-of-skills-for-residential-construction-and-ret.pdf**

Strategic Actions Pillar 1

4.2 Invest in Areas of Priority Skill Needs for Enterprise and Public Services continued

To support the expansion of skills, we will continue to progress a range of initiatives across further and higher education:

- We will expand the suite of Springboard+ courses, Skills to Advance, micro-credentials, micro-qualifications, target Skillnet initiatives and traineeships, offering flexible upskilling and reskilling opportunities in high priority skills areas.
- We will continue to expand medical, health and social care training places through HEA-led Expression of Interest processes.
- We will enhance engagement between SOLAS and ETBs on strategic skills provision.
- We will continue to support the development of new, accessible learning pathways such as apprenticeships and tertiary degree programmes in areas of high skills demand.
- We will open the National Demonstration Park for Modern Methods of Construction (MMC), implement the MMC Action Plan, and continue to develop MMC training pathways.
- We will promote transversal skills, including those for the green transition, across all disciplines to strengthen both graduates' and workers' capability to adapt swiftly to changing labour market requirements.

Together, these actions will help build a workforce that is skilled, flexible, and ready to meet future challenges.

4.3 Support Irish Language Education

The tertiary education sector has an important role to play in promoting and expanding the teaching and use of Irish at third level. The Higher Education Authority Act (2022) places an obligation on the HEA to support HEIs to teach, promote and use the language. DFHERIS supports HEIs, via the HEA, through the provision of core funding, and specific funding to support Irish language initiatives. With respect to skills, initiatives are already underway, including an Irish language stream in a new Business and Operations apprenticeship in the Civil Service, and further education and training to support upskilling.

However, more must be done to support the teaching and status of Irish, particularly in the context of the 20% target for public service recruits to be competent in Irish by 2030 as set down in the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021.

To this end, DFHERIS will work on a cross-government basis to support the objectives of the National Plan for Irish Language Public Services.

This will include working with the Department of Education and Youth to examine the transition of students from Irish-language post-primary to tertiary level; working with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to establish a sectoral working group to examine how tertiary education can contribute to public service language targets; undertaking research to better understand existing and future demand for Irish-medium education in higher education; and examining the inclusion of Irish-medium courses in future expressions of interest processes for areas of skills need.

With these measures, we can make important progress in promoting the Irish language, and in fostering Irish-language service provision.

4.4 Support the Enhancement of Creativity across the Tertiary Sector and Support the Development of a University of the Creative Industries

National and EU policy recognises the creative industries as central to innovation, employment, and cultural development. Cultural and creative industries make a significant contribution to Ireland's economy by generating employment, stimulating tourism, and fostering innovation. Further and higher education institutions play a vital role in sustaining these sectors, providing the knowledge, skills, and talent needed by those working within them, and fostering innovation through creativity and design in collaboration with other sectors, such as manufacturing and services.

DFHERIS's approach to fostering creativity within the tertiary sector comprises of three strands:

Firstly, many of our institutions recognise that creative thinking, curiosity and problem-solving are important transversal skills and attributes that can help graduates thrive in careers and ways of working that are evolving rapidly due to advances in artificial intelligence and other technologies. We will encourage and facilitate tertiary education institutions and relevant stakeholders to enhance and embed creativity across the tertiary ecosystem, extending beyond the traditional creative arts and humanities disciplines.

The second strand is to deepen and enhance research and innovation capacity, and to grow the skills base that drives the creative and cultural industries. DFHERIS through Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland and the HEA will support research programmes that are industry-focused and deliver innovation, and support for the creative sector in HEIs may also be sought through the new programme of investment in research equipment and facilities. We will also explore opportunities to strengthen the all-island creative ecosystem.

Finally, the third strand recognises that, while many tertiary providers contribute to the creative industries, certain institutions have a specialised focus in this field and have expressed an ambition for the establishment of a university for the creative industries. The department recognises the importance of specialist provision in this area and will support these institutions, within legislative provisions, as they progress towards university designation.

4.5 Advance Digital Skills and AI Transition

In an age of rapid digital transformation, digital and technology skills are of critical importance for Ireland's economic future and the welfare of society.

In response to the government's ambition for Ireland to lead in the adoption and development of new technology and its commitment to supporting a positive and inclusive digital transformation of the economy and society, as set out in the new National Digital and AI Strategy, we will strive to:

- Optimise the pipeline of specialist technology skills to meet industry and public sector needs and diversify the profile of digital specialists, including by encouraging under-represented groups to become technology specialists. Programmes will continue to be developed in partnership between industry and the tertiary sector.
- Provide businesses, NGOs and public sector organisations access to the skilling and upskilling opportunities required to support their digital transformation, including courses to enable compliance with the AI Act.
- Embed the development of digital skills and the use of digital technologies across education and training, including the use of AI for teaching and learning. This approach would reflect that digital technologies, including AI are not only transforming the subject matters of education, but they are also transforming the experience of learners and their educators.
- Increase the learning opportunities to enhance digital literacy and basic skills for society and for work, including AI Literacy.

We will publish a Statement of Ambition with regards to the acquisition of basic digital skills, including AI Skills in the tertiary sector.

5. Strengthen Ireland's Research Talent Base

A thriving research and innovation ecosystem depends on a strong and sustainable pipeline of highly skilled researchers.

5.1 Support Ireland's PhD Researcher Community

PhD students represent a critical part of the research ecosystem and are essential to further developing our knowledge-based economy. During their PhD degree, PhD researchers challenge the boundaries of existing knowledge in generating novel research outputs and gain important professional skills such as advanced problem-solving skills.

Ireland has a vibrant PhD community of 10,500 enrolled PhD students. Institutional provision, with the support of research funders, is underpinned by Ireland's National Framework for Doctoral Education and the National Advisory Forum, co-chaired by the HEA and QQI.

Ireland's PhD landscape has developed organically over the last three decades, resulting in a range of practices and experiences. Under *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*, the government commits to promoting a more consistent experience, so that all research degree students – regardless of their funding support, host institution or discipline – can enjoy a consistent and high-quality educational experience.

We will continue to support the provision of comprehensive professional development programmes for PhD researchers, including transversal skills training in areas such as project management, entrepreneurship, and communication, to ensure that PhD researchers are prepared for a diverse range of career paths. We will also continue to support and develop initiatives such as the Research Ireland Centres for Research Training programme, which delivers a suite of industry and entrepreneurial skills to its PhD students in addition to their academic and research experiences.

5.2 Broaden Opportunities through Increased Research Activity in Technological Universities

Strengthening Technological Universities' research capacity will further expand Ireland's research talent pool.

The Technological Universities Act 2018 provides a legislative requirement for the Technological Universities to engage in high-quality, industry-focused research and to support increased doctoral education.

DFHERIS has secured €83.68 million in technological university-oriented research funding over the period of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to 2027. TU-RISE, an initiative funded under ERDF aims to establish, strengthen, and systemise research and innovation offices in TUs to enable greater and more structured engagement with regional enterprises. ERDF funding is further directed at developing TUs' research capacity in areas such as staff development, recruitment, postgraduate training and supervision, networking, and collaborative knowledge transfer and mobility.

We will continue to strengthen research activities in Technological Universities, by implementing key recommendations of the 2022 OECD Review, specifically the introduction of professorial and academic grades like those in the wider University sector. The creation of new TU Professorships also promises to boost Ireland's capacity to substantially grow private research and Horizon Europe funding.

We will continue to support Technological Universities as they fulfil their regional development potential as hubs for research and innovation, enterprise collaboration, and skills development. Properly supported in their regions, TUs can be engines of economic and social transformation leading responsiveness to increasing skills and innovation demands and thus bolster Ireland's economic competitiveness.

5.3 Support Researchers at all Career Stages

Fostering research talent is central for Ireland's economy as it drives innovation, economic growth, and competitiveness through new technologies and processes. Research talent strengthens the pipeline of skilled professionals, which supports existing industries and attracts foreign investment. It also plays a pivotal role in addressing societal challenges like climate change and public health.

Competitively allocated research funding is essential to supporting Irish based research talent and excellence in their research endeavours. Alongside Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland, we will strive to reform the existing funding calls landscape to better target and support early career researchers over the duration of this strategy.

In addition, to supporting Ireland-based research talent, Global Citizens 2030 seeks to confirm Ireland as a first-choice destination for international researchers and innovators. The appointment of six Global Ireland Talent and Innovation Attachés intends to embed talent and innovation at the heart of Ireland's global footprint. The Talent and Innovation Attachés, who will be located in key markets, will have the responsibility to work in close collaboration with the Global Ireland initiative, leveraging the 'Team Ireland' strengths to build talent and innovation relationships.

Pillar 2
Equality and Opportunity

Across further and higher education, significant progress has been achieved in supporting access and participation of socio-economically disadvantaged students through targeted student funding and access programmes.

Socio-economic disadvantage, however, continues to affect participation in further and higher education and the educational choices people are making. In recent years, the rising costs of living combined with the persistent housing crisis have put disproportionate pressures on our most disadvantaged learners.

The Tertiary Education Strategy will build towards a more inclusive and equitable tertiary education system by working towards reducing financial, structural, and systemic barriers and supporting all learners, regardless of their background, to access, participate in, and successfully complete their education.

This includes expanding targeted support, funding, and access initiatives to address the needs of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. Recognising student accommodation as a key factor in educational access is part of this and we will drive a coordinated, long-term response to address supply and affordability challenges.

Strategic Actions – Pillar 2

1. Reformed Transitions to Further and Higher Education

We are committed to ensuring educational transitions are as easy as possible for learners. Whether it is from second level to tertiary, from further education and training to higher education, or back into education following a period away, we will work with partners to ensure learners are equipped to make the right decisions for their future.

1.1 Improve Transitions and Pathways from Second Level to Tertiary Education

Each year in August, CAO offers mark a crucial moment in the educational journey of tens of thousands of learners. Typically, each year, over three-quarters of applicants receive an offer of one of their top three choices. However, the CAO system and the 'points race' places significant pressures on students, particularly those applying for high-demand courses, and those experiencing educational disadvantage.

To date, these issues have been addressed through a range of targeted initiatives. Following the 1999 Commission on the Points System, access routes were improved through the introduction of the HEAR and DARE schemes; in 2013, efforts were made to increase the number of broad-based first year courses; while in 2017 a revised 8-band Leaving Certificate grading scale and non-linear CAO scale were introduced to reduce random selection in high-demand courses. More recently, the development of new pathways, including tertiary programmes, has provided students with options to progress to third level beyond the CAO.

In line with Programme for Government commitments, we will continue to work to reform transitions and pathways from second level to tertiary education, to expand alternative options for progression to higher education. We will also examine options to reduce pressure on students competing in the points system through the CAO. We will work with the sector to examine options for broader undergraduate education, including the potential to expand opportunities for delayed specialisation.This will require close engagement with higher education institutions, which have autonomy in admissions policy, and across the wider education sector.

1.2 Improve Information for Those Making the Transition from Post-Primary to Tertiary Education

We will work to continue to improve the information available to students and prospective students. This will help them make better-informed choices about their education, training, and future beyond. A key goal of the National Access Plan 2022–2028 is to provide clarity and ensure students have access to clear, detailed and accurate information on pathways and supports.

We will undertake a detailed scoping exercise on the information available to students. This will include reviewing quality and identifying gaps in key areas. This complements the two-year programme of research being undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute and DFHERIS on decision-making by prospective students and learners.

Our work will be phased to ensure efficiency and to bring greater coherence to the current fragmented information landscape. The initiative will also align with public service transformation goals, as set out in the Digital Public Services Plan 2030. This plan's objective is to make 100% of key public services available online, organised around citizen-centred Life Events.

Strategic Actions – Pillar2

2. Enhance Participation and Inclusion

We will continue to take measures to expand access to tertiary education through a range of targeted initiatives and will strive towards offering seamless and consistent support across the full spectrum of the tertiary education system.

2.1 Expanding Access to Work-Integrated Learning, Including Apprenticeships and Other Work-Based Programmes

Expanding access to work-integrated learning (WIL) is central to building an inclusive and responsive tertiary education system, at all levels across the system. WIL encompasses a range of programmes – including Professional Doctorates, apprenticeships, traineeships, pre-apprenticeship initiatives, and structured placements – where learners gain practical experience in real-world settings as part of their education.

To ensure that learners from all backgrounds can access these opportunities, we will continue to expand entry routes into WIL, such as through pre-apprenticeship programmes which play a vital role in introducing learners to work-based learning and helping them make informed choices about future pathways.

Under the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025, targeted initiatives have been introduced to increase participation among women, members of the Traveller community, and socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

Under the new Action Plan for Apprenticeship, we will continue to systematically increase the visibility of apprenticeship options and encourage participation from underrepresented groups, including women, members of the Traveller community and socio-economically disadvantaged groups. We will gradually expand the targeted bursaries providing financial assistance to apprentices and learners on work-based learning programmes and further develop incentives for employers to support the recruitment of underrepresented groups.

2.2 Support Early School Leavers

The Youthreach programme and the Community Training Centres offer education and training to young people who leave the mainstream education system without qualifications.

The programmes aim to equip early school leavers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to participate fully in society and progress to further education, training, and employment.

Over the course of this Strategy, we will continue to strengthen pathways from Youthreach into other tertiary education programmes. We will also conduct a review of Youthreach and the Community Training Centres to determine how to best align the offering for learners.

2.3 Expand Access and Inclusion to Tertiary Education

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) is the funding programme to support the delivery of the National Access Plan 2022-2028 objectives and is integral to fostering equity of access and opportunity. PATH has been providing funding to higher education institutions (HEIs) to improve access, participation and retention of priority groups identified in the National Access Plan, including students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities and students from the Traveller and Roma communities.

Building on the success of the PATH programmes in Higher Education, we will explore potential new supports and expand existing funding programmes to fund initiatives that support inclusion across further and higher education. This expansion will lay the foundation for a system of seamless support across the tertiary education system.

2.4 Support Student Progression, Completion and Success in Tertiary Education

Supporting students to progress, complete and thrive in tertiary education is central to ensuring that investment in education delivers both personal and societal benefits. Student success extends beyond entry, and requires sustained focus on equity, wellbeing and employability.

In recent years, significant progress has been made in widening access to higher education and in embedding a stronger focus on retention and completion. The National Access Plan 2022–2028 introduced a student success framework that emphasises the importance of universal design for learning (UDL), effective student supports and institutional accountability. The Altitude Charter, the national charter for UDL in Tertiary Education, was launched in 2024 to embed inclusive practice across the system. Higher education institutions have also expanded academic, financial and wellbeing supports, while developing innovative teaching and learning practices to respond to the changing needs of diverse student cohorts.

We will support and engage closely with the Higher Education Authority and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in progressing the policy response to student progression, completion and success. Together, our focus will be on supporting whole-of-institution approaches to student success, strengthening academic and non-academic supports, and improving data and evidence to identify the factors which may limit student success.

Significant work has been done in recent years across the FET sector by SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland, the ETBs, and AHEAD to strengthen staff and organisational capability in UDL and the provision of Reasonable Accommodations. This work will remain a priority in the years ahead.

2.5 Introduce Second Chance Option

Currently, students who wish to repeat a year of higher education or change course after beginning a different one, can face increased financial barriers. They are ineligible for the Free Fees scheme for the repeat year, and those receiving the Student Grant lose access to funding for that period.

The Programme for Government commits to establishing a “Second Chance” option which would allow students, on a one-time basis, to retain eligibility for Free Fees. This would help reduce financial obstacles for students seeking to repeat a year or switch to a more suitable course.

We will also explore the potential for an eligible second chance student to continue to avail of their maintenance grant in these circumstances.

2.6 Graduate Entry Professional Programmes

Graduate entry professional programmes play an increasingly important role in expanding access to priority professions and supporting workforce development. In line with Programme for Government commitments, the Department will continue to engage with relevant partners to examine a range of options for Graduate Entry Medicine and other graduate entry pathways. This examination will focus on ensuring sustainable and equitable support mechanisms alongside ongoing expansion of training capacity and existing student supports across identified key critical skills areas.

Strategic Actions – Pillar2

3. Grow and Deliver a Responsive Tertiary System for Learners with Disabilities

Supporting people with disabilities accessing tertiary education plays a key role in creating an inclusive society in which everyone can reach their full potential. A recent National Council for Special Education report has revealed a strong appetite for tertiary education among school leavers with disabilities.[16]

During recent years, the number of students reporting a disability has increased significantly. Eurostudent data of 2022 for Ireland indicated that 32% of students report a disability, up from 25% in 2019, with mental health being the most reported disability.[17]

Under the recently published National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, the Government commits to creating an inclusive education system that respects the rights of those with disabilities to choose and access learning environments that suit their needs. The Strategy aims to improve retention and progression by supporting learners at key transition points including from school into tertiary education and onto the world of work.[18]

In line with this Strategy, we are committed to support learners with disabilities by ensuring that our education system is reflective of their needs, fosters their success during their studies and assists them to progress into meaningful employment.

To ensure sustained and systemic inclusion for learners with disabilities across the tertiary sector, we will develop a policy framework to support learners with disabilities in transitioning at key educational points; provide flexible, responsive, tailored supports and services; and assist learners on the pathway to work.

To achieve this, we will progress the following actions across tertiary education.

3.1 Enhance Successful and Seamless Transitions

Moving through education from second level to tertiary education for learners with disabilities brings new challenges and systems to navigate. Transition supports and planning are vital to ensuring learner success and progression in tertiary education.

To promote and support the participation and progress of learners with disabilities, we will work with our partners in the education system to ensure that learners with disabilities are aware of the range of opportunities available and provide supports and services to assist them in their transition and throughout their time in tertiary education.

3.2 Grow Support and Services for People with Disabilities

Well-resourced and responsive student support services are fundamental to supporting learners with disabilities. We will continue to strengthen wrap-around supports to enable learners with disabilities to participate fully in academic and training settings and to successfully transition into employment.

[16] McCoy, S. et al. (2025). Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: The Post-school Transitions of Students with Special Educational Needs. Dublin: National Council for Special Education (NCSE), **www.esri.ie/publications/paths-tracks-gaps-and-cliffs-the-post-school-transitions-of-students-with-special**

[17] Erskine, S. and Harmon, D. (2023). *Eurostudent Survey VIII – Report on the Social and Living Conditions of Higher Education Students in Ireland 2022.* Dublin: Higher Education Authority. **Eurostudent-8-final-report_IE.pdf**

[18] Department of Children, Disability and Equality (2025). *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030.* Dublin: Government of Ireland. **https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/33a36e70/National_Human_Rights_Strategy_for_Disabled_People_WEB_04.09.25.pdf**

3.3 Expand Universal Design for Learning

The roll out of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) across further and higher education in the areas of teaching and learning, student support, as well as the physical and digital environments is a key enabler for increased student participation and success. We will continue to invest in UDL initiatives to ensure that learning environments, teaching and assessment are accessible to all learners.

3.4 Establish a Programme to Support Pathways to Employment for Students with Disabilities

Supporting the successful transition from tertiary education to the labour market is central for the future labour market participation of graduates with disabilities.

We will examine how to provide opportunities for students to gain work experience and implement a programme to support them in their transition to employment after they complete their tertiary education.

3.5 Expand Fund for Students with Disabilities

The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) is a key fund that ensures learners with disabilities have the necessary supports to participate in Post-Leaving Certificate and higher education courses. This Fund supported over 3,500 Post-Leaving Certificate students and over 19,400 higher education students in 2024.

The purpose of the FSD is to provide funding to higher and further education and training institutions to assist them in offering supports and services to eligible students with disabilities on both full-time and part-time courses so that they can participate on an equal basis with their peers.

We will continue to expand FSD supports to ensure that these supports are flexible and responsive to learners' needs, resulting in seamless transitions across tertiary programmes for learners with disabilities.

4. Improve Student Financial Support

We will work towards improving student financial supports to ease financial pressures for everyone, but particularly for those most in need.

4.1 Reduce the Student Contribution Fee

Under the Free Fees Initiative, the State provides funding toward the tuition fee costs of eligible undergraduate higher education students, with students paying a student contribution of €3,000 per annum towards their fee costs. In the 2023/24 academic year, there were over 143,000 students eligible to benefit from the Free fees Initiative. The Free Fees Initiative is a universal scheme and means testing does not apply.

The Student Contribution fee was permanently reduced by €500 in Budget 2026 which reduced the fee down to €2,500. This measure benefitted around 108,000 undergraduate students and circa 14,000 apprentices who will see up to a 17% pro-rata reduction. We will continue to reduce the Student Contribution fee in a financially sustainable manner, in line with Programme for Government Commitments. Targeted measures to address affordability of education will be actively progressed.

Strategic Actions – Pillar2

4.2 Increase Supports under the Student Grant Scheme

The Student Grant Scheme, administered by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), is the main financial support scheme for students studying in approved full-time third-level courses in Ireland covering both further and higher education.

Student grants are divided into Maintenance Grants and Fee Grants. The student maintenance grant is a contribution towards the living costs of a student, and the scheme provides for different levels of maintenance support, depending on means which are defined within varying income thresholds and adjacency criteria (distance from your primary residence to college).

It is a Programme for Government Commitment to increase maintenance rates.

To be eligible for a grant, an applicant's household income must be within the income thresholds set out in the Student Grant Scheme. A higher level of grant known as the Special Rate of grant is provided to specified low-income families whose household income includes an eligible payment such as listed in the Student Grant Scheme. Students living further from their institutions may incur significantly higher costs for transport and accommodation. The Student Grant Scheme accounts for this by providing a higher rate of grant known as a "non-adjacent" grant.

The Non-Adjacent Maintenance Grant is awarded to eligible students whose primary residence is 30km or more from their institution and represents a critical support mechanism for those facing elevated costs associated with travel, accommodation, and daily living.

As of September 2025, students whose household income is under €58,470 may be eligible for a maintenance grant to help with the cost of attending PLC/Undergraduate or Postgraduate courses.

Budget 2026 increased all non-adjacent rates by at least €200 from September 2026. Students this academic year have also seen a pro-rata increase of between €111 – €239 from January 2026, benefitting nearly 30,000 students.

To inform government decision-making on progressive enhancements to the SUSI scheme, we will carry out a programme of research and analysis. This research will support the development of a better decision-making framework for student supports.

We will continue to work towards increasing Maintenance Grants in line with research findings and budgetary parameters.

4.3 Reform the Student Grant Scheme (SUSI) to Better Meet the Needs of Students

The Programme for Government commits to reform SUSI to better meet the needs of students.

The Student Support Act, 2011 and related legislation will be reviewed to ensure that legislation reflects the current further and higher education landscape and future needs.

During this strategy, we will focus on further developing SUSI's IT infrastructure. To enhance the user experience of the current SUSI platform, we will progress and invest in a new IT system that improves accessibility, navigability, and user-friendliness.

5. Develop Solutions to Address Student Accommodation

5.1 Implement the New National Student Accommodation Strategy 2026-2035

The availability of affordable student accommodation is fundamental for learners accessing the tertiary education system.

The government recognises that Ireland's housing system is not currently meeting the needs of enough of our people. The student accommodation sector is a subset of the broader housing market, and as such is impacted by many of the same factors affecting other parts of the housing market.

In recent years, legislative and regulatory measures have aimed to increase tenancy security for students. The Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2024, for example, clarified tenancy rights for students in purpose-built student accommodation[19] and targeted tenancy models (e.g., banning 51-week occupancy contracts) to protect students from exploitative practices. [20] More recent changes have included VAT reductions and an amendment to rent controls rules.

The Student Accommodation Assistance Scheme provides financial support to vulnerable and disadvantaged students such as Traveller and Roma, and care experienced students.[21]

In November 2022, the government approved the development of a new policy to provide State assistance to stimulate the development of new student accommodation for public higher education institutions. The National Development Plan committed €100m in capital investment over the period 2024-2026, allowing the progression of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation beds in Maynooth University (116 beds) and approval of funding for University College Dublin (493 beds) in 2025. Thirty Percent (30%) of the new beds will be ringfenced for target group students at below market rates.[22]

In addition, the Design Guide for State Sponsored Student Accommodation, published in June 2025, sets out new design standards for state sponsored student accommodation with the objective of establishing design standards to support the delivery of high-quality student accommodation by driving consistency in design, enhancing cost-efficiency, and facilitating the use of modern methods of construction. The Design Guide is an iterative framework that reflects best practices and supports the efficient delivery of student accommodation. It seeks to ensure value for money for the State while promoting the development of modern student residences that are functional, sustainable, maintainable, flexible, safe, and architecturally well-designed.

To respond to the significant demand in student accommodation a step change is needed in increasing the supply of affordable student housing. We have recently published the new National Student Accommodation Strategy.[23]

The Strategy is built on two pillars: increasing the supply and viability of new beds and strengthening affordability supports for students under financial pressure.

[19] **Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2024, Section 2**

[20] **Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2024, Section 2**; **Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2024, Section 3**; **Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2024, Section 4**

[21] Information on Student Accommodation Assistance can be found here: **https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science/services/student-accommodation-assistance**

[22] Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2025). *Policy Information on Student Accommodation.* **www.gov.ie/en/department-of-further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science/policy-information/student-accommodation**

[23] Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2025). *Policy Information on Student Accommodation.* **www.gov.ie/en/department-of-further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science/policy-information/student-accommodation**

Pillar 3
System Performance, Governance and Adaptability

The creation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) marked a significant step towards enhancing strategic focus and consolidating the disparate strands of further education and training, higher education, and research and innovation.

Key legislation and policies have been progressed to strengthen governance and funding of the sectors, including the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, the Research and Innovation Act 2024, and Funding the Future, a policy on the future of higher education.

Wide-reaching economic and social shifts are resulting in rapidly changing learner profiles and expectations, as well as labour market requirements. Adequate governance, funding and staffing provisions are central for institutions to adapt to these changes in a sustainable, agile and responsive manner.

The strength of the tertiary education system lies in its academically autonomous institutions which deliver education and research in a dynamic environment and at a high standard. Yet, there is a growing recognition that to deliver more effectively and more sustainably for learners, society and the economy a more joined-up and collaborative approach is required.

The intention of this Strategy is therefore to enable institutions and agencies to deliver on national goals in coherent, quicker and more flexible ways, and aligned with economic and social needs.

This Strategy will aim to balance the requirements of institutional autonomy and distinct institutional missions with the need for the State to provide strategic direction and system-wide coordination. It will promote increased collaboration and coherence across tertiary education institutions and sectors, while ensuring that national priorities are advanced in a way that supports institutional diversity and innovation.

We want institutions which are financially robust, effectively governed and internationally competitive. We want institutions with modern and sustainable campuses with greener buildings, smart facilities and fit for purpose infrastructure.

We will continue to support institutions in providing high quality education, recognising their distinct research, engagement and teaching missions. This includes strengthening curriculum design and delivery, embedding digital and AI-enhanced innovation, investing in staff, investing in targeted capital programmes, and supporting institutional sustainability and the implementation of the national ESD to 2030 strategy. And we will support institutions in enhancing the impact of their research for evidence informed policymaking and the public good.

To strengthen collaboration and coherence across sectors we will enhance the co-ordination of the system within existing legislative frameworks through stronger policy guidance. To this end the department will introduce an annual statement of priorities, a forum of stakeholders, and a stronger engagement with agencies.

Strategic Actions
Pillar 3

1. Transform Staffing Structures in Technological and Further Education and Training sectors

We will continue to work towards improving capacity and capability of staff employed across the tertiary education system.

1.1 Enable Technological Universities to Achieve their Enhanced Mission through Academic Staffing Reform and Professorial Grades

The transformation of Technological Universities, specifically the introduction of new academic career paths, contracts and professorships in Technological Universities, is a key step towards further developing institutional research and innovation capacity. Establishing professorial grades will bring TUs into alignment with university norms and enable them to meet their legal mandate under the Technological Universities Act 2018 to engage in high-quality, industry-focused research.

An OECD review of Technological Universities' academic career structures, academic contracts and senior management and leadership structures, published in 2022, highlighted the need for reformed staffing structures as necessary to enable TUs to unlock their full potential and meet international standards and norms.

Following the report's recommendations, work has begun to introduce a new academic framework, including a new national contract and a new career structure, consisting of five ranks, namely assistant lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, and full professor. We will complete this work during the course of this strategy.

Establishing professorial grades within Technological Universities will significantly contribute to strengthening Ireland's research talent base, grow research capacity, address balanced regional development and thereby ensure economic competitiveness. A target of 25 professors across our TU sector is set to be achieved through the Targeted Enhancement Fund which runs up to 31 December 2028. A further 25 professor posts will follow up to 2030.

1.2 Deliver the New Further Education and Training Staffing Structures

To strengthen Ireland's skills eco-system, enhancing further education and training provision is paramount. This involves improving responsiveness to industry, enriching the range and relevance of programmes, and ensuring the highest standards of quality. In parallel, there is a need to drive greater integration, consolidation, and harmonisation across further education and training.

Refreshed and fit for purpose staffing structures for FET will underpin this ambition.

DFHERIS appointed an independent Expert Panel in 2024 to evaluate the current further education and training practitioner staffing structures in Educational Training Boards.

We will be progressing the development and implementation of the new staffing framework over the course of this strategy. The new staffing framework will be an important element of the overall further education and training transformation agenda and a crucial step towards increasing the responsiveness to evolving societal and workforce needs.

Strategic Actions – Pillar3

2. Enhance Teaching and Learning across Tertiary Education

We will enhance teaching and learning across the tertiary education system, by supporting our educators in adopting new pedagogical and technology supported teaching approaches.

2.1 Enhance Teaching and Learning

Enhanced teaching and learning across further and higher education, through the effective use of technology, innovative pedagogical approaches and digital skills, is central in equipping learners with transversal skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and digital literacy.

By integrating real-life, technology-driven learning experiences into the curriculum, institutions prepare learners to adapt and thrive in complex, rapidly evolving work environments.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education offers professional development and knowledge sharing opportunities on topics such as student success as well as teaching and learning in a digital world.

We will continue to support the work of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, which sits within the Higher Education Authority (HEA), and the HEA's 2025 Strategy for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

We will also work towards strengthening capacity for curriculum development and quality assurance in further education and training. Continuing Professional Development among staff will be prioritised to bolster the sector's capacity and capability to respond to changing societal and economic developments.

2.2 Strengthen the Responsible Use of AI across Further and Higher Education

The rapid development of AI technology is having a profound impact on the delivery of teaching and learning across the tertiary education sector.

While advancements in AI present many opportunities, they also pose challenges and risks relating to academic integrity, compliance with the AI Act and GDPR compliance. There is therefore an urgent need to equip educators and learners with AI literacy skills.

QQI and the HEA are leading out on a significant programme of work to support the tertiary education system in responding to the opportunities and challenges presented by AI. This includes initiatives such as the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) which provides opportunities for educators across further and higher education to share learnings and expertise, and which has produced Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) Guidelines for Educators.

Complementary to this work, the HEA published in 2025 the report Generative AI in Higher Education Teaching and Learning: Sectoral Perspectives. This report captures the views of staff, students, and leaders across the Irish higher education system on the opportunities and challenges posed by artificial intelligence. This consultation also informed the development of the HEA's forthcoming policies and guidelines on generative AI in higher education, due for publication by early 2026.

We will continue to strengthen the responsible use of new AI technologies, with a strong focus on providing AI literacy training across further and higher education.

3. Reform Funding Allocation Models

We will continue to enhance the funding allocation models to increase the agility of our tertiary education institutions to respond to changing learner and labour market requirements, to maximise value from public investment, aligning the allocation of funding to public policy objectives.

3.1 Amend Funding Allocation Mechanisms to Align with Policy Priorities

Funding serves as a foundational enabler for sustaining the tertiary education system, enabling the state to strategically steer the system while also providing institutions with the flexibility to pursue innovation and respond effectively to evolving challenges.

Higher Education Institutions are funded through a mix of income streams including state grants, competitive funding, tuition fees, and commercial/private income.

DFHERIS provides financial support to the higher education sector through a variety of means including recurrent grants, capital grants, research grants, superannuation funding, policy initiatives such as apprenticeship, and indirectly, such as fees paid on behalf of students (for example free fees, Springboard+, and SUSI fee supports).

The current higher education funding model allocates recurrent funding primarily based on weighted student numbers. Apart from €5 million in performance funding, funding is disbursed with no reference to system outcomes, offering limited leverage to incentivise change or reward excellent performance.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are primarily funded through state grants. DFHERIS allocates funding to SOLAS for the FET sector from the Exchequer and the National Training Fund to deliver FET programmes in a wide range of settings including Post-Leaving Certificate and Further Education Colleges, Training Centres (which includes apprenticeships), Youthreach and adult education centres.

Following the publication of the 2022 FET Funding Model Review report, the funding of ETBs has transitioned to a simplified five category funding allocation system approach. The model allows a more efficient and effective resource allocation, and more autonomy for ETBs to target investment in areas of greatest regional need

Over the duration of this strategy, we will continue to support the HEA to develop funding allocation mechanisms aligned to policy priorities, taking into account the future direction of higher education and more flexible modes of teaching and learning. These reformed mechanisms will provide a transparent and streamlined model for the allocation of funding across the various streams, including core funding based on enrolments,targeted funding aimed at supporting initiatives responding to critical skills demand and essential services, and performance-based funding.

This mix of funding streams will allow the department to allocate funding in line with strategic priorities, thereby aligning education outcomes more closely with national objectives, and increasing system responsiveness.

In Further Education and Training, we will continue to support SOLAS in strengthening the alignment between funding allocation and measurable outcomes and impact. This includes refining structures to incentivise performance, support innovation, and ensure that resources are directed toward areas of greatest strategic value. By deepening the connection between investment and results, we aim to build a more accountable, responsive, and outcomes-driven FET system.

Strategic Actions – Pillar3

3.2 Continue to Implement 'Funding the Future' Policy with Progressive Enhancement of Core Higher Education Funding

Funding the Future, published in May 2022, outlined a vision for how higher education will be funded and how this will support students, employers and wider society.

The Framework identified an amount of €307 million as representing the quantum of increase in core funding required to deliver enhanced performance, strategic reforms and strengthened quality of outcomes.

In return for increased investment under Funding the Future, the higher education system delivers enhanced performance aligned to strategic priorities defined in the framework, alongside parallel efforts to address the cost of education as a barrier to participation.

Over the four budgets since the publication of Funding the Future, an additional €174 million has been secured in exchequer and employer funding with a commitment to deliver a further €100 million by 2030 from the National Training Fund (NTF). This additional funding will create space for higher education institutions to increase staffing levels and capacity, enable a greater alignment of provision with priority skills needs and facilitate the further development of tertiary programmes.

We will continue to drive the implementation of 'Funding the Future' through progressive enhancement of core funding to higher education institutions in line with the annual budgetary process. To ensure optimal use of NTF and Technological Enhancement Fund (TEF) funding, we will work towards compacts with Higher Education and employers on additional outcomes to be delivered, including enhancements to teaching and learning, flexible and lifelong learning, and measures to support sustainability of funding.

4. Deliver Capital and Infrastructure for Sustainable System Growth

We will continue to develop the wider tertiary education system's capacity to initiate and deliver capital projects, through the progressive development of delivery capability both within the department and in state agencies as well as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and ETBs.

4.1 Deliver Capital Expenditure Programmes under Reviewed NDP 2026-2030

In July 2025, the government committed under the National Development Plan (NDP) 2026-2030 to provide €4.55 billion in capital allocation to DFHERIS.

Funding received through the NDP review process will support transformative projects that contribute to economic growth, job creation, research and innovation, balanced regional development, decarbonisation, and the global competitiveness of Ireland's further and higher education sector.

During the course of this strategy, we will deliver and progress a suite of capital expenditure programmes in line with the Revised National Development Plan 2026-2030. Capital investment programmes include:

- the Technological Sector Strategic Projects Programme(TSSPP)
- the Higher Education Strategic Infrastructure Fund (HESIF)
- the Infrastructure Upgrade and Refurbishment Fund (IURF)
- the Strategic Infrastructure Upgrade Programme (SIUP)
- The Higher Education Energy Efficiency and Decarbonisation Pathfinder Programme (HE EEDPP) co-funded with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) and the FET College Major Capital Programme.
- Inspire Research Infrastructure Investment Programme

These programmes are in addition to some individual projects and other regular programmes such as devolved grant, the green devolved grant for the FET sector and minor and emergency works programmes. All of these programmes will have a climate lens applied thereby ensuring that capital investments are future proofed and aligned with the national climate targets.

4.2 Lead Sector-Wide Decarbonisation through a Strategic Action Plan, Coordinated Investment and Planning

The decarbonisation of the tertiary education sector is one of the most significant strategic challenges, and opportunities, facing the sector this decade.

The department has a clear legal mandate to drive this transition by reducing the tertiary education sectors' greenhouse gases by 51% by 2030, achieving a 50% improvement in energy efficiency and delivering a climate neutral tertiary sector by 2050. Meeting these obligations requires that all planning, investment, and operational decisions across the sector are consistently aligned with national climate policy, carbon reduction targets, and long-term sustainability goals.

There is already strong evidence that the sector can deliver at scale. The combined further and higher education estates have already achieved significant emission reductions since climate targets were introduced, amounting to 14% below baseline as of 2023. These reductions have been driven by a combination of behavioural changes, estate management, and investment in refurbishment and retrofitting. It demonstrates both a proven track record of delivery and the depth of capability that exists within institutional estates and energy management teams.

Decarbonisation, however, cannot be treated as a compliance exercise alone. It is a defining leadership challenge that will increasingly influence capital planning, operational models, and institutional collaboration.

The scale of the challenge is substantial. The tertiary sector holds the second largest building floor area of the public sector (3.6 million m^2) and produces 17% of public sector building emissions. At the same time, the sector is expected to continue to grow, with increasing student numbers and expanded research activity. Decarbonisation, therefore, cannot be about constraining growth but instead it must be about enabling growth to occur sustainably, by decoupling emissions from activity and investment decisions.

To support institutions in meeting their carbon reduction and efficiency targets, we will develop a Strategic Action Plan for the Decarbonisation of Tertiary Sector Building Stock which will serve as an evidence-based platform for coordinated action, continuous improvement and smart investment. It will support institutions to accommodate growth without locking in avoidable emissions and help establish a benchmark for credible, durable decarbonisation across the public sector.

Energy efficiency and decarbonisation will remain a fundamental criteria for progression in all capital investment programmes. Measures such as the Energy Efficiency and Decarbonisation Programme and a new capital programme supporting building upgrade and optimisation will support the implementation of the Strategic Action Plan. The plan will promote creative, user-friendly design principles to reconfigure learning spaces and innovative delivery for a low carbon flexible building stock. A system change approach to decarbonisation will consider a re-think of service delivery modes and will promote inclusive dialogue on service delivery, space use and the sharing of space across and between higher and further education and training in support of the tertiary sector in meeting climate targets. Achieving these goals will also require the continued strengthening of the capacity and capability of administrative, technical, and support staff to enable and sustain system-wide change.

Our ambition is for the tertiary sector to be recognised as a national leader in decarbonisation, where success is defined by more than emissions reductions alone. It will be reflected in more resilient campuses, smarter investment decisions and institutions that can grow and evolve without hard-wiring emissions into future infrastructure.

Strategic Actions – Pillar3

4.3 Amend GDA Legislation to Support Capital Development Projects

The Grangegorman Development Agency (GDA) is a statutory agency established in 2006 with the aim of redeveloping the 73-acre site of the former St. Brendan's Hospital grounds in Dublin's North Inner City.

The Grangegorman development consists of a number of interrelated projects across the education, health and community sectors, including the building of TU Dublin's new campus, representing one of the largest investments in Higher Education in Ireland.

The department is now considering expanding the remit of the Grangegorman Development Agency (GDA) – through an amendment of the GDA legislation – to assist with sectoral capacity to develop and deliver capital projects.

4.4 Publish Tertiary Roadmap Identifying Priorities for Digital Infrastructure Investment

Rapid digitisation and developments in artificial intelligence along with the evolution of learning environments from physical spaces to virtual and blended platforms requires a transformation of the current digital infrastructure.

Advancing the priorities of DFHERIS depends significantly on the tertiary sector being digitally agile, open, and interconnected across education, research, and public engagement. The department plays a pivotal role in providing strategic leadership in ICT and digital capability.

Providing a consistent digital experience (for both staff and learners) using state-of-the-art classroom technology is integral to providing a high quality and accessible educational experience.

The current higher education digital infrastructure spans online research library resources (IReL), open access planning (NORF) alongside shared systems and infrastructure Advancing Services for Irish Education, Research and Academia (ASIERA) (formerly HEANet, EduCampus).

An improved digital infrastructure is essential to manage risk arising from cyber-attacks. Investment in the maintenance and upgrading of IT infrastructure can decrease the vulnerability of current infrastructure to cyber-attack.

We will develop targeted digital policy approaches to support high-quality service delivery and ensure timely access to data for evidence-based policy development and identifying skills needs and responses. Strengthening digital responsiveness, adaptability, and capability, across systems and within teaching, learning and research, is essential to building a successful, inclusive tertiary sector that meets the needs of all learners.

We will develop and enhance systems for student registration and record management, curriculum management, and timetabling, with appropriate governance oversight. We will focus on facilitating the seamless integration and interoperability of systems to advance institutions' digital and AI capabilities and the evolution of digital infrastructure.

We will work towards a system that allows for readily available, consistent and accessible up-to-date institutional and student data and information from a single source of data. This will facilitate data sharing for regulation and policy amongst the Department and its agencies (as appropriate) and inform strategic priorities, actions, and decision-making and enable greater efficiency and real-time transmission of information across multi-systems.

Updates to student data systems will allow the sectors to handle the growing complexity and diversity of the student population and their learning pathways, improving student data analysis including the retention and identification of 'at-risk' learners.

To drive this agenda, we will publish a tertiary roadmap identifying priorities for digital infrastructure investment, including enhanced student and course management solutions. Options for storing and sharing digital credentials will also be considered, to enhance security, portability and verification of qualifications.

5. Reform and Enhance Governance of the Tertiary Education System

We will aim to further enhance the co-ordination of the tertiary education system through stronger policy guidance.

5.1 Review the Higher Education Authority Act

The introduction of the HEA Act in 2022 marked a significant reform of higher education governance. The Act aimed to enhance oversight of HEIs, and reformed internal governance at Board level.

A core objective of the HEA Act 2022 is to strengthen sectoral governance and accountability frameworks in a way that supports institutional autonomy, improves public trust, and ultimately enables the system to meet strategic national goals more effectively.

The legislation clarified and strengthened the powers of the HEA to support governance in the sector. The Act gives the HEA graduated powers to deal with issues that have not been satisfactorily resolved by the institutions themselves and ensure they are addressed with appropriate urgency.

In December 2024, the department initiated a focused review of the implementation of the HEA Act 2022 to assess its effectiveness in comparison to the policy intent and to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement and possible reform. The findings of the ongoing review will inform further actions for improvement and reform. We will continue to maintain a strong governance framework for higher education institutions, providing the correct balance of oversight and accountability of higher education institutions, to ensure robust internal governance balanced with the need for strong autonomous institutions.

5.2 Review the Further Education and Training Act

In 2025, the department completed its first Periodic Critical Review (PCR) of SOLAS. One of the key objectives of the PCR was to examine the extent to which SOLAS is fulfilling its statutory mandate and whether the current legislative framework remains fit for purpose. The review found that SOLAS is broadly delivering on the functions set out in the Further Education and Training (FET) Act 2013. However, it noted that SOLAS' remit has expanded significantly over time, now encompassing national leadership in apprenticeship reform, and the coordination of cross-cutting initiatives such as green skills and the Adult Literacy for Life strategy. While these activities are broadly aligned with the FET Act, the PCR found that their scale and complexity have contributed to mandate stretch and blurred governance boundaries.

In response, the PCR recommends establishing a structured process to review and, where necessary, update the legislative basis to ensure it continues to support SOLAS' evolving functions. Such a process would help clarify roles and responsibilities, strengthen accountability, and provide a clearer underpinning for areas where SOLAS both develops and oversees major national strategies, including the FET Strategy. We will take forward this recommendation through the implementation plan for the PCR.

The department is also progressing the transfer of FET-related functions under the Education and Training Board (ETB) Act 2013, ensuring DFHERIS is assigned the statutory responsibilities necessary to oversee the FET sector effectively. Following the establishment of DFHERIS in 2020, the Department of Education and Youth continues to operate overall governance oversight of the ETB sector including ensuring a Code of Practice for the Governance of ETBs is in place and reviewing and monitoring its implementation. Responsibility for the Minister for Education's functions under the FET Act, 2013 in relation to SOLAS have transferred to the MFHERIS under the Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Transfer of Departmental Administration and Ministerial Functions) Order, 2020 (SI 451/2020). However, some legislative powers and duties relevant to the FET sector in the ETB Act, 2013 remain vested in the Minister for Education and Youth and are, since the establishment of DFHERIS, relevant to the remit of the MFHERIS and require to be transferred. We will continue to collaborate with the Department of Education and Youth to progress this legislative reform. Work is underway to facilitate integration, consolidation and harmonisation of FET provision, with the goal of enabling easier access, simplified pathways, a consistent learner experience, and a stronger identity for the sector. A reform of governance structures is an important element of this wider FET transformation agenda.

Strategic Actions – Pillar3

5.2 Review the Further Education and Training Act continued

We will work on further developing ETBs governance and management structures through the creation of a Governance Framework for FET Colleges. This Framework will act as an enabler for the sector, setting out guiding principles and a clear framework for the FET College model, creating efficiencies in the system and enhancing the learner experience, underpinned by strong and coherent governance systems. To that end, the department has established a Consultative Framework with sectoral and staff representatives to co-develop the reform agenda. Introducing a new and strengthened governance model for ETBs will be central to delivering for Ireland's skills needs.

In addition, SOLAS, working with DFHERIS, will progress the development and implementation of a new FET Strategy, ensuring that it is aligned with both department and government priorities.

5.3 Strengthen Sectoral Governance

Institutional autonomy is a core feature of the further education and training, higher education and research sectors, since it is linked both to academic freedom and to operational flexibility.

While institutional autonomy allows institutions to respond flexibly to changing national and local needs, autonomy also brings with it an enhanced responsibility to observe high standards of governance and financial management.

The HEA has a statutory responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions, whereas SOLAS is responsible for the strategic co-ordination and funding of the FET sector.

In accordance with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies 2016, the relationship between the department and its agencies is governed by Oversight Agreements (OA) and Performance Delivery Agreements (PDA).[24]

The PDA is reviewed and updated every year whilst the OA covers a three-year period. The OA and PDA are dynamic documents which may be modified in light of changing circumstances.

In addition, the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies (2016) requires that all non-commercial state bodies are subject to Periodic Critical Review (PCR) every five years. The aim of the PCR process is to provide a robust challenge to, and assurance on, the continuing business need for the organisation in question, both in function and form. DFHERIS has commenced work on conducting PCRs of its aegis bodies and these will be completed on a scheduled basis.

Concurrently, DFHERIS is also developing a handbook for sectoral governance oversight and coordination responsibilities with a view to streamline monitoring and oversight requirements.

5.4 Provide Stronger Policy Guidance to the Tertiary Sector through an Annual Policy Statement

The funding and governance arrangements underpinning the current tertiary education system have been shown to deliver for the Irish society. Yet, the current system is also a highly decentralised one, which relies on a cascade of governance and funding mechanisms to achieve its objectives.

There is scope to enhance the co-ordination of the system within existing legislative frameworks through stronger policy guidance to generate greater system adaptability and responsiveness and strengthen collaboration across sectors.

To this end the department will provide stronger policy guidance to the Tertiary education sector through an annual policy statement and more frequent direction which will facilitate the progressive implementation of the Tertiary Education Strategy.

[24] The Oversight Agreement (OA) defines the key roles, responsibilities and supports which underpin the relationship between the Department and each agency whereas the Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) sets out the accountability framework between the Department and each agency. An important feature of the PDA each year is to set out the purpose of the agreement, the mutual commitments and the services and activities planned by each agency for the coming year.

6. Build Research Capacity for Policy

Evidence-informed policymaking enables the development of targeted and effective policy responses grounded in robust data and analysis. Researchers can therefore play a vital role in informing policy responses to prevailing societal challenges. Their work also provides a foundation for effective foresight in policy development.

DFHERIS has a leadership role in government to foster collaboration between researchers and policymakers, so that policy development and decision making can be informed by robust and contemporary evidence. The department is leading a number of key structures and measures designed to maximise the impact of publicly funded research on policy development.

The Government Science Advisor, with the support of the National Science Advice Forum, will develop a programme to align scientific expertise with policymaking to strengthen responses to complex and challenging issues. The Advisor will work to enhance science capacity across government departments and improve communication around complex scientific concepts and discoveries.

Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland will support research activity, interdisciplinary collaboration and policy connectivity through key funding and engagement activity such as the Public Service Fellowship scheme, and National Challenge Funding to focus research activity on key national challenges.

The DFHERIS-led Civil Service Research Network is successfully building skills and promoting structural mechanisms within the civil service to facilitate engagement with researchers. Other structures, which include research/civil service exchanges and the DFHERIS-led Higher Education Research Advocate Network, have been created to promote linkages and build capacity for policy relevant research throughout the research system.

DFHERIS is also leveraging the expertise and insights of established international networks in various countries and is leading Ireland's participation in an EU-led multi-country project to assess national evidence ecosystems and identify opportunities to develop Ireland's research-policy capacity.

In line with Programme for Government 2025 commitments, we will seek to further enhance the government's capacity to engage with research on policy.

Building on existing structures and initiatives, DFHERIS will continue to work closely with the Government Science Advisor, Taighde Éireann – Research Ireland, and stakeholders from across the national evidence ecosystem to bring forward a transparent and comprehensive Framework for connecting research to policy across the civil service.

Harnessing the value of data to strengthen the evidence base for policy development in the tertiary sector is a critical enabler for these activities. We will support sector-wide improvements in data governance, access, skills, and technology through collaboration across the tertiary education sector to maximise the use of high-quality data in policy development.

DFHERIS will leverage its oversight role for both tertiary education and the research system, to develop a strategic approach to data and research, to improve the management, integration and use of evidence for policy development and service delivery in the tertiary sector.

Pillar 4
Transformational Growth and Lifelong Learning

In enabling personal growth, strong communities and a resilient economy, the power of tertiary education is truly transformational.

In a period of significant and rapid economic and technological change, lifelong learning is particularly important to enable people to adapt flexibly and quickly to changing labour market requirements. As a result, Ireland has witnessed in recent years a rapid expansion of flexible, accessible, and bite-sized learning.

Learning new skills and staying abreast with evolving knowledge not only supports personal development and individual employment opportunities, but also future proofs businesses and advances the further development of professional roles.

Today, the Tertiary Education System offers a wide network of learning pathways, spanning community education, adult literacy and numeracy courses, work integrated learning and apprenticeships, and PLC courses, micro-credentials and micro-qualifications, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

While each component of the overall tertiary education system is working well, there is scope to create a more coherent system consisting of flexible, accessible and seamless pathways. A tertiary education system, which allows learners to dip in and out of education throughout their life, which recognises prior learning and allows the accumulation of credit along their learning journeys fostering a culture of inclusivity and learning at every life stage.

To that end, we will continue to work towards better understanding learners' decision-making process, so that we can better support them in navigating their learning journeys. We will also expand the offering of flexible pathways through a range of measures, including tertiary programmes, the expansion of the part-time fee scheme, or the opening of new careers opportunities through the apprenticeship model. Taken together, these measures can support lifelong learning and progression for a wider cohort of learners.

Strategic Actions
Pillar 4

1. Implement and Refresh the Adult Literacy Strategy

Literacy, numeracy, and digital skills are essential for adults to thrive in a modern society and the workforce. Launched in 2021, the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy is Ireland's 10-year strategy, which aims to ensure that every adult has the literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy needed to participate fully in society and reach their full potential.

The targets set in the Strategy are to decrease the share of adults with unmet literacy needs from 18% to 7%; the share of those with unmet numeracy needs from 25% to 12% and to decrease the share of those without basic digital skills from 47% to 20%.

The department invests €4 million annually to implement the ALL Strategy. Key achievements to date include the establishment of a cross-government structure and a National Programme Office in SOLAS; active literacy coalitions across all 16 ETBs; the introduction of the Collaboration and Innovation Fund; and the development of practitioner frameworks and health literacy initiatives.

However, in the latest results, Ireland ranks 13th in literacy and 18th in numeracy across 31 OECD countries who participated in the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Results released in December 2024 show that nearly 20% of adults globally are considered low performers in all skills domains. Irish adults remain at the OECD average for literacy and numeracy skills in 2023. Despite Irish adults performing at the OECD average for literacy and numeracy, there has been limited progress since the late 1990s, with persistent levels of unmet literacy needs.

Addressing these gaps through a strong focus on lifelong learning is essential to equip adults for the demands of a changing economy. Sustained cross-government commitment is critical to maintaining momentum and delivering lasting improvements for adult learners. This underscores the importance of continued and focused implementation of the ALL Strategy.

In response to the PIAAC results, SOLAS established the Literacy Provision Expert Group in mid-2025 to produce a report recommending standards for literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy provision across ETBs, including a common approach to assessment, learner supports, and practitioner development. The Group will also identify gaps in provision and propose operating guidelines to improve access and coherence in literacy services. This Group will submit its report to the department in 2026.

To maintain momentum and advance the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy's goals, we will restructure the ALL Strategy governance to ensure more effective cross-sectoral coordination and accountability. The department will consider options for a mid-term evaluation of the ALL Strategy and exploring the feasibility of a national survey on adult literacy and numeracy. This would build on the PIAAC framework but extend its scope to include cohorts not currently represented, providing a broader evidence base to inform future policy and implementation. Finally, we will start bringing forward a new strategy in 2030.

2. Expand Lifelong and Flexible Learning Pathways

Expanding lifelong learning and flexible pathways will enable people to adapt swiftly to new labour market requirements, thereby boosting job opportunities and productivity across the workforce. Utilising the breadth of the tertiary system, we will make upskilling available in the most appropriate delivery format for the given skills challenge, ensuring that impact and uptake is maximised.

Upskilling and reskilling Ireland's workforce is an important element of Ireland's response to megatrends such as the AI revolution, increasing digitisation, sustainability targets, and demographic change. Continuous learning allows people to avail of new opportunities, including for those most at risk of marginalisation.

The importance of this agenda to our individual wellbeing and economic development is underpinned by the OECD Ireland Skills Strategy Review and aligns with the Action Plan for Competitiveness and Productivity along with UNESCO's ESD for 2030 Framework[25] and Ireland's ESD to 2030 national strategy.

Underpinning the shared international understanding of the importance of this issue, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan set a target of 60% of all adults participating in lifelong learning every year by 2030. In May 2022, under the Plan, Ireland committed to achieving a 64.2 % participation rate in lifelong learning by 2030. We will continue to advance the transformation of the Tertiary Education System to support a culture of lifelong learning.

2.1 Reform Access, Transfer and Progression Policy

Coherent Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP) policy across FET and HE is central in enabling learners to move flexibly between courses, institutions, and sectors, and complements actions that aim to improve pathways and the recognition of qualifications.

In 2025, QQI embarked on a significant piece of work that will reform current Access, Transfer and Progression Policy and increase clarity and coherence at NFQ Levels 5 and 6.

The new Access, Transfer and Progression Policy, currently under development, will focus on improving flexibility, adaptability and credit use to support clear, navigable and extensive pathways for learners. Credit accumulation and fostering the development of stackable transferable awards that can be built into larger qualifications within institutions and across institutions will allow learners to 'stack' smaller units of learnings such as micro-credentials.

In addition, the introduction of a single major award at NFQ Level 6, will be a critical step towards creating parity of esteem between FET and HE Level 6 awards and will better serve the needs of learners. The use of ECTS for all major and non-major awards at NFQ Level 5 and 6 may further improve progression opportunities. It is the intention that the new single award will be fully implemented from September 2027. DFHERIS will continue to support QQI to work in partnership with institutions and providers to build and sustain the capacity necessary for the effective implementation of this policy.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an important element of ATP policy. RPL is a process whereby an individual's existing knowledge, skills, and experience, gained through formal, non-formal, or informal means, are formally identified, assessed, and acknowledged against an NFQ award. RPL provides pathways to FET and HE programmes, allows for credit or exemptions from specific course elements, and thereby facilitates access to tertiary education and the workplace. We will further strengthen the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) across FET and HE.

Reforming ATP policy, including working towards a credit system that spans FET and HE, and strengthened RPL process will not only improve pathways and progression across the tertiary education system, but it will also be an important driver for true parity of esteem between the two sectors.

[25] UNESCO (2019). *Framework for the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) beyond 2019*. **https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370215**

2.3 Grow Micro-Credentials and Micro-Qualifications Offering

Springboard+ and Skills to Advance are two initiatives fostering the provision of flexible learning opportunities and lifelong learning pathways, in higher education and further education and training, respectively.

Springboard+ supports the development of targeted upskilling and reskilling initiatives in areas of critical skills needs within HEIs. For 2025, this included, for the first time, short, accredited micro-credentials designed to meet specific industry needs. Higher education micro-credentials have been further supported through the Human Capital Initiative – originally through the HCI Pillar 3 Micro-Credentials project and, more recently, through the Micro-Credentials Learner Fee Subsidy, which subsidises fees for learners across micro-credentials courses in priority areas.

In the FET sector, Skills to Advance has supported the roll out of micro-qualifications across ETBs. Micro-qualifications offer short, targeted courses designed to meet specific industry needs. They offer opportunities for upskilling and reskilling in priority areas such as sustainability and digital transformation, equipping learners with the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving job market.

These flexible learning options foster lifelong learning, support career transitions, and thereby enhance Ireland's workforce resilience.

In 2025, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) embarked on a consultation process to consider whether the national infrastructure for quality assurance and the regulation of qualifications is sufficient for micro-credentials or whether additional supports are required to help ensure micro-credentials meet the needs of all qualifications users.

Micro-credentials and micro-qualifications are an important component of the tertiary education system's response to specific upskilling needs. To respond in a more coherent and targeted way, we will work towards a more closely aligned cross-tertiary offering. Taking a cross-tertiary perspective will ensure that resources are best targeted.

2.4 Broaden Part-time Fee Scheme

DFHERIS introduced a Student Part Time Fee Scheme and Regulations for Specified Undergraduate Courses in September 2024 to provide fee support to eligible part-time students attending specified publicly funded undergraduate courses leading to a major award.

The Part Time Fee Scheme aims to provide socio-economically disadvantaged students with additional flexibility when choosing a course.

The Part Time Fee Scheme covers approved undergraduate courses that accrue between 30 and 50 ECTS per year, and that are delivered either in-person or through hybrid learning, by a publicly funded HEI. This provides opportunities to those for whom full-time education is not a suitable option – for example those balancing the pursuit of a degree with caring responsibilities.

The introduction of the Part Time Fee Scheme marked the first time that fee support, under the Student Support Act, has been made available for students studying part-time. The number of HEIs on the scheme has increased from 7 institutions to 9 institutions for the 2026/27 iteration. As part of a broad effort to align funding models with a range of flexible learning options, a review of the Part-time Fee Scheme will examine the success of the scheme and explore possible changes to make the scheme more accessible to part-time students.

2.5 Promote Lifelong Learning Among Older Learners

Lifelong Learning is arguably particularly important for older workers who may need to upskill and reskill after several years of experience in the workplace.

Yet, data shows that engagement in lifelong learning is less common among older workers.[26] Given the fast-changing nature of the world of work, and evidence that it is harder to reengage with the labour market as one ages, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is committed to ensuring that these learners are supported.

Train-and-place employment bootcamps offer intensive upskilling and training opportunities in high-demand sectors such as digital and green sectors.

We will continue to embed train-and-place employment bootcamps to help older individuals overcome employment barriers and re-enter the workforce.

[26] SOLAS (2025). *Lifelong Learning Amongst Adults in Ireland – Quarter 4 2024*. Dublin: SOLAS. **https://a.storyblok.com/f/70398/x/f7897760f2/lifelong-learning-amongst-adults-in-ireland-q4-2024.pdf**

Strategic Actions – Pillar 4

3. Grow Integrated Pathways across Tertiary Education

Alongside the growing network of lifelong and flexible learning pathways, the Further and Higher Education sectors in Ireland continue to expand their offerings of distinct and complementary learner pathways.

The establishment of QQI in 2012 marked the first time in its history that Ireland had an agency in place that had oversight of qualifications across both sectors, enabling greater connection between further and higher education. More recently, the 2022 unified tertiary education policy aims to create clear, flexible pathways that support learner mobility between further and higher education.

While progress has been made, continued efforts are needed to build a truly seamless tertiary education system.

3.1 Mainstream Tertiary Degrees and the Higher Education Links Scheme

The establishment of the National Tertiary Office (NTO) within the HEA in December 2022, jointly managed by the HEA and SOLAS was central to broadening pathway options for learners. Tasked with developing joint further and higher education programmes, the NTO launched the first tertiary programmes in July 2023.

Tertiary programmes are a new kind of educational pathway that allow students to begin a Level 8 degree course in further education and training, before transitioning on to complete their degree in a higher education setting.

Entry to tertiary programmes is independent of the CAO system, thereby providing another route to a degree. This new tertiary pathway diversifies routes to higher education, while also strengthening skills supply in priority skills areas such as health and social care.

Tertiary degrees are unique in so far as these degrees are co-designed and co-delivered by the Education and Training Boards and Higher Education Institutions, with seamless transition between the two sectors.

Tertiary degrees have been provided as a part of a pilot programme which will run until 2026. A review of the tertiary degree programmes and the National Tertiary Office is underway. This review will aim to examine the success of the pilot programme, identify areas of good practice, and areas for improvement, and explore how to transition the tertiary programmes from a pilot into a mainstream pathway.

Tertiary degrees complement existing Further Education and Training/Higher Education pathways facilitated through the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS). The Higher Education Links Scheme remains the main Further Education and Training/Higher Education pathway with 14,093 students entering higher education with a further education and training award or equivalent in the academic year 2023/24, and with 91% of HE courses now available through the Higher Education Links Scheme.

Tertiary programmes and the Higher Education Links Scheme are key initiatives for creating more diverse and progressive pathways in the system beyond the traditional points system.

We will continue to strengthen and diversify pathways into further and higher education by advancing tertiary programmes, the Higher Education Links Scheme, and expanding access through non-CAO routes, in line with our commitment to inclusive and flexible lifelong learning.

Furthermore, through the new FET Strategy, the department and SOLAS will continue to drive the transformation of the FET sector, expanding on the current offering to deliver diverse and seamless pathways for learners, enabling progression across and between institutions.

3.2 Develop a Strengthened Apprenticeship System in the Context of a Tertiary Education System

Apprenticeships are a cornerstone of Ireland's tertiary education and training system, combining work-based learning with formal education to deliver critical skills across the economy. They play a central role in:

- Meeting national skills needs in priority areas such as construction and retrofitting.
- Supporting upskilling and reskilling in response to technological change and economic disruption.
- Broadening access to sustainable employment pathways.

Since the formation of DFHERIS, the system has expanded significantly – from 17,800 apprentices across 60 programmes to 30,100 apprentices enrolled in 78 programmes. This growth is set to continue. The government has committed to reaching 12,500 new apprentice registrations annually by 2030, in line with national skills priorities and the critical requirement for skilled tradespeople ready to deliver infrastructure projects. Achieving this ambition will require a strengthened apprenticeship system – one that is high-quality and responsive.

Craft apprenticeship programmes are delivered across the tertiary education system, with Phase 2 training provided by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and Phases 4 and 6 delivered in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). To date, responsibility for curriculum and assessment has rested with SOLAS and QQI. While overall oversight of apprenticeship will remain with SOLAS, and QQI will continue to regulate quality across apprenticeship programmes, specific responsibilities for curriculum development and assessment will now transfer to education providers.

This will strengthen the quality and relevance of craft apprenticeship programmes by placing academic oversight with those directly responsible for delivery and best positioned to uphold standards. It will also harness the full strengths of Ireland's tertiary education system, ensuring that apprenticeships continue to meet the evolving needs of learners, employers, and the wider economy.

3.3 Expand Apprenticeship and Work-Integrated Learning Offerings

Work-integrated learning (WIL) – where learners apply their studies in real-world settings – is a vital feature of Ireland's tertiary education system. It includes a range of models such as traineeships, clinical placements, and apprenticeships.

Among these, apprenticeships are recognised as offering a guaranteed employment pathway, with learners formally employed from the outset and supported through structured, earn-and-learn programmes.

New apprenticeship offerings have also opened up new routes into professions that were previously primarily accessible through university, such as accounting, engineering, and social work. This shift has broadened participation in higher-level learning and made professional qualifications more accessible to diverse learners, including those seeking to earn while they learn or re-enter the workforce.

This expansion is not just about increasing numbers – it is about ensuring the right pathway for the right occupation or skills need. Apprenticeships, in particular, offer a structured route into employment for roles that require deep, hands-on learning and guaranteed workplace experience. They are especially suited to occupations where employment from day one is essential to skill development and retention.

To meet this ambition, we will continue to expand apprenticeship offerings as part of a broader strategy to grow work-integrated learning pathways including traineeships.

Strategic Actions – Pillar 4

3.4 Explore the potential to accelerate apprenticeship pathways

Ireland's national infrastructure targets will require an increase in the skilled construction workforce over the coming years. Traditional craft apprenticeships remain central to the construction skills pipeline and are delivered through a well-established four-year training model. As part of building a more responsive skills system and supporting the delivery of major housing and infrastructure projects, we will explore the potential for accelerating apprenticeship pathways to qualification.

The transition of quality assurance and curriculum responsibilities for craft apprenticeships from SOLAS and QQI to education providers presents a strategic opportunity to review how programmes are structured and delivered. Education institutions assuming responsibility for curriculum development should actively explore opportunities to optimise these programmes, recognising the capability and capacity across the tertiary education system. These opportunities may include the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), flexible delivery modules, and modularization to shorten programme duration where feasible, in line with international best practice and quality standards.

4. Harness Community Education to Drive Social Value and Inclusion

Community education is crucial for individual growth, social cohesion, and democratic participation. It provides local, accessible learning opportunities, fosters skills development, and builds confidence, ultimately promoting greater community involvement.

SOLAS published the Community Education Framework in 2024 with the aim of establishing a more consistent approach to community education provision across the FET sector. To oversee its implementation, SOLAS has established a National Implementation Steering Group (ISG), bringing together key stakeholders across the sector.

While community education is an important part of FET, it is necessary to review current provision to ensure it is reaching the intended cohorts. This includes developing a clear position on the role of personal interest courses and their alignment with the strategic objectives of the FET system. The department will work with SOLAS to develop this position in the context of the Community Education Framework.

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Appendix A
Summary of Actions

Pillar 1
Skills and Research for Competitiveness, Social Development and Economic Success

The Tertiary Education Strategy will support Ireland's research and skills ecosystem to drive innovation, investment and employment and thus strengthen the country's global competitiveness.

Strategic Objective	Strategic Actions
Invest in National Research and Innovation Capacity	• Design and Deliver a New Programme of Investment in Research Equipment and Facilities Using Funds Allocated in the National Development Plan • Invest in High Performance Computing and Establish an AI Factory Antenna in Ireland • Support Tyndall National Institute
Promote All Island and International Linkages	• Strategically Advance Ireland's Membership of International Research Organisations • Support Ireland's participation in the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation – Horizon Europe • Support All-island Linkages • Roll Out TrustEd Ireland • Strengthen Ireland's Qualifications Recognition System
Advance a National Skills Intelligence Ecosystem	• Establish a Skills Observatory • Optimise Wider Skills Intelligence Ecosystem
Drive Specialist Skills and Innovation	• Grow Specialisation and Centres of Excellence • Invest in Areas of Priority Skill Needs for Enterprise and Public Services • Support Irish Language Education • Support the Enhancement of Creativity across the Tertiary Sector and Support the Development of a University of the Creative Industries • Advance Digital Skills and AI Transition
Strengthen Ireland's Research Talent Base	• Support Ireland's PhD Researcher Community • Broaden Opportunities through Increased Research Activity in Technological Universities • Support Researchers at all Career Stages

Pillar 2
Equality and Opportunity

The Tertiary Education Strategy will build a more inclusive and equitable tertiary education system that reflects the full diversity of Irish society.

Strategic Objective	Strategic Actions
Reform Transitions to Further and Higher Education	• Improve Transitions and Pathways from Second Level to Tertiary Education • Improve information for Those Making the Transition from Post-Primary to Tertiary Education
Enhance Participation and Inclusion	• Expand Access to Work-Integrated Learning, Including Apprenticeships and Other Work-Based Programmes • Support Early School Leavers • Expand Access and Inclusion to Tertiary Education • Support Student Progression, Completion and Success in Tertiary Education • Introduce Second Chance Option • Graduate Entry Professional Programmes
Grow and Deliver a Responsive Tertiary System for Learners with Disabilities	• Enhance Successful and Seamless Transitions • Grow Support and Services for People with Disabilities • Expand Universal Design for Learning • Establish a Programme to Support Pathways to Employment for Students with Disabilities • Expand Fund for Students with Disabilities
Improve Student Financial Supports	• Reduce the Student Contribution Fee • Increase supports under the Student Grant Scheme • Reform the Student Grant Scheme (SUSI) to better meet the needs of students
Develop Solutions to Address Student Accommodation	• Implement the New National Student Accommodation Strategy 2026–2035

Appendix A Summary of Actions continued

Pillar 3
System Performance, Governance and Adaptability

The Tertiary Education Strategy will aim to ensure that institutions and agencies have the tools, clarity and frameworks needed to deliver on national goals in coherent, quicker and more flexible ways, and aligned with economic and social needs.

Strategic Objective	Strategic Actions
Transform Staffing Structures in Technological and Further Education and Training sectors	• Enable Technological Universities to achieve their enhanced mission through academic staffing reform and professorial grades • Deliver the New Further Education and Training Staffing Structures
Enhance Teaching and Learning across Tertiary Education	• Enhance Teaching and Learning • Strengthen the Responsible Use of AI across Further and Higher Education
Reform Funding Allocation Models	• Amend Funding Allocation Mechanisms to Align with Policy Priorities • Continue to Implement 'Funding the Future' Policy with Progressive Enhancement of Core HE Funding
Deliver Capital and Infrastructure for Sustainable System Growth	• Deliver Capital Expenditure Programmes under Reviewed NDP 2026-2030 • Lead Sector-Wide Decarbonisation through a Strategic Action Plan, Coordinated Investment and Planning • Amend GDA Legislation to Support Capital Development Projects • Publish Tertiary Roadmap Identifying Priorities for Digital Infrastructure Investment
Reform and Enhance Governance of the Tertiary Education System	• Review the Higher Education Authority Act • Review the Further Education and Training Act • Strengthen Sectoral Governance • Provide Stronger Policy Guidance to the Tertiary Sector through an Annual Policy Statement
Build Research Capacity for Policy	• Establish a Framework for Policy and Research Engagement in the Civil Service • Develop a Data Strategy to Strengthen the Evidence Base for Policy Development and Service Delivery in the Tertiary Sector

Pillar 4
Transformational Growth and Lifelong Learning

The Tertiary Education Strategy will work towards a tertiary education system that supports lifelong learning in providing a network of flexible, accessible and seamless learning pathways.

Strategic Objective	Strategic Actions
Implement and refresh Adult Literacy Strategy	• Restructure the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy Governance
Expand lifelong and flexible learning pathways	• Reform Access, Transfer and Progression Policy • Grow Micro-Credentials and Micro-Qualifications Offering • Broaden Part-time Fee Scheme • Promote Lifelong Learning Among Older Learners
Grow integrated pathways across tertiary education	• Mainstream Tertiary degrees and the Higher Education Links Scheme • Develop a Strengthened Apprenticeship System in the Context of a Tertiary Education System • Expand Apprenticeship and Work-Integrated Learning Offerings • Explore the potential to accelerate apprenticeship pathways
Harness Community Education to drive social value and inclusion	• Review current Provision in the Context of the Community Education Framework

Appendix B
List of Abbreviations

AI
Artificial Intelligence

AIF
Artificial Intelligence Factory

ALL
Adult Literacy for Life

ASIERA
Advancing Services for Irish Education, Research and Academia

ATP
Access, Transfer and Progression

CAO
Central Applications Office

CERN
European Organisation for Nuclear Research

DFHERIS
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

ECTS
European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

EEA
European Economic Area

EHEA
European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process

ERDF
European Regional Development Fund

ESD
Education for Sustainable Development

ETB
Education and Training Board

EU
European Union

FDI
Foreign Direct Investment

FET
Further Education and Training

FSD
Fund for Students with Disabilities

GenAI
Generative Artificial Intelligence

HCI
Human Capital Initiative

HEA
Higher Education Authority

HEI
Higher Education Institutions

HELS
Higher Education Links Scheme

HESIF
Higher Education Strategic Infrastructure Fund

HPC
High Performance Computing

HSCP
Health and Social Care Professionals

ICHEC
Irish Centre for High-End Computing

ICT
Information and Communications Technology

ILEP
Interim List of Eligible Programmes

IRC
Irish Research Council

IRO
International Research Organisations

IURF
Infrastructure Upgrade and Refurbishment Fund

MMC
Modern Methods of Construction

NAIN
National Academic Integrity Network

NDP
National Development Plan

NFQ
National Framework of Qualifications

NGO
Non-Governmental Organisation

NORF
National Open Research Forum

NTF
National Training Fund

NTO
National Tertiary Office

OA
Oversight Agreements

OECD
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PATH
Programme for Access to Higher Education

PDA
Performance Delivery Agreements

PhD
Doctor of Philosophy

PIAAC
Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

PLC
Post Leaving Certificate

QQI
Quality and Qualifications Ireland

R&I
Research and Innovation

RPL
Recognition of Prior Learning

RPO
Research Performing Organisations

SFI
Science Foundation Ireland

SIUP
Strategic Infrastructure Upgrade Programme

SME
Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

SOLAS
An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Training Authority)

SUSI
Ireland's national awarding authority for further and higher education grants

TEF
Technological Enhancement Fund

TSSPP
Technological Sector Strategic Projects Programme

TU
Technological Universities

UDL
Universal Design for Learning

UK
United Kingdom

UNESCO
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

WIL
Work-integrated Learning

Appendix C
Metrics

The Tertiary Education Strategy is based around four pillars;

- Pillar One: Skills and Research for Competitiveness, Social Development and Economic Success.
- Pillar Two: Equality and Opportunity.
- Pillar Three: System Performance, Governance and Adaptability.
- Pillar Four: Transformational Growth and Lifelong Learning.

The table below provides a list of targets that have been set for the sector in various national and international strategies and policies, which reflect the key activities and objectives of the pillars of the Tertiary Education Strategy. Progress against these targets will be reported on during the strategy cycle.

Table AC.1.
Indicators and targets for Tertiary Education Strategy, 2026–2031

Pillar 1: Skills and Research for Competitiveness, Social Development and Economic Success

Measure	Baseline	Target	Year
Number of apprenticeship registrations	9,352 (2024)	12,500	2030
Number of Research Ireland PhDs funded	700	3,800 (2026-2030)	2030
Number of publications in top 10% (per million population)	653 (2024)	3,300 (2026-2030)	2030
Number of engagements between Research Ireland funded researchers and Government Departments and Agencies	1,080	1,250 (2026-2030)	2030
European Innovation Scoreboard (Innovation performance as a % of EU average)	123% (2025)	125%	2030

Pillar 2 Equality and Opportunity

Measure	Baseline	Target	Year
Percentage of students from socio-economically disadvantaged areas who transfer directly to third level**	43% (2024)	54%	2028
New entrants with a disability (% of all new entrants) to higher education**	16.6% (2024)	16%	2028
New entrants from the Traveller community to Higher Education**	42 (2024)	150	2028
Numbers of learners progressing from FET to HE per annum	6,000 (2024)	7,000	2030

Pillar 3: System Performance, Governance and Adaptability

Measure	Baseline	Target	Year
CO_2 emissions (fossil) for FHERIS (% reduction from 2018 baseline)	14% (2023)	51%	2030
No. of Professors in Technological Universities	0 (2025)	25	2028
		50	2030

Pillar 4: Transformational Growth and Lifelong Learning

Measure	Baseline	Target	Year
Percentage of individuals aged 16-74 with at least basic digital skills	72.9% (2023)	80%	2030
Participation in lifelong learning	52% (2022)	64.20%	2030

** Midterm review of the National Access Plan 2022-2028 is currently underway; targets may be subject to update following completion of review