

## **Question 1**

Delighted to hear about the prospect for a cross border university, what stage is that issue currently at and how will it proceed?

### **Response:**

The establishment of a technological university (TU) in the north-west is being advanced through the Connacht Ulster Alliance (CUA) TU development consortium composed of Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Galway Mayo IT and IT Sligo. CUA is working on plans to submit an application seeking an order for establishment as a technological university under the Technological Universities Act 2018. My Department understands that an application is to be submitted by CUA by the end of the year.

The Government welcomes the development of plans for ambitious new higher education provision at the Magee Campus, including in the context of the British Government's City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund initiative which is being advanced by Derry City and Strabane District Council. This investment has the potential to increase access to third-level education for young people on a cross-border basis, enable further cooperation between third-level institutions in the North West and underpin broader economic development and opportunities in the region. We look forward to continued engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive including in taking the NDNA commitments forward through the regular pattern of Ministerial-level Sectoral meetings across the North South Ministerial Council's twelve policy sectors over the coming months. The funding requirement in the years ahead to deliver these projects will depend on the timing and details for projects being agreed on a North/South basis, and will need to take account of necessary discussions with the Executive through the North South Ministerial Council, the progress of implementation of each project, and, where relevant, our engagement with the British Government.

I am focused on examining opportunities for closer North-South collaboration in the Further Education and Higher Education areas including in the North West where such arise opportunities particularly post-Brexit and as we seek deal with and emerge from the Covid 19 pandemic. In this context I am determined that, notwithstanding Brexit, cross-border collaboration should not only be maintained but enhanced.

Finally, I have also noted with interest recent calls for the development of a cross-border university. While I understand the challenges involved in establishing such an institution including under the current legal framework for universities in this State I have asked my officials to consider the matter further.

## Question 2

Can Minister Harris elaborate as to where the additional 1250 college places this year will be allocated?

### Response

After engagement with higher education institutions (HEIs) to identify where there was capacity in the system to create additional places, and the demand to justify them, 2,225 additional places were made available in advance of Round One offers. These places were created in a broad range of courses across many disciplines, and include courses in areas of very high demand such as healthcare, science and teacher education. A summary of these 2,225 places by subject area and sector is below:

Subject Area	Universities	IoT/TU	Colleges	Total
Architecture	13	10	0	23
Arts & Humanities	469	7	0	476
Business	276	154	0	430
Creative Arts	0	35	6	41
Dentistry	2	0	16	18
Education	105	18	47	170
Engineering	232	81	0	313
Law	53	89	0	142
Music	9	0	0	9
Science	153	67	0	220
Information Technology	13	18	0	31
Nursing	86	38	10	134
Medicine, Health & Physical	35	158	25	218
<b>Total</b>	<b>1446</b>	<b>675</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>2225</b>

Following the correction of errors in the coding used by the Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades national standardisation process, the CAO identified 485 students who were entitled to a higher preference CAO offer as a result of their improved grades. While most of the students had already accepted a CAO offer, and were therefore given the option to transfer to a new course, a small number were receiving a CAO offer for the first time. Creating additional places for these students brought the total number of new places created to 2,270.

### **Question 3**

Is this funding only for this academic year or it will continue\_ My School of Languages in University says they do not have money, they are always thinking about reducing staff, less positions, less money. It is a completely different discourse.

### **Response:**

As announced in July, the government has provided additional and re-prioritised funding in the amount of €168m to enable providers to facilitate the safe return of students to further and higher education in 2020, in the background of public health advice. This funding includes provision for PPE and equipment, online learning costs, student supports and research costs.

Through Budget 2021 funding will be provided to meet demographic and other pressures across the sectors, including Covid-19 impacts, and to provide for additional upskilling and reskilling opportunities, as well as increased capacity and places in the higher education sector. Elements of this funding in key skill areas will be provided by the National Training Fund.

My Department allocates recurrent funding to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for direct disbursement to HEA designated higher education institutions. The HEA allocates this funding as a block grant to the institutions. As autonomous bodies, the internal disbursement of this funding, including any expenditure within a particular field of study or school within a University, are a matter for the individual institution.

I will continue to work with further and higher education providers, agencies and key stakeholders including student representatives to mitigate the additional pressures faced as a result of covid-19.

#### Question 4

Can I ask the Minister of his commitment to the development and funding for Technological Universities please

#### Response

On 7 October 2020 together with the HEA I announced the following allocations under the new Technological University Transformation Fund which is being provided by Government for the progression and development of technological universities nationally. The Fund will provide total funding of €90 million in the period to 2023.

**Table: Funding allocations by consortia or institution, 1<sup>st</sup> Sept 2020 – 31<sup>st</sup> Aug 2021 (€'000)**

Consortia/Project	Allocation 1 <sup>st</sup> Sept 2020 – 31 <sup>st</sup> August 2021	Payable Q4 2020	Payable Q1 2021
AIT-LIT	€5.00m	€4.33m	€0.67m
CUA (GMIT/IT Sligo/LYIT)	€5.70m	€4.93m	€0.77m
DkIT	€0.76m*	€0.66m	€0.10m
IADT	€0.10m	€0.10m	€0.00m
MTU (CIT/IT Tralee)	€8.25m	€7.14m	€1.11m
TU Dublin	€7.25m	€6.27m	€0.98m
TUSEI (WIT/IT Carlow)	€5.10m	€4.41m	€0.69m
IRel: TU Dublin, 2020	€1.20m	€1.20m	€0.00m
EduCampus: TU Dublin, 2020	€0.85m	€0.85m	€0.00m
HEA Monitoring/Resourcing	€0.12m	€0.12m	€0.00m
<b>Total</b>	<b>€34.33m</b>	€30.00m	€4.32m

#### Timelines towards TU Status

- **TU Dublin** – established on 1 January 2019.
- **MTU** – date of establishment set for 1 January 2021.
- **AIT-LIT** – application expected end October 2020
- **CUA** – application expected end 2020
- **TUSEI** – application expected late Spring/early Summer 2021
- **DkIT** – on a developmental pathway towards TU Status.
- **IADT** – at an exploratory stage in assessing options for TU status

### Question 5

Can the minister confirm that the idea of student loans schemes will not be considered for the public reform of fees? Loan schemes disadvantage working class & low income earners

### Question 7

The current system is dominated by a model that assumes students are ready and able to attend full-time higher education at 17/18 years of age. While acknowledging that there are more options available now than previously, this model is still dominant and disadvantages many groups and individuals. It puts excessive pressure on performance at leaving certificate. It pushes some students who are unready and unsure about career choices into unsuitable courses. It convinces some students that they are unable rather than unready to take on full-time higher education. At a time where life-long learning is essential for personal development, economic prosperity, and competitiveness, we need to broaden our approach to higher education support.

- A) Will the new Department of Higher Education consider the potential of higher education vouchers for school leavers that can be redeemed in a modular and/or part-time fashion at a time when the learner is ready, be that 17, 37, 57 years of age or older.
- B) In the current model, the Free Fees Initiative only applies to full-time learners and is unsuited to many. Will the new Department of Higher Education consider dropping the requirement for courses to be full-time and allow part-time, evening, blended, and distance learning options to come under the Free Fees Initiative.
- C) Will the new Department of Higher Education consider the potential of working with ICTU and industry organisations to find mechanisms for the provision of ongoing education vouchers to employees that can be redeemed in a modular and/or part-time fashion at all levels of education including masters and doctoral studies.
- D) Will the IUA support the provision of more flexible part-time, evening, blended, and distance learning options.

Changes like this could have many benefits including:

- i) Supporting learners who find full-time attendance too high a hurdle.
- ii) Help reduce the number of students choosing unsuitable courses.
- iii) Relieve the situation where students studying full-time courses have to work close to full-time to fund themselves.
- iv) Better utilise higher education institution's physical assets (evening/weekend use of buildings, blended/distance courses)
- v) Drive teaching, programme, and delivery system innovation in higher level institutions.

### Question 9

"Does the Minister plan to predicate the public funding of third level education on a lessening of university/college autonomy from state interference?"

**Response (Questions 5,7 and 9)**

The Programme for Government undertakes to provide a long term sustainable funding model for higher education. In addition the range of student supports operated by SUSI will be subject to review as announced in Budget 2021. An important objective will be to ensure access to and continued participation in higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The development of a sustainable funding model for higher education is essential in light of the centrality of higher education and for the future development of Ireland as an inclusive society and a knowledge economy against the backdrop of rapid technological change. In that context, a comprehensive economic evaluation of the funding options presented in the Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education is underway supported under the European Commission DG Reform Programme.

My Department is working closely with the European Commission and the independently appointed consultants. The key aim of this review is to investigate methods of increasing the sustainability of higher and further education provision in Ireland, including an examination of the funding options including the existing student contribution and other supports.

Completion of this work will allow for an informed debate on the appropriate policy approach to future funding which is fundamental to Ireland's economic and social sustainability.

## Question 6

Given the critical importance of healthcare workers in society and the challenges in health system which have been further highlighted by COVID, what strategic investment in Health professional education and research is envisaged?

*- to support challenges and costs faced by the University sector in the delivery of entry level health professional programmes? (challenge of clinical education provision critical)*

*- to support clinical and health services research with more emphasis on primary care/rehabilitation research to support people to continue to live independently in their own homes?*

*-to ensure optimal return from current investment in Health professional education in Ireland ... aiming to retain our health professional graduates in Ireland by creating more HSE posts especially in primary and community care , better career opportunities /CPD especially for health and social care professionals, investing in electronic health record system to optimise use of health professional time -ultimately leading to enhanced health services and potential cost savings*

### **Response:**

Elements of the queries such as retention and records system as raised are a matter for the Department of Health.

The current Higher Education Funding model includes weightings to account for the cost of delivery of courses such as those undertaken in healthcare. Undergraduate courses for first time students are generally supported by the Department Free Fees initiative. In order to widen access to GEM programmes, and give assistance towards the financial burden on each student pursuing these programmes, the fees of participating EU students are partly subsidised by the State via the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Currently, I understand the subsidy is €10,710 per student with the balance of fees payable by the student (on approved courses under the fund).

Research investment: The IRC-HRB rapid response call was part of [a national research funder response](#), which also includes SFI, Enterprise Ireland and IDA to Covid 19. Some €17m in rapid response funding has been allocated by the five agencies to-date. The first round of funding under the IRC-HRB was announced in April 2020 and comprised a total of 21 new projects, 8 of which were social/policy countermeasure projects supported by the IRC.

The role and importance of expert knowledge grounded in our higher education institutions has been brought into sharp relief during the crisis. In addition to experts in public health/epidemiology/virology, it is clear that expertise will be brought to bear on the wider social and policy implications and to understand the longer-term impact of the crisis, especially on vulnerable groups. There are new opportunities for researchers to work together across borders to better understand the crisis and influence global policy and cooperation on pandemics and the rebuilding process. Pandemics/public health will be strongly reflected in European research funding going forward.

Work is now underway in my Department to develop the successor strategy to Innovation 2020, Ireland's strategy for research and development, science and technology. I expect the strategy to set out a vision that will ensure we prioritise investing in RDI as key to addressing our economic and social challenges such as climate change, digitalisation and public health. It will also focus on addressing the cross-cutting issues that are essential for maintaining a well-functioning, fit for purpose RDI system capable of addressing these challenges. Critical to this is ensuring we have a pipeline of talent coming through our higher education system that is fully equipped to make a valuable contribution to our economy and society



## **Question 8**

I think that the panel should be asked not simply to say what is needed, but to prioritise. All institutions, from relatively well-resourced universities to more or less penniless Colleges of Further Education, will be combining collective demands with sectoral and individual special pleading. Furthermore, many institutions in the sector have considerable capital debt problems which are obscured by very currently favourable repayment terms and very optimistic cash flow projections which may not endure.

Related to this is how the panel would advise the government to address the problem - which is visible in other states, and here at primary and secondary levels - that IT and internet access is not a given for many households and many students, and that a shift to 'blended' or wholly online learning will further disadvantage the least well-off and reduce access and thereby economic and social mobility.

### **Response:**

Since the onset of Covid-19 in March, the Department, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and SOLAS have collaborated with key stakeholders from the sector to identify, quantify and develop options to mitigate against the financial impacts of Covid 19 on the sector.

As announced in July, the government has provided additional and re-prioritised funding in the amount of €168m to enable providers to facilitate the safe return of students to further and higher education in 2020, in the background of public health advice. This funding includes provision for PPE and equipment, online learning costs, student supports and research costs.

Through Budget 2021 funding will be provided to meet demographic and other pressures across the sectors, including Covid-19 impacts, and to provide for additional upskilling and reskilling opportunities, as well as increased capacity and places in the higher education sector.

It has been a significant priority for me, in the context of the shift to online teaching and learning that has arisen from the public health restrictions, to provide support to students to facilitate connectivity and to examine options designed to seek to minimise the extent to which connectivity challenges act as a barrier to full participation in higher and further education.

In this regard, as part of the package of financial support approved by Government to help underpin the recommencement of higher and further education for the current academic year, my Department allocated €15 million to higher and further education providers for a grant to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices. This initiative which enabled a bulk purchase of approximately 16,500 laptops on behalf of higher education institutions is intended to help address concerns regarding the digital divide in the context of the shift to online and blended models, and the importance of supporting disadvantaged students to adapt to these new models of learning.

The delivery through the National Broadband Plan of high-speed internet connectivity nationwide will ultimately provide a solution to current differences in broadband experience for students and learners. In the interim there are initiatives across a number of Government Departments to facilitate connection through community-based broadband hubs and liaison with telecommunication providers on packages, including unlimited data. It is also worth noting that at the present time HEAnet provides a WiFi solution - Eduroam - designed by and for the higher education community which operates across the education locations nationally. Eduroam allows a student to access WiFi wherever Eduroam is broadcast, enabling a student to seamlessly roam from one Eduroam location to another.

HEAnet is currently working on options to extend the reach of Eduroam beyond the traditional campus locations to areas within the wider community. An extended Eduroam footprint would greatly overcome connectivity challenges and facilitate staff and students in effective teaching and learning activities based at their home location. HEAnet has already made progress in this regard, with Eduroam now available at many teaching hospitals and several public libraries.

I have recently facilitated engagement between HEAnet and relevant Government Departments and Public Sector Bodies to explore the potential for pilot projects trialling the availability to students of Eduroam, via wi-fi hotspots in public infrastructure owned and/or funded by the State. I anticipate receiving an update from HEAnet on its engagement with these bodies shortly.

## Question 10

Considering the COVID impact to all University cash flows and budgets, will **additional** funding be put in place to **target & support** future education initiatives that will assist in this 2 year minimum impact period (as per the WHO)?

### Response

Since the onset of Covid-19 in March, the Department and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) have collaborated with key stakeholders from the sector to identify, quantify and develop options to mitigate the impacts of Covid 19 on the sector.

As announced in July, the government has provided additional and re-prioritised funding in the amount of €168m to enable providers to facilitate the safe return of students to further and higher education in 2020, in the background of public health advice. This funding includes provision for PPE and equipment, online learning costs, student supports and research costs.

The pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on younger workers and those in lower paid occupations. In the July Stimulus Package we provided €100m in funding for the tertiary education and training sector to help support upskilling and reskilling, which will fund over 35,000 places in 2020.

Through Budget 2021 funding will be provided to meet demographic and other pressures across the sectors, including Covid-19 impacts, and to provide for additional upskilling and reskilling opportunities, as well as increased capacity and places in the higher education sector. Elements of this funding in key skill areas will be provided by the National Training Fund.

Budget 2021 will see a total investment of €118.5 million to upskill and reskill people who have been affected by the impacts of the current pandemic and train in the skills of the future, particularly the climate agenda. The investment will be aimed at those that require it the most, whether that is to assist with seeking employment or to upskill in their current jobs.

**Question 11**

I am starting my doctorate this month and fees are 36k. It is a full time course comprising of coursework, workshops, and 300+ days working in school/hse disability services. All work is unpaid. Fellow trainee clinical psychologists whose course follows the same structure are paid a salary of 33-39k & fees are subsidised by 60pc. Do you think there is scope to address the inequality of access that exists between trainee education/counselling psychologists and trainee clinical psychologists?

**Response:**

Applications to undertake study at postgraduate level are made directly to individual higher education institutions. Higher education institutions are autonomous institutions as provided for in legislation and on that basis, the criteria governing the level of tuition fees to be charged in the case of postgraduate study is solely a matter for the relevant institution to determine in line with its own criteria.

Supports and sponsorships funded by the Department of Health and or the HSE are a matter for the Department of Health. However, the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science would encourage the relevant parties to engage with each other with a view to resolving this matter.