Restructuring Irish Post-Secondary Education for the Universal Phase – Whither the Tertiary Strategy?

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Knowledge is King

"Ireland is not a country rich in natural resources. The key factor which will determine whether or not we achieve the increased employment levels and the higher living standards for which we strive lies in the knowledge and the skills of our people. From a developmental perspective, the need to upgrade skills and knowledge is as important - if not more so - to the non-market sector of the economy as it is to the market sector."

John Travers (1995) launch of *Making Knowledge Work for Us*
http://www.forfas.ie/media/forfas950327_science_technology_innovation.pdf; https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000026218

Overview of Presentation

Massification to Internationalisation: Setting the Context

Phase 1 - Reconfiguring Post-secondary Education, 2011-2021

Phase 2 - Progressing a Unified Tertiary System, 2022-

Issues and Challenges

Final Observations

MASSIFICATION TO INTERNATIONALISATION: SETTING THE CONTEXT

Overview

Independence in 1922; declared a Republic in 1949

Beginning 1930s, public policy promoted protectionism in economic dealings.

- The idea was based on the need to develop native industry, and move away from over-dependence on Britain, as well as its failure to develop industrially under free market conditions.

Beginning 1959, principle of protectionism abandoned and replaced by economic expansion based on foreign investment and transformation of Irish society and the economy:

- Emigration substantially declined; access to education broadened; consumer spending increased, and holidaying abroad commonplace; Catholic social teaching challenged; etc.

From Protectionism to Globalism

Radically transformed from being a labour-exporting to a labour-importing society – heavily dependent on FDI and highly skilled labour.

1. The big story has been massification.
   - For a country which missed industrial revolution & lacking natural resources, the objective has been to get more people well-educated. People are Ireland's natural resource.
2. EU membership and internationalisation of the economy
   - From being heavily dependent on protectionist policies and agriculture, Ireland now one of most open economies and best performing in the EU.
3. Demographic changes significant
   - Highest birth rate in EU and lowest death rate; ageing fastest in EU
   - Population projected to increase from 3.8m (2000) to 7m (2050s)
   - 60% of people in the labour force today will still be eligible workers in 2035

Growth/Expansion of HE & FET

- Beginning of 20thC., 3,200 students enrolled in 6 universities on island of Ireland
- Today, ~279,000 students across all modes of study (2024-2025) in 19 public-funded HEIs

+ ~20,000-30,000 in private HEIs (~10%)

FET:

- 219,000 unique learners participating levels 1-6 NQF
- 69.5% of FET learners over 24 yrs cf. 36.6% HE learners (2022-2023)

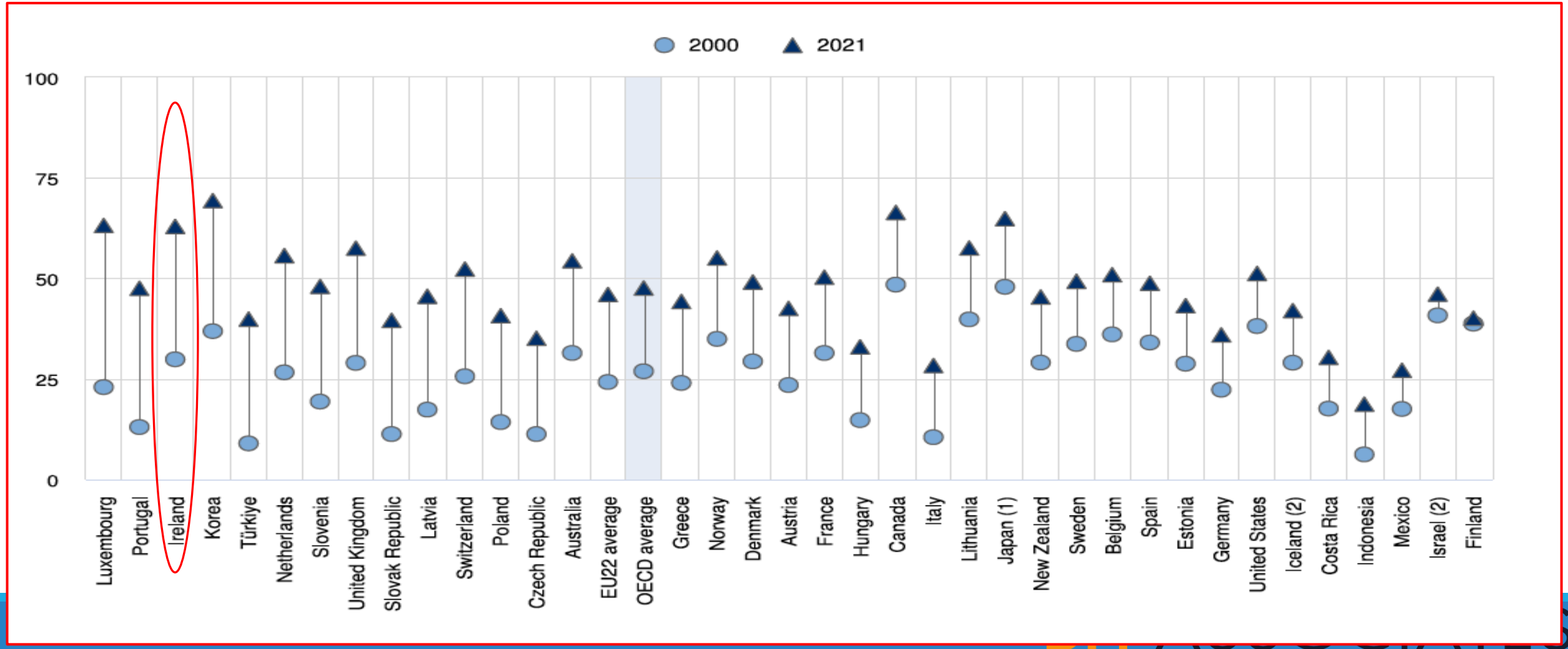
Approx. 91% complete comprehensive secondary school @ 18yrs, of which

- ~5% leave without completion
- ~65% HE
- ~22% FET
- 10-15% apprenticeships (FE/HE)
- ~7.6% NEET

HE Expansion 1970s-

- Ireland has one of the highest levels of tertiary education attainment and completion rates in the OECD with 47% of 25-64 year-olds surpassing the EU2020 target of 40%.
- 77% students finish their bachelor's degrees within three years, cf. OECD avr. of 70%
- 21% of 25-34 year-olds hold a master’s or equivalent degree, which is above the OECD average of 16%.
- More than half (~57%) enrolled in universities compared with 43% in the TU sector
- Economic returns for individuals are significant.

Trends in Share of Tertiary-educated 25–34-year-olds (2000-2021)



Mismatch and Skills Shortages

Graduates earn 65% more than those with upper secondary (OECD, 2025) cf. 81% (OECD 2019).

BUT:

- ~30% of graduates do not require their level of qualifications for their current roles.
- ~10-15% of labour force considered overqualified w/ business/law highest share

Yet:

- 30% workers reported being underqualified
- Major skills shortages in key areas (construction, engineering, healthcare, teachers), including jobs requiring moderate level skills – typically those acquired via FET.

Regional disparities reflects 40% economic activity around Dublin

- ~50% graduates work in Dublin; only 4% in SE, 3% in border region and 2% in midlands

Economy & Skills

Ireland's economic productivity among world's best BUT high levels do not translate into all areas

- Dual economy: global, export-oriented multi-national sector and a more domestically oriented, labour intensive sector dominated by small and medium-sized enterprise (SMEs)
- 30% workers underqualified
- Major skills shortages in key areas (construction, engineering, healthcare), including jobs requiring moderate level skills – typically those acquired via FET.

In assessing "how effectively skills are used" in workplace, OECD places Ireland in the bottom 20-40% of 37 countries.

Single highest level of overall qualifications mismatch in the EU.

PHASE 1 - RECONFIGURING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2011-2021

System Re-shaping, Coherence and Consolidation

Historic binary system has been undergoing significant changes over several decades:

Regional Technical Colleges (1970s-1990s) → Institutes of Technology (1990s) → pathway to designation as Technological Universities

- Levels 6-8 on NFQ; professional/TVET education; application focused research; strong regional commitment;

Colleges of Education – merged with universities

Increased emphasis on Further Education (TVET) as entry to employment and educational ladder for all learners

Parallel roles of HEA & SOLAS (governance & coordinating structure) + QQI

DoE → DFHERIS

Ireland's version of the California Plan

Post-secondary System Today

Universities = 8

Technological universities = 5

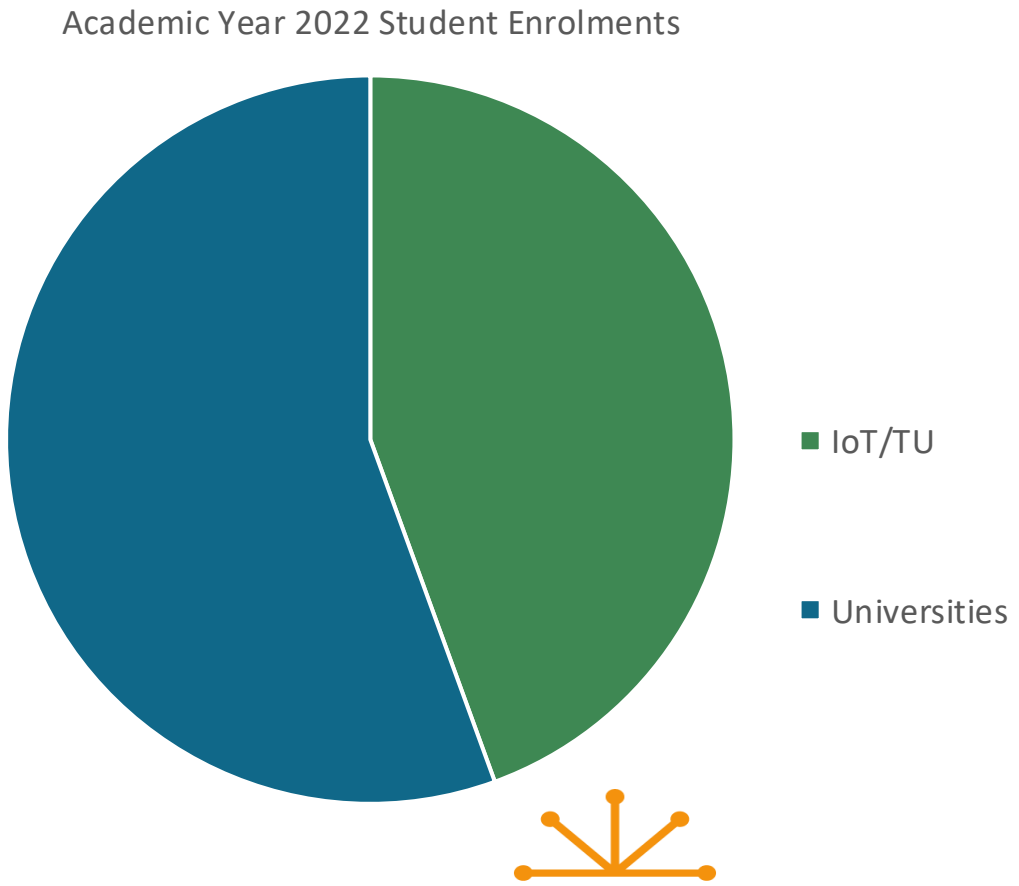
Institutes of Technology = 2

Other publicly funded colleges = 11

Private colleges = ~20 institutions/10% of HE students

Education & Training Boards = 16

FET colleges = 200+



Key HE Developments

National Strategy for Higher Education 2011

Changing Landscape, TU Criteria & Legislation 2013-2018

System Performance Framework & Strategic Dialogue 2014 -

Mergers & Designation Process 2019-2022

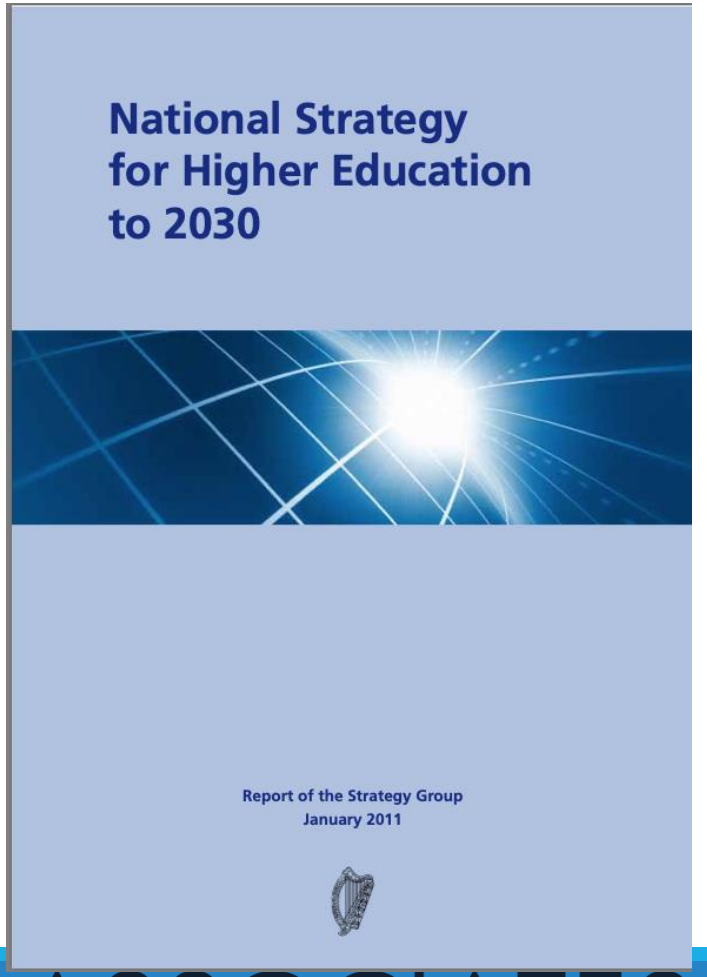
Government Actions & Funding 2019-

Progressing a Unified Tertiary Education Sector 2022-

National Strategy for Higher Education 2011

Aim to “reconfigure the Irish system of higher education” to meet future societal and labour market needs.

- Strategic steering and shaping of HE higher education landscape creating a coordinated and “coherent” system of a smaller number of larger and diverse institutions, referred to as “directed diversity” (Boland, 2009).
- More coherent system of HEIs, coordinated by the HEA, to deliver complementary range of institutions and academic programmes needed by individuals, society and the labour market.
- High levels of inter-institutional collaboration required so that specialisation at institutional level does not lead to diminished opportunities and choices for students at regional and national levels.
- Mergers of IoTs resulting in redesignation as technological universities (TU) with distinct missions.



Regional Technical Colleges (RTC) to Technological Universities 1967 - 2022

Regional Technical Colleges (RTC) created with support of European Social Fund (ESF).

—1967-2000: 13 RTCs established to educate students for craft/professional level jobs. Colleges to play developmental role in their regions.

—1992; 2007: All RTCs redesignated as Institutes of Technology (IoT) with authority to develop applied research and offer some PhD programmes.

Technological Universities – address social and economic needs of region and strengthen industry-focused research.

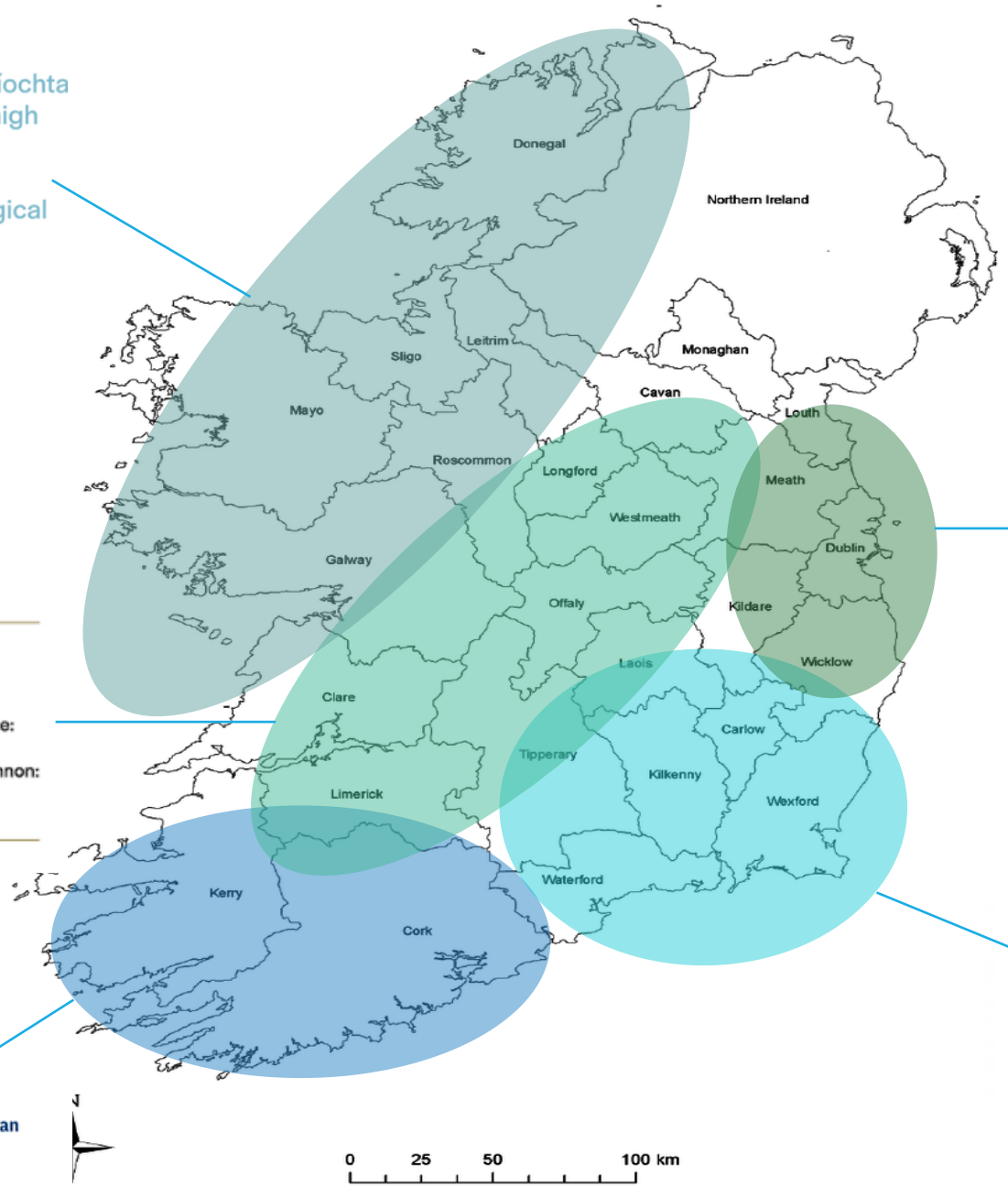
—Focus on science and technology programmes which are vocationally and professionally oriented.

—Expected to play a pivotal role in facilitating access and progression particularly through relationships with the further education and training sector.

— Merger of at least two IoTs required.

Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta an Atlantaigh

Atlantic Technological University



OLLSCOIL TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA BHAILE ÁTHA CLIATH
DUBLIN
TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY DUBLIN

TUS
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Sionainne: Lár Tíre, An tIarthar Láir
Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest
www.tus.ie

SETU
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta an Oirdheiscirt
South East Technological University

MTU
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Mumhan
Munster Technological University

Reconfiguration of FET

Technical Instruction Committees established by the Agriculture and Technical Instruction (Ireland) Act 1899.

Vocational Education Committees (1930) – organised primarily by/linked to local authorities to administer continuation/ technical education for 14- to 16-year-olds. Expanded to include vocational schools, RTC and adult education.

FAS, the national training and employment authority (1987) with responsibility for assisting those seeking employment during long/deep recession. Primarily focused on traditional apprenticeships.

SOLAS (2013) took over from FAS and brings together FET including apprenticeships. SOLAS is funding authority for the ETBs.

Education and Training Boards (2013) – merger of 33 VECs into 16 ETBs as statutory education authorities with responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions.

Evolution of a FET System

2013 was new watermark. BUT FET as a system is still evolving

First strategy: 2014-2019, 2020-2024

FET College of the Future: integrated approach to all educational provision: apprenticeships, traineeships, post-leaving certificate, community and adult education, core literacy and numeracy services across levels 1-6 on the NQF

Two key areas of focus:

1. Inclusive opportunities especially for unemployed, but increasingly focused on training, upskilling and reskilling with *direct relevance* for the labour force

2. Alternative entry route to HE – pathways/co-delivery with designated partner HEIs (IoT/TU)

PHASE 2 - PROGRESSING A UNIFIED TERTIARY SYSTEM, 2022-

Progressing a Unified Tertiary Education Sector 2022-

Minister launched policy vision for a more unified tertiary education and research system

Creation of a unified, balanced and integrated knowledge and skills system to enable a coherent and comprehensive range of learning opportunities

More diverse and aligned learning and development opportunities across a broad spectrum with clear and extensive pathways for learners and researchers and a more seamless system overall.

Intensified focus to inclusion across the whole of the tertiary system to address socio-economic disadvantage and underrepresentation of groups.

More effective and responsive transformation of FET/VET, HE and R&I adapting to future changes and challenges.

More agile, flexible and integrated approaches across the system to equipping the whole of the workforce and population with the skills and advancing knowledge in coherent ways.

More balanced regional development with FEIs and HEIs and research at the heart of this process.

Actions

Lots of different initiatives although unclear extent to which they are all going in the same direction

- National Apprenticeship Office
- National Tertiary Office

Emphasis on pathways and regional clusters

- Clusters seen primarily as mechanism for greater coordination
- Regionally-based unified actions focusing on impact and contribution that the system can make to Government priorities.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

1. Massification 1

Irish post-secondary expansion comparable to experience elsewhere

- Comprehensive transformation in the role, scale and expectations of higher education
- Economic and social expectations linked to high levels HE participation
- FET and RTC/IoT/TU sector play significant roles in expanding access and participation, especially outside major cities
- Lots of focus on widening access and learner supports BUT still working off old model of strict divisions between ft/pt learners, 'traditional'/'mature', vocational/academic

1. Massification 2

Almost 70% of students in HE: is this a problem?

- Growing skills crisis as economy expands w/potential spillover feeding into discontent and other grievances
- Privileged by student demand but this is forestalling closer scrutiny of demographic and learner trends
- Low levels of adult learners – especially across university system
- Most of focus on formalising learning pathways between FET and TU (2+2) via the NTO rather than boosting FET

2. Technological Universities

TUs = response to massification/bottom-up pressure – but process itself led by/driven by Ministry

- *TURN Report* (2019) – w/ strap-line "Connectedness & Collaboration through Connectivity" – set out "vision and ambition" and "distinctive national and international contribution"

System governance mechanisms, e.g., strategic dialogue and QA, will play an important role going forward

Criteria were aligned with traditional criteria – arguably setting perverse incentives

Coherence across multi-sites and R&I will remain challenges

Smart specialisation and regional engagement to counter concentration around Dublin

3. Missions & Boundary Crossing

Over-emphasis on HE reflects social-cultural factors and implicit policy/funding – and undermining ”stated” policy objectives and ‘boundaries’

- Level 6 (sub-degree certificate) is both FE and HE (IoT/TU) – encourages learners to apply to/enrol in HEIs
- Pressure for links btw FET/HE (e.g., pathways)
- Boundary between universities and TUs becoming more porous

Funding system is geared towards full-time undergraduate students

- Student funding system drives HE participation
- Capital investment programme imbalanced in favour of HE vis-à-vis FET

Unintended consequences?

Differentiation perceived as stratification, as majority of students attend traditional universities, and governance arrangements and funding differ.

4. Further Education & Training (FET)

FET seen as last resort; as HE expands, numbers in FET decline

Sector only beginning to understand the challenges of meeting goals

- "College of the Future" ambition yet to be clarified and communicated

Strategic capacity, curriculum, QA, human and capital resources

20% of school learner population may be realistic but is it prepared for adult learners

Governance confused and confusing

- SOLAS has only partial authority
- ETB also oversee primary and secondary schools
- Closer links with TUs may ultimately undermine FET and encourage predatory behaviour/focusing on most lucrative areas

5. Middle-level Skills

Some evidence of hollowing out of middle level skills:

- Projections that ~45% of jobs will require medium level skills has been missed
- Major skills shortages especially in areas acquired through FET programmes – and aligned with infrastructural development needs.
- New apprenticeship programmes being introduced – level 6-10 NFQ

R&I strategy focused primarily on research-intensive universities and creation of start-up counter-weight to FDI

- Trying to focus on role FET can play especially with SME sector
- Failure to recognise importance of skills with regard to innovation system

6. Regionalism

Regionalism is weakly developed – signs of regional assemblies playing a bigger role, but national parliament is the mainstay of decision-making

Place-based and place-responsive strategies have played only a relatively minor role.

- Regional Skills Council

This *potentially* makes criteria for technological universities critical

- RTC/IoT traditionally linked more to SME sector, and supporting enterprise
- Also vital for FET sector
- But this also an area where the universities have been moving into

7. Private HE

PHE (NFQ 6-9) has expanded to meet and absorb demand in response to demographic pressures and on-going massification

Domestic and international market = 10% of learners

Included in specified skills/re-training programmes, e.g.: Labour Market Activation Fund (2010) and Springboard programmes (since 2011) where = 50% of all places.

Overseen by QQI with expanded regulations + increased autonomy and recognition

- "delegated authority" to make own awards
- "listed" provider – having their qualifications included in the NFQ
- Powers to evaluate "corporate fitness"
- Data sharing

Ongoing debate regarding funding for pt students

Stronger governance in return for funding?

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Some Proposals Doing The ‘Rounds

Single integrated agency for tertiary education

Significantly strengthened FET system via strengthening SOLAS governance

Revamped funding model – targeted at objectives (funding begets the system)

National Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (mandatory)

Guided and Navigable Learning Pathways

Learner Guidance System for all learners

Regional Research and Innovation Eco-Systems

Universal Phase is the Tertiary System 1

Are the models that underpinned the earlier phases of massification still appropriate to meet individual and societal demands and requirements in the universal phase?

Have we given sufficient attention to the universal phase - except to count participation numbers and consider demographic characteristics?

Universal Phase is the Tertiary System 2

Only way societies & economies can provide for 80+% pop. in new 21stC economy is:

- opening up system
- greater diversity of E&T institutions
- much more flexible and integrated system
- greater mobility into and through the system for all

Huge implications for governance, structures, institutions and funding

	Elite	Mass	Universal
% relevant age cohort	0-15%	16-50%	Upwards of 80+%
Attitudes to access	Privilege of birth or talent or both	Right for those with certain qualifications	Obligation for the skilled working, middle and upper classes
Functions of higher education	Shaping mind and character of ruling class; preparation for elite roles	Transmission of skills; preparation for broader range of technical elite roles	Adaptation of "whole population" to rapid social and technological change
Curriculum and forms of instruction	Highly structured in terms of academic conceptions of knowledge	Modular, flexible and semi-structured sequence of courses	Boundaries and sequences break down; distinctions between learning and life break down
Institutional characteristics	Homogeneous with high and common standards; small residential communities; clear and impermeable boundaries	Comprehensive with more diverse standards; 'cities of intellect' – mixed residential/commuting; boundaries fuzzy and permeable	Great diversity with no common model; aggregates of people enrolled but many rarely on campus. Boundaries weak or non-existent

Source: Adapted from Brennan, J. (2004) p23.

Final Observations

- All eyes on the forthcoming National Tertiary Strategy
- Heretofore most focus on formal pre-determined pathways from FET-HE
- No guarantee for a seamless and equitable tertiary system
- FET still seen as second-best, albeit apprenticeships are expanding (esp. those offered by HE)
- Demographics currently driving enrolment but as that changes system/FET will come under pressure
- Huge potential but social, cultural and economic factors continue to drive HE

References

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NAO, https://apprenticeship.ie

NTO, https://nto.hea.ie/about/

SOLAS, https://www.solas.ie

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Additional Slides

Key milestones in transformation of tertiary landscape

Transformed number/size of institutions and national/international role/orientation.

- *Investment in Education* (1962), *Training of Technicians in Ireland* (1964) → Regional Technical Colleges (RTC)
- *Institutes of Technology (IoT)* (1992) to "provide vocational and technical education...with particular reference to the region served by the college" (Government of Ireland, 1992; Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992 S5(1).
- Universities Act 1997 (Government of Ireland, 1997, S12(f)) described university responsibility "to support and contribute to the realisation of national economic and social development"
- SOLAS established to monitor and coordinate FET provision (Further Education and Training Act, 2013)
- *Education and Training Boards (2013)* – merger of 33 VECs into 16 ETBs as statutory education authorities for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions.
- *Redesignation of IoTs (2018)* as technological universities (Technological Universities Act 2018)
- *Higher Education Authority Act 2022*, strengthens system governance and accountability.

HEA Steered Process, 2013

Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape - HEIs to review their mission and consider how it would fit into coherent system now being developed.

Technological University process and criteria for designation.

Guidelines on Regional Clusters to serve regional needs.

Institutional Responses to the Landscape Document and Achieving the Objectives of the National Strategy for Higher Education

A Study of Future Demand for Higher Education in Ireland, ESRI

Completing the Landscape Process for Irish Higher Education

Report to the Minister for Education and Skills on System Reconfiguration