



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

Policy Platform: Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ATP	Access, Transfer and Progression policy
CAO	Central Applications Office
D/Health	Department of Health
D/Taoiseach	Department of the Taoiseach
DAFM	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
DECC	Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DoE	Department of Education
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
EI	Enterprise Ireland
ELC	Early Learning and Care
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EU	European Union
FET	Further Education & Training
HCI	Human Capital Initiative
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IRC	Irish Research Council
NAO	National Apprenticeship Office
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NTF	National Training Fund
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education

QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
R&I	Research & Innovation
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RSES	Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies
SEAI	Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
SFI	Science Foundation Ireland
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Training Authority)
TU	Technological Universities
TUTF	Technological University Transformation Fund

Foreword by Simon Harris TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Since becoming Minister, I have made the creation of a unified third level system a key priority of mine.

We have changed the CAO website to ensure school leavers are aware of all of their third level options. We have removed financial barriers to post-Leaving Cert courses. We introduced new supports for people seeking to become apprentices and sought to change the narrative about apprenticeship programmes.

But we know we have much more to do.

Today – just three weeks after publishing our Funding the Future policy - we are setting out our plans for reform of the system.

This policy aims to enhance the existing third level system, building on the individual strengths, and improving the ways the system responds to the changing needs of students and learners, researchers, of industry, and of wider society.

It is my view that there is a need for more diverse and accessible approaches to learning aimed at meeting the needs of learners.

This policy ensures pathways between further education and training and higher education are clear and coherent and that any barriers to progression are removed.

In this way, I envision a system whereby irrespective of whether a learner enters into further education and training or higher education or a research career, they are in a single system, a system that responds to their individual talents, ambitions and motivations, a system where they cannot put a foot wrong.

I know this is a vision the sectors share. Working together we can address the needs of the students, improve their outcomes and ensure our economy and society has the skills it needs.

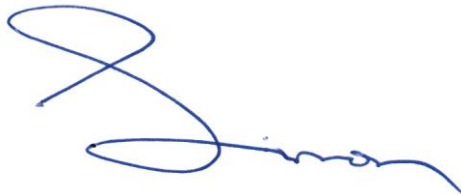
I have travelled across the country over the past 12 months and while there are incredibly good examples of collaboration, they are not universal.

This policy sets out our ambition for a more coherent system. This is in line with the increased investment in the sector.

My Department's goal is to better facilitate access, progression and success for the population to ensure equality and champion diversity right across the tertiary education and research system.

As the first Minister of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, I am proud to progress this more unified approach across the sector and am delighted to be able to bring this landmark policy to the attention of Government.

This vision can only be realised when each sector sees the benefits that will come from a more unified system and individual students, learners, researchers, staff and employers begin to work together to make a change.



Simon Harris TD

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Introduction

This policy platform is intended to deliver the Minister’s commitment to progress the development of a more unified tertiary system capable of meeting the diverse needs of all learners throughout their lifelong pursuit for knowledge and skills, more closely aligning research and innovation to higher and further education and training and strategically positioning the system to better address the future knowledge and skills needs of our learners and researchers, our economy and our society.

Though the individual sectors within the tertiary system are performing well, without progressing a more unified approach it will be difficult to achieve coherent and complementary formative and continuing further education and training, undergraduate, post-graduate, doctoral and post-doctoral education and research. Additionally, there is scope within the system to improve the sustainability of the ways in which the system as a whole responds to changing stakeholder needs (learners, industry, public interest and wider society), playing to individual sectoral strengths with the added value of sectors working together, especially at regional levels. For learners especially, pathways between sectors are underdeveloped and can be expanded.

The platform draws together the components of Ireland’s further education and training, higher education, research and innovation sectors and, in the context of Programme for Government commitments, frames a vision for a more unified system and a series of overarching objectives and the impacts of the changes that this will bring about.

It is envisaged that the realisation of the Strategy for Tertiary Education, as set out in the Higher Education Authority Bill 2022 will be a key step in the attainment of the vision for a more unified system. Accordingly, the overarching purpose of this policy platform is to build upon actions that have already commenced through the Department’s Statement of Strategy to initiate an open consultation and engagement process with sectors and stakeholders to co-create a Strategy for Tertiary Education.

The Vision



Unified Tertiary System
for **Learning, Skills**
and **Knowledge**

The vision is for a **well-functioning, unified tertiary system for knowledge and skills, composed of complementary further education and training, higher education and research and innovation sectors**, characterised by:

- Diverse and aligned learning and development opportunities across a broad spectrum
- Clear and extensive pathways for students, learners, researchers and innovators
- Expansive skills and qualifications frameworks aligned to current and future skills needs
- The creation and wider diffusion of new knowledge, skills and innovation
- Resilience and preparedness for future change and the challenges that may present (e.g. technological advances, EDI, climate change)
- Comprehensive regional and national systems that are coherent and balanced in meeting these objectives
- Coherent and balanced policies, investment, support and resources

This Policy Platform is formulated to move the system closer to the realisation of this vision, recognising that while the elements of a strong tertiary system are already in place through strong individual sectors, the purpose of this work is unify them to ensure that they are coherent, complementary and well balanced, and are well positioned to address future challenges.

Key Messages

The vision and the Policy Platform give rise to a number of key messages aimed at understanding, promoting, guiding and measuring progress on developing a more unified tertiary education and research system.

Policy Message 1: Building on a Strong Foundation

- The diverse sectors of tertiary education, research and innovation have traditionally been organised, funded and operated in separate ways.
- There is a distinct purpose and contribution to be made by each sector to serve specific public needs and the successes of the individual sectors aligned to their specific missions are evident.
- The operation and evolution of the sectors in separate spheres has restricted the scope to derive the benefits of more integrated thinking and actions across the system.
- It is intended to build on individual strengths of sectors whilst also maintaining and developing further the inherent diversity across the system, in line with the needs of learners, researchers and other stakeholders.
- The vision for a more unified system will create a more collaborative environment between the sectors and provide an even stronger base from which they can develop, align and work more closely together.

Policy Message 2: Clear Scope for Change

- The Programme for Government sets out the ambition to create a world class education system, one which will achieve the targets it sets out through building stronger connections within the system.
- The creation of a dedicated Department in 2020 reflects the priority Government has placed on the progress and development of the further education and training, higher education, research and innovation system and the achievement of the Department's strategy is dependent on the adoption of a more unified approach.
- There is a growing need for more diverse and accessible opportunities for learning and development and to ensure that these opportunities are well joined up so as to facilitate progression and specialisation across the system.

- The emergence from the pandemic and an ongoing uncertain global environment brings into focus the developments necessary to ensure that sectors can prepare for and address common current and future challenges.
- Bringing the education and research and innovation sectors closer together can expand the diffusion of new knowledge created through research and strengthen regional systems to support indigenous growth through innovation.
- The funding and reform framework for higher education, Funding the Future, highlights the creation of a unified, balanced and integrated knowledge and skills system as a key priority to enable a coherent and comprehensive range of learning opportunities.

Policy Message 3: Objectives of a More Unified System

The realisation of this vision will mean:

- A coherent system that rises to the challenge of providing accessible diverse learning and development opportunities for the widest range of learners, researchers and innovators.
- A wider more flexible and adaptive life-long and life-wide learning and development system.
- A shared understanding of a unified but diverse tertiary system of education, skills, research and innovation that can meet the wide-ranging and distinct educational needs of individuals whereby every opportunity and pathway is valued equally in terms of the opportunity for learning and development that it offers.
- A more robust research and innovation system built on stronger integration with the further education and training and higher education sectors, with access to talent, access to knowledge and skills at both a regional and national level, and between the knowledge and skills system and indigenous innovation and enterprise to build future workforce capacity at regional and national levels
- Acceleration, in a knowledge based economy, of the complementarity between the creation of new knowledge and skills through research and imparting this knowledge and skills through both further education and training and higher education
- A further education and training and higher education and research and innovation system that can attain, as set out in the Programme for Government, greater inclusion, actions to address climate control, national resilience, adaptation to digitalisation and a more sustainable economy and society.

Therefore, in summary, the objectives of a more unified tertiary system are to:

- Offer a wide range of more joined up learning and development opportunities to learners, researchers and innovators
- Grow equality, diversity and inclusion across the system
- Enable the system to adapt to change
- Create more unified regional systems
- Provide for the skills, knowledge and talent needs of individuals, the economy and society

Policy Message 4: Implementation and Monitoring

- The creation of a single overarching response to the challenges of the COVID pandemic demonstrated the ease and effectiveness with which a more unified approach can be adopted across this system.
- No one outcome, action or work stream can deliver on the vision and the objectives that this is intended to achieve. The solutions to addressing this are sited in the adoption of a distributed approach that will drive change through a wide range of individual but coordinated and interdependent actions across DFHERIS, agencies, sectors and stakeholders
- The platform to achieving this policy objective will be iterative and will require strong levels of participation from sectors and stakeholders working with the Department to provide the necessary leadership and support.
- Led by the Department's Statement of Strategy, the Department and its agencies have already begun to identify and coordinate a number of interdependent outcomes that will together make this change. These are set out at the end of this document and will continue to be sited and progressed in a range of diverse processes of policy development with sectoral and stakeholder engagement.
- Each year, the Department will publish a spotlight on actions ensuring that the platform is iterative and dynamic.
- A spotlight on the specific actions commencing in 2022, led initially by the Department and its agencies is included at the end of this paper.
- This policy platform is highlighting these actions to create the impetus for the identification and progression of a wider set of actions across a range of policy lines to

drive the development of a more unified system and to work towards the development of a Strategy for Tertiary Education.

Policy Message 5: A Co-creative Endeavour

- Real and lasting change will happen through strong sectoral and institutional engagement with this policy platform and objectives.
- The best way to achieve this is through an open, distributed process of co-creation with sectors and stakeholders across the system whereby they are empowered to identify and progress actions aimed at the achievement of this objective.
- To achieve this, an open process of engagement and consultation, building on actions already underway, will provide a platform whereby the sectors and stakeholders can respond to the vision and policy objective, identify further actions, collaborate with other sectors and work with DFHERIS to co-create a Strategy.
- Working together, sectoral and stakeholder engagement and consultation will also begin to build greater unity and it will important to ensure that the key DFHERIS agencies (SFI, HEA, SOLAS, QQI), are seen as leaders, working with their respective sectors to progress actions and serving as key facilitators for collaboration.
- Key information sources and ways of measuring progress will also be developed and co-created through dialogue and feedback.

Building On A Strong Foundation

Public investment in further education and training, higher education, research and innovation is the collective way in which the State seeks to provide individuals with opportunities to align their own motivations and ambitions with specialised learning and development opportunities from which they can aim to achieve good lives, good jobs, strong participation in society and a lifetime interest in further learning and development.

The diverse elements of tertiary education, research and innovation have heretofore been organised, funded and operated in separate ways. While the successes of the individual constituent elements of the system are evident, their operation and evolution in separate spheres has restricted the scope for opportunities to derive the benefits of more integrated thinking and actions across the system for the attainment of national objectives.

Through the adoption of separate approaches to the sectors to date tacit effective hierarchies within and between further education and training, higher education, research and innovation, have been allowed to progress unchecked. Learning opportunities, viewed in this hierarchical way, shift the focus from the value and benefits of individual learning programmes and the opportunities that they can offer, to concerns about the level of programmes and the value attached to a particular kind of learning experience.

The operation of the sectors in an individual way has also accentuated a dependency on single sector driven models. A good example of this is the growth in dependency on CAO entry to a primary degree stream as the dominant pathway into and through this system. Though efficient, this places an over-reliance on just one pathway into and through the system and one model of delivery. Though it may be successful at meeting the needs of many learners emerging from the secondary school system at present it is not an optimal basis for sustainability.

As the number of learners exiting our secondary school system begins to subside at the end of this decade, the need for more diverse and accessible approaches to learning aimed at meeting the needs of learners throughout their working and personal lives will grow. A single dominant pathway will not be sufficient in meeting these needs as learners will increasingly come from different starting points. The best strategy to plan for this is to ensure a focus on the growth of a wider range of more collaborative, varied and equally valued options that speak to the interests and needs of a wider range of learners, ensuring that the pathways through these options are efficient and that any barriers to progression are removed.

It will be important to ensure that these diverse and accessible opportunities are well joined up so as to facilitate progression in and across the system. Taking a more unified perspective will bring a focus on ensuring that all programmes within the system, including research programmes, are relevant to stakeholders and have a clear learning and career progression pathway.

The research and innovation system fosters and shapes capacity for knowledge creation and advancement. Research also underpins the higher education system and is intrinsic to, and indivisible from, undergraduate and postgraduate formation, engagement with enterprise, regional objectives and the international reputation of the higher education system. In addition, research and innovation directly creates knowledge that can lead to new technologies, commercial products, and development of industries that can have a significant benefit to the economy, bringing business opportunities and jobs to regions.

Bringing the education and research and innovation sectors closer together and developing more extensive and accessible pathways into research and innovation could open up career and progression options for learners and researchers. A closer relationship between research and innovation and the further education and training and higher education sectors will facilitate the diffusion of new research and innovation knowledge and skills throughout the education system. More unified core and applied research sectors will serve to deepen the sustainability of research and innovation. With greater integration with the further education and training and higher education sectors, the innovation sector will have wider access to talent, knowledge and skills at both a regional and national level, strengthening these sectors to support indigenous growth.

Clear Scope for Change

The Programme for Government sets out the intent to create a world class education system, one which will achieve the targets it sets out through building stronger connections within the system. Advancement across the further education and training, higher education and research and innovation system is also fundamental to achieving, as set out in the Programme for Government, greater inclusion, actions to address climate control, national resilience, adaptation to digitalisation and a more sustainable economy and society.

The creation of this dedicated Department in 2020 represents the priority Government has placed on the furtherance and development of the further and higher education, research and innovation system. For the first time in the State's history, further and higher education, research and innovation have been given the necessary platform from which to develop and advance in accordance with the mandate set for the Department.

The Department's Approach of Strategy 2021- 2023 clearly sets out its overarching mission to develop Ireland's future, higher and research systems to support people in reaching their full potential and to create value, prosperity and a cohesive, sustainable and vibrant society. The strategic goals underpinning the achievement of that mission are: to develop talent and skill; to support learning for all; to promote research, knowledge and innovation; to succeed on the world stage; to ensure good governance to enhance quality; and to ensure a Department fit for purpose. These goals apply to all of the elements forming part of the Department's responsibilities. A more unified further and higher education and research and innovation system is the foundation upon which the Department can most effectively realise this Strategy.

Emerging from the pandemic this is also, more widely, a necessary step in preparation for the common challenges presenting for the sectors: demographics; different and more pressing set of skills needs; digitalisation and AI; and building greater sustainability - environmental, economic and societal. A more comprehensive approach can provide for more cohesive actions that strengthen the system overall and prepare and enable the sectors to respond to the challenges created given the pace and intensity of economic, societal and technological change that will be necessary.

This scope for change is supported by the scale of public investment allocated to the system (€3.7bn in 2021 in addition to approximately €483m allocated to research and innovation from other Government Departments). With the adoption of a more unified lens on the sector, the significant level of funding that flows into the system can be more effectively

utilised to ensure that it is supporting a system capable of best meeting learners' needs and strategically positioned to address future challenges.

By providing a good balance of complementary specialised opportunities across a more unified system, the State and sectors can more deliberately seek to ensure that what is offered is broadly aligned with the present and future knowledge and skill needs of learners and researchers, the economy and our society.

The further education and training, higher education and research and innovation sectors exist separately to meet specific and important public needs and the adoption of a more unified approach does not signal the intention for more homogenous approaches. This policy recognises that the maintenance and promotion of diversity in provision is one of the key ways to prepare for future uncertainty and ensure sustainability and so while taking a more unified perspective, there will be an ongoing emphasis on the further strengthening of the individual sectors within this system.

Objectives of a More Unified System

The objectives of this policy are:

1. To offer a wide range of more joined up learning and development opportunities to learners and researchers
2. To develop more inclusive cultures to grow equality, diversity and inclusion
3. To enable the system to adapt to change
4. To create more unified regional systems
5. To provide for the skills, knowledge and talent needs of individuals, the economy and society

1 Learning and Development Opportunities

The objective is to ensure that the overall system can provide a coherent, complementary and diverse set of clear educational and developmental opportunities to meet the wide ranging motivations and ambitions of individual learners and researchers, initially when departing the school system and as people develop personal, vocational and professional learning and development needs throughout their lifetime.

In so doing to ensure that the diversity that currently exists within the system is valued and encouraged through the strengthening of strategies for specific sectors to meet their full potential according to their mission and for the expansion of options.

Outcomes that will contribute to the achievement of this objective are:

- a more comprehensive range of transverse pathways between FET and HE
- scope for collaborative programme development, planning and delivery between FET and HE
- stronger individual sectors within the system
- more opportunities for researchers to pursue a diversity of career paths
- increased capacity for lifelong learning amongst learners and institutions in their working and personal lives
- innovations such as RPL, stackable micro credentials and shorter, more flexible programmes, across the system

2 Inclusion

The objective is to develop more inclusive cultures that welcome and promote diversity to provide learning for all by facilitating access, progression and success, ensuring equality and championing diversity and inclusion. This will ensure that all potential learners, researchers and innovators can be enabled to participate and derive the maximum benefit from their education and skills development and their research interests. A more coherent system will also be better equipped to confidently learn from, and engage with, learners, researchers, innovators and staff in other international tertiary systems.

Outcomes that will contribute to the achievement of this objective are:

- cross sectoral approaches to develop more inclusive cultures welcoming equality, diversity and inclusion
- working across further education and training and higher education to target access, engagement and reengagement of people in lifelong learning and tertiary education
- funding to grow participation from underrepresented groups throughout the system

3 Adapting to Change

The objective is to take a more unified approach to building an agile and responsive system so as to diminish the challenges and make the most of the opportunities presented by the changes and adaptations required of our society and economy. The factors causing these changes and adaptations also create the need for significant changes to the further and higher education, research and innovation systems in themselves.

Outcomes that will contribute to the achievement of this objective are:

- solutions to sustainability challenges, such as decarbonisation strategy and climate action, on a whole of FET, HE, R&I basis
- shared specialist expertise and advice across the system
- legislation and strategies that can strengthen the system and enable collaboration

4 Regional Rebalancing

The objective is to create more coherent and powerful responses to the regional rebalancing objective of Project Ireland 2040 and the associated RSES. The combined presence of higher and further education and training providers and research centres has a footprint in every county across Ireland. A more unified further education and training, higher education and research and innovation system regionally could capitalise on this footprint to assist in necessary regional rebalancing as envisaged under Project 2040.

Outcomes that will contribute to the achievement of this objective are:

- shared infrastructure on the ground
- further developing regional partnerships between ETBs, universities & TUs to meet the needs of community, society and economy
- a stronger role for FET in innovation

5 Skills and Talent

The objective is to move towards a more complementary and diverse unified system of lifelong learning options aligned to social and economic need as the best way to meet the diverse ambitions and talents of students, learners, researchers and innovators throughout their lifetimes. A unified system of diverse, valid and high quality options borne out of sector strengthening and higher levels of collaboration between sectors can help to remove invalid bias and assumptions, change attitudes and move closer to an equal valuing of all educational and developmental options.

This policy can accelerate, in a knowledge based economy, greater complementarity between the creation of new knowledge and skills, imparting this knowledge and skills in both further and higher education and bringing this knowledge and skills system closer to indigenous innovation and enterprise, to build future workforce capacity for a knowledge-based economy at regional and national levels

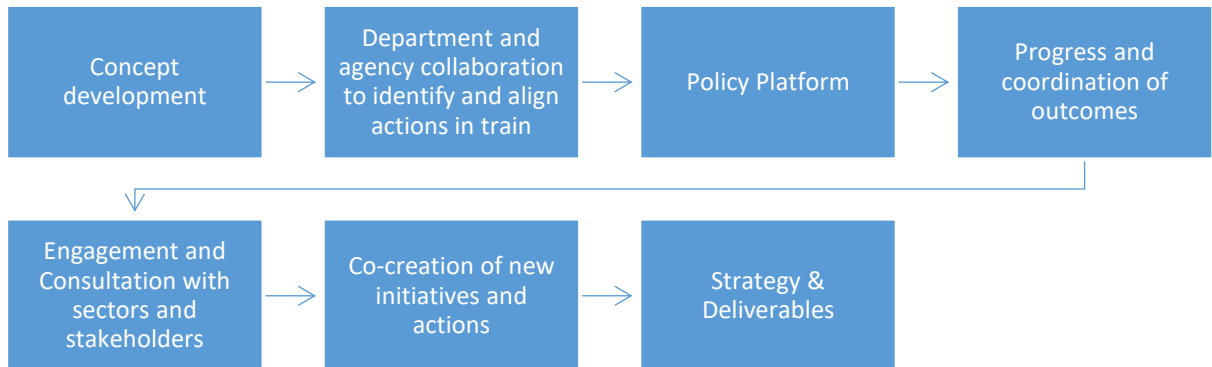
The intent is to create a wider sphere, composed of further and higher education and research and innovation to respond to learning, skills, knowledge and talent needs in key fields and domains and to provide a wider choice of transition points and to enable the development of more diverse and progressive pathways across and between the system for personal growth, to develop talent and to promote lifelong learning.

Building on the role and objectives of existing initiatives in this area such as the OECD Skills Strategy Project and the Action Plan for Apprenticeship, this policy will stimulate the enhancement of the system overall to develop Ireland's economic competitiveness and attractiveness on the global stage as well as its competitiveness, as a small knowledge-based economy, in comparison with other similar, more unified systems of tertiary education, research and innovation.

Outcomes that will contribute to the achievement of this objective are:

- more responsive and diversified supply pipelines for skills and knowledge in priority fields and domains
- more comprehensive and effective workforce planning systems
- a tertiary system that can deliver on the diverse interests and ambitions of people across society and changing needs throughout their life stages and circumstances
- a growth in the appetite for lifelong learning and development through the availability of high quality learning and development opportunities
- the stronger development of skills across the unified system driving innovation and strengthening the performance of firms
- the provision of more unified career and programme information and guidance

Implementation and Monitoring



The key milestones in the implementation of the more unified policy are:

- Identifying and aligning a series of initial early actions driven by DFHERIS and its agencies
- Framing the vision and objectives for a more unified further education and training, higher education and research and innovation system through the adoption of a policy platform
- Using the policy platform and progress on actions to involve stakeholders and sectors in an open process of consultation and engagement
- Working with the sectors and stakeholders to move from these initial actions to co-create a deeper, more comprehensive and extensive set of individual and well-coordinated sector- and stakeholder--led outcomes across the system
- Encompassing these within a Tertiary Education Strategy to drive their progress

DFHERIS is developing an iterative approach to this policy. The achievement of outcomes to build a more unified further education and training, higher education and research and innovation system are complex and linked to interdependent strategic issues that have proved difficult to progress independently in the past. The solutions to addressing this are sited in the adoption of a distributed approach that will drive change through a wide range

of individual but coordinated and interdependent actions and policy lines across DFHERIS, agencies, sectors and stakeholders

Led by the DFHERIS Statement of Strategy, the identification of many of these outcomes has already commenced through engagement across the Department, and with the Department's agencies as key collaborators, and in this document these have been aligned to specific objectives (see outcomes and spotlight lists below).

A wide range of actions across policy lines will be necessary to ensure the efficacy and success of the development of a more unified system and co-creation with the wider sector is acknowledged as the most effective and productive way to achieve this.

It is intended that through the identification, monitoring and coordination of outcomes and actions, progress can be made and the visibility of success can stimulate stakeholder and sectoral engagement. The use of an annual spotlight approach to actions will ensure an ongoing focus, adapting to more grassroots-led actions over time and providing for a change that can be iterative and dynamic.

The work of the Department in COVID 19 has demonstrated the effectiveness and, indeed, the richness of policy and action that can come from strong sectoral and stakeholder engagements. Sector and stakeholder bodies and individuals must feel empowered and enabled to lead and join in this vision of a more unified system, to develop a sense of ownership of actions that will require them to reach outside sector specific interests and to contribute to, inform and deepen the range of actions and responses that will be necessary to progress the development of a more unified system.

In this process it will important to ensure that the key DFHERIS agencies (SFI, HEA, SOLAS, QQI), that are seen as leaders and have significant reach into their respective sectors, promote this policy and cooperate together.

The Department and its agencies have identified and commenced actions and initiatives that support and facilitate the development of a more unified further education and training, higher education and research and innovation system. In a spirit of collaboration, wider sectoral and stakeholder engagement and consultation through existing processes as well as direct engagement and consultation on this policy objective will be key in progressing this policy platform. An open process of engagement and consultation will provide a platform whereby the sectors within this system can provide observations on the policy platform and its objectives, identify actions, identify ways to measure progress and collaborate with other sectors and with DFHERIS to co-create a Strategy.

To ensure that the policy platform is as comprehensive and robust as possible, the sectors and stakeholders will be invited to respond to the vision and policy objectives and provide their, inputs and observations on the:-

- Breadth and scope of the policy objectives
- Likely risks and opportunities arising from the policy development
- Additional impacts, benefits, outcomes to be reflected in the policy platform
- Sectoral actions, initiatives, strategies which could serve to deepen and enrich the policy development
- Mechanisms necessary to ensure that stakeholders are kept informed and involved in the development of this policy

It is intended that this process of consultation will stimulate the identification of further actions and initiatives by the wider sector, deepen the concept and embed it firmly at grassroots level and will ultimately crystallise into the development of a Strategy for Tertiary Education as set out in the Higher Education Authority Act 2022.

Outcomes

Led by the DFHERIS Statement of Strategy, DFHERIS has identified a wide range of outcomes that will progress the development of a more unified further education and training, higher education and research and innovation system.

These are based on work streams that have already commenced and are being led by the Department or one of its agencies. They have been worked out through a process of intensive engagement and a co-creative approach across units within the Department and with the Department's agencies.

Each outcome is aligned to a specific objective, though many of them will serve to achieve more than one objective. The achievement of these outcomes has been aligned and where necessary accelerated and reshaped to attain the overall vision for a more unified system.

In addition to the identification of outcomes aligned to specific objectives, DFHERIS is also aiming to prioritise the following overarching outcomes to provide more unified approaches

- More comprehensive funding and finance reporting
- More unified and aligned projections, information, analysis, reporting and policy
- More joined up skills and knowledge ecosystems
- Developing legislation and strategies that can strengthen and modernise the system and enable collaboration
- Sharing solutions to challenges such as climate change across the system
- Developing common approaches to capital planning, delivery and programme management and shared infrastructure and co-location options
- Promoting and supporting and learning from conjoint and unified approaches, such as Apprenticeship programme development, to develop more unified ways of working across the system

	Outcome	Lead body	Collaborators
	OBJECTIVE 1 – LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES		
1	Creation of HE/FET collaborative programmes through the development of more collaborative approaches to programme planning, development and delivery across the sectors	DFHERIS	SOLAS HEA QQI
2	Establishment of the QQI quality and qualifications forum for HE and FET to update ATP policy to enable the enhancement and expansion of pathways across the system.	QQI	DFHERIS
3	Learnings from the HCI and comparable projects in the FET sector being used to mainstream, develop and implement consistent national frameworks across FET and HE for the RPL and stackable micro-credential awards	QQI	DFHERIS HEA SOLAS
4	Completion of the review of Level 6 awards and follow up of recommendations to contribute to a more unified system	QQI	DFHERIS
5	Wider development of integrated national standards that straddle further education and training and higher education with a view to progressing pathways between the NFQ levels	QQI	DFHERIS HEA SOLAS

6	Progress the enhancement of the CAO system in partnership with ETBs and CAO, on the basis of the outcome of the current pilot project, and as part of the implementation of the FET Transforming Learning Strategy	SOLAS	DFHERIS HEA QQI CAO ETBI
7	Progress the enhancement of the CAO system to incorporate apprenticeship options	NAO	DFHERIS SOLAS HEA CAO NAO
8	Delivery of a more unified tertiary system and the operation of effective pathways between FET and HE on a more systematic and mainstreamed basis, through: progressing the relevant recommendations of the HE/FET Subgroup on FET/HE Transitions; implementation of the FET Transforming Learning Strategy; and the implementation of Funding our Future	DFHERIS	SOLAS HEA QQI NAO Funding and Reform Framework Implementation Group
9	The creation of a more comprehensive range of transverse pathways between FET and HE through the development of new pathways and the expansion and consolidation of existing pathways, through: progressing the relevant recommendations of the HE/FET Subgroup	SOLAS	SOLAS HEA QQI

	on FET/HE Transitions; implementation of the FET Transforming Learning Strategy; and the implementation of Funding our Future		NAO Funding and Reform Framework Implementation Group
10	Delivery of more coherent and easily accessible skills and knowledge guidance and information about programmes, qualifications and careers	DFHERIS	QQI DoE
11	Progressing the development of shared quality assurance review process between HE and FET and cross-sectoral publications on the quality of the system	QQI	DFHERIS
12	A framework for future research and innovation capital investment to identify the main infrastructural requirements across HEIs and Research Performing Organisations.	DFHERIS	HEA/IRC SFI
13	Ensuring that researchers have the right skills and opportunities so that they can make their maximum contribution, whether that is in academia, industry, the public sector or elsewhere, and realise their own career potential while doing so.	DFHERIS	HEA/IRC SFI
14	Fostering of and growth in participation in lifelong learning within and outside of the workplace, driven by National skills policy approaches, with the support of the OECD Skills Strategy Project	DFHERIS	SOLAS HEA NAO

OBJECTIVE 2 – INCLUSION			
15	Development of more unified frameworks across FET, HE and R&I to progress equality, diversity and inclusion in line with cross governmental EDI strategies	DFHERIS	HEA SOLAS SFI Other Departments
16	Widened scope of access planning to encompass options available to learners across HE and FET	DFHERIS	HEA SOLAS
17	Determination of the expansion of PATH funding to assist mature students in transitioning between FET and HE and to increase the number of research students from underrepresented groups	DFHERIS	HEA SOLAS
OBJECTIVE 3 – ADAPTING TO CHANGE			
18	Development of a tertiary system approach to meeting digital skills needs arising from the implementation of the National Digital Strategy	DFHERIS	DoE SOLAS HEA
19	Sharing of specialist capital expertise and advice between SOLAS and HEA	DFHERIS	SOLAS HEA

20	Determination of the expansion of the HE pathfinder programme to include the FET sector, in conjunction with SEAI	DFHERIS	SEAI
21	Promotion of solutions and joined up planning across FET, HE, research and innovation as part of public policy partnership engagements in relation to construction and green skills in the first instance with a potentially wider scope over time	DFHERIS	Other Departments
22	Continued development of a sectoral decarbonisation strategy and climate action mandate with a view to ensuring that targets and reporting are on a unified basis	DFHERIS	HEA SOLAS
23	Development of joined up approaches between FET and HE to guidelines for blended and online learning, assessment practice, academic integrity and enhancing the reputation of qualifications	QQI	DFHERIS HEA SOLAS
24	Development of a new International Strategy that brings together higher education and research objectives and considers the role of FET	DFHERIS	HEA/IRC SOLAS SFI EI
25	Greater alignment between FET, HE and R&I to ensure that course offerings are responsive to R&I needs	DFHERIS	HEA/IRC

26	A merger of IRC and SFI to advance greater interdisciplinarity in Ireland and to improve coordination of funding activities, administrative efficiencies and simplify the suite of supports for researchers, while building on their respective existing track records and international reputations.	DFHERIS	SFI HEA/IRC
27	A more cohesive R&I system with a streamlined oversight of strategic development	DFHERIS	Strategic Group made up of DFHERIS, DETE, DECC, D/Health, DAFM & D/Taoiseach
28	More collaborative approaches across the system to maximise the impact of R&I	DFHERIS	Strategic Group made up of DFHERIS, DETE, DECC, D/Health, DAFM & D/Taoiseach
OBJECTIVE 4 – REGIONAL REBALANCING			
29	Growth of engagement of the FET network in innovation through Regional Enterprise Plans, consistent with the objectives of the Smart Specialisation Strategy, to build local engagement, coordination and opportunity	SOLAS	EI

30	The empowerment of TUs to realise their potential in their regions, with their distinctive R&I capability at the centre of their collaboration with enterprise and especially Small and Medium-sized Enterprises.	DFHERIS	HEA/IRC
31	Prioritisation of capital apprenticeship proposals to realise the potential for shared infrastructure on the ground	HEA SOLAS	DFHERIS
OBJECTIVE 5 - SKILLS AND TALENT			
32	Engagement with and promotion of the joined up skills agenda at EU level which is a whole of tertiary and research approach	DFHERIS	EU bodies SOLAS HEA NAO
33	National skills policy approaches that traverse FET, HE and R&I, with the support of the OECD Skills Strategy Project	DFHERIS	SOLAS HEA NAO
34	New ways of working to leverage skills across FET, HE and R&I to drive innovation and strengthen the performance of firms	DFHERIS	SOLAS HEA NAO

35	Establishment of more comprehensive and effective workforce planning for delivery of public services through the establishment of structures in collaboration with HE, FET and Apprenticeship areas, agencies and relevant Government Departments	Relevant Government Departments	HEA SOLAS QQI Other Departments
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2022 Spotlight on actions progressing the development of a more unified tertiary system

The vision and objectives of a more unified tertiary system will be achieved through an open, distributed process of co-creation with sectors and stakeholders across the system whereby they are empowered to identify and progress actions to achieve this goal.

The Department and its agencies have already begun to identify and coordinate interdependent outcomes and actions for change in their own work plans.

Each year, as part of the development of the Strategy, the Department will publish a spotlight on actions ensuring that the approach is iterative and dynamic.

This is a spotlight on the specific actions commencing in 2022, led initially by the Department and its agencies. Over time, as the vision and actions take hold, the proportion of actions in the spotlight that are led by sectors and stakeholders will grow.

Provide a platform to promote, consult and engage on a more unified system:

- Commence an open process of engagement and consultation with the sector and stakeholders to progress the development of a more unified system.

A comprehensive communications and stakeholder engagement plan has been prepared. The plan envisages commencing the communication of the vision to the wider public by organising briefings. This will be followed by engagement and dialogue with sectors and stakeholders via consultation, bilateral discussions and events. Milestones, significant developments and further iterations of the Policy Platform will be communicated to the public throughout.

Fund collaborative action across the tertiary sector:

- Establish a Tertiary Fund for collaborative programme design, development and delivery by further education and training and higher education on a conjoint basis

This can be realised through the creation of a fund which would incentivise/support further education and training and higher education institutions to work together to create and deliver programmes on a collaborative basis, for example, joint programmes in disciplines of national importance or a sequence of further education and training and higher education and collaborative programmes with enhanced progression routes. Consideration will also be given to funding collaborative projects, for example, developing shared services (e.g. inclusion, libraries, counselling etc.), developing sectoral qualifications across further education and training and higher education and research and organising events involving the whole of the system (e.g. sustainability week, research exchange etc.) that help to build trust and mutual understanding between sectors and institutions.

- Develop proposals through the NTF for the tertiary sector to drive a step-change in participation in Life Long Learning in the workforce.

Examples of potential proposals to utilise NTF funding include increasing availability of a suite of complementary further education and training and higher education part-time and online programmes in skills priority disciplines, developing targeted career advice and guidance and making basic digital skills training available to specific cohorts.

- Extend the HCI to encompass funding for joint further education and training and higher education projects supporting the development of a more unified tertiary system.

This can be realised through the creation of a fourth pillar of the HCI which would award funding, through a competitive call model, for innovative projects that encourage and support a more unified tertiary system. Such projects could include structures to support the delivery of new joint further education and training and higher education programmes, the enhancement of recognition of further education and training credits within higher education, adaptation or realignment of existing programmes and joint programme delivery models.

- Enhance the connectedness between higher education and research in Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy and the progression of the TUTF and ERDF funding initiatives.

Under the new Strategy, there is potential to facilitate greater alignment between higher education and research and innovation by working with stakeholders across the tertiary system to ensure course offerings are aligned to research and innovation objectives and to develop better alignment and collaboration between research in higher education and research in industry to maximise impact.

The TUTF and ERDF funding initiatives have the potential to support the development of research infrastructure and capabilities across the higher education sector.

Support mainstreaming of good practice

- Seek proposals from further education and training and higher education to secure the mainstreaming of HCI projects on RPL and microcredentials across the tertiary sector.

This can be realised through a call for proposals to expand current and future HCI projects, which have been focussed on the higher education sector, to promote and support RPL and stackable microcredential awards offerings across further education and training and higher education, unifying the frameworks for these across sectors and creating opportunities for engagement in lifelong learning and addressing specific skills demands.

- Develop and publish unified further education and training and higher education QOI Guidelines for:
 - blended and online learning;
 - assessment practice;
 - academic integrity

This guidance, developed and published by QOI, will assist in the provision of more coherent and easily accessible guidance for further education and training and higher education providers in these areas. This, in turn, will facilitate aligned practices across the sector and ensure consistency.

QOI is in the process of commissioning a third party to assist with the establishment and publication of enhanced quality assurance guidelines for Blended and Online Learning in 2022 for implementation across the tertiary education system. This will support providers in further education and training and higher education to provide wholly online programmes.

- Enhancing the reputation of qualifications under the NFQ

QOI are working on joined up approaches across the tertiary system to enhance the national reputation for qualifications.

Encourage collaboration and cooperation between stakeholders in the system

- SFI and IRC will collaborate to develop multi-disciplinary mission oriented research and innovation programmes in 2022 and 2023

The Boards of SFI and IRC have taken steps to consult and collaborate in 2022 on areas of mutual cooperation which will include the development of multi-disciplinary, mission-oriented research and innovation programmes.

- Identify and disseminate best practice examples of further education and training and higher education collaboration in relation to capital investment from proposals submitted from higher and further education institutions under the current €430 million capital investment package

Further education and training and higher education institutions will be encouraged to strengthen their approaches to capital funding projects by sharing experiences and learning and to collaborate together on proposals, which may include sharing of infrastructure and/or co-location of facilities.

- Establish a sectoral research and evaluation group to support Departmental and aegis body research and evaluation activity and to communicate key learnings to policy makers and the wider public.

A sectoral research and evaluation group has been established and has agreed a programme of work which will support an evidence base for the tertiary sector.

Develop workforce planning in priority areas on a whole of tertiary basis

- Expand the development of sectoral qualifications frameworks by QQI across further education and training and higher education

This envisages a more coherent approach to the development of the education and training contribution to workforce planning initiatives encompassing the key competencies, standards and qualifications required by specific sectors and linked to further education and training and higher education programmes. Such frameworks have the potential to facilitate training, mobility, validation and potentially as a tool to assist in the development of policy. The recent development of the ELC workforce plan demonstrates the value of the sectors working together at a foundational level, demonstrating the strength and coherence of a unified approach and ensuring enhanced pathways for learners who wish to progress in the same discipline.

- Develop a comprehensive policy framework and Action Plan encompassing both further education and training and higher education provision for responding to the significant digital skills requirement for all segments of the workforce identified in the National Digital Strategy Harnessing Digital

The development of a policy framework and Action Plan will underpin and support a whole of tertiary approach to meeting digital skills needs arising from the implementation of the National Digital Strategy. Under the Skills dimension of the Strategy, this could include the development of digital skills programmes (broad level skills to more high level skills) for further education and training, higher education and lifelong learning, to ensure that all cohorts can engage with and benefit from digitalisation.

- Develop an integrated plan for a coherent tertiary response to meeting residential construction skills needs.

It is planned to promote solutions and joined up planning across further education and training, higher education, research and innovation as part of public policy partnership engagements in relation to residential construction. These engagements could be built upon to encompass a wider scope over time to address other skills demand areas. The plan could include the development of innovative construction technology and processes through research and innovation, an increase in the number of programmes targeted at residential construction, additional funding for Springboard and the HCI to incentivise the delivery of programmes which support the development of construction professionals, creation of additional construction apprenticeships.

Improve transitions/pathways opportunities

- Put in place a set of principles and an overarching policy framework to enhance further education and training-higher education transitions and set out a set of recommendations for next steps in delivering on this objective.

Work is underway within the Department to build upon and progress the recommendations arising from the HE-FE Transitions Group Report of June 2020. This will manifest as an approach to be adopted by the Department to increase, promote and support the development of increased pathways and transitions opportunities and to remove artificial barriers to learner progression.

- Establish a QQI Forum and conference to develop the NFQ and ATP policy to progress a more unified tertiary system

QQI are planning to establish a quality and qualifications forum for further education and training and higher education to update AT policy to enable the enhancement and expansion of pathways across the system. This forum will also assist in the development of integrated national standards that straddle further education and training and higher education with a view to progressing pathways between the NFQ levels.

- Progress the enhancement of the CAO system to include further education and training programmes and apprenticeships

SOLAS will be driving the work of the FET Transforming Learning Strategy Implementation to oversee, in partnership with ETBs and CAO, the enhancement of the CAO, on the basis of the outcome of the pilot project currently underway. This work will explore options for the inclusion of HE and FET options as part of the CAO system. The NAO will also support this work to ensure inclusion of apprenticeship options.

- Develop a proposal for establishing a comprehensive national online career information and guidance resource consistent with the relevant recommendation in the Indecon Review of Career Guidance

DFHERIS is liaising with DoE to progress the development and provision of more unified career and programme information and guidance resource. This is consistent with the Indecon recommendation for the provision of multi-channel blended career guidance supports including online tools with telephone and internet access to experienced guidance practitioners and the strengthening and promotion of a user friendly centralised careers portal.

- Identify and initiate the change in approach to access funding schemes that work more effectively with a unified approach e.g. PATH funding

A change in the approach is being considered which would see the appointment of a PATH coordinator for the FET sector who would work alongside and in collaboration with the PATH coordinator resource for the higher education sector. The role of the coordinator is to deliver and implement a national approach for the applications, assessment and awarding of the PATH2 bursaries including the promotion of the PATH programme and the building and managing of ongoing collaborative relationships with stakeholders.

- Highlight the policy objective to broaden the scope of future National Access Plans to encompass further education and training and higher education

A statement signposting the Department's intention to consider widening the scope of future National Access Plans to encompass further education and training with higher education has been included in the forthcoming National Access Plan 2022 – 2026.

Promote and support regional rebalancing

- Engage in regional development on a whole of system basis, focussing initially on the implementation of Smart Specialisation on an integrated basis between further education and training and higher education

SOLAS will promote the innovation agenda for the further education and training sector by growing its engagement in innovation through the Regional Enterprise Plans, consistent with the objectives of the Smart Specialisation Strategy, in order to build and support local engagement, coordination and opportunity.

- Implement the capital funding programme on a whole of tertiary basis

Capital proposals submitted to the Department under the capital investment package announced earlier this year will be assessed against an evaluation framework that includes a criteria to demonstrate how the proposal supports unified tertiary planning. Institutions and providers are being encouraged to collaborate on proposals which may include sharing of infrastructure and/or co-location of facilities.