

**Higher Education Authority****Report of 412nd Meeting held on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021 via teleconference**

Present: Mr Tony Donohoe (agenda items 1-14)  
Dr Bahram Bekhradnia (agenda items 1-12)  
Professor Orla Feely, Deputy Chair (agenda items 1-14)  
Dr Sharon Feeney (agenda items 1-14)  
Ms Lorna Fitzpatrick (agenda items 1-14)  
Mr Michael Horgan, Chairperson (agenda items 1-14)  
Ms Darina Kneafsey (agenda items 1-14)  
Dr Deirdre Lillis (agenda items 1-14)  
Dr Ronan Lyons (agenda items 1-8, 14)  
Dr Sinéad O’Flanagan (agenda items 1-14)  
Mr Pól Ó Móráin (agenda items 1-14)  
Dr Lynn Ramsey (agenda items 1-14)  
Dr John Wall (agenda items 1-14)

Apology: Dr Judith Eaton  
Dr Jim Mountjoy

In attendance: Dr Alan Wall (agenda items 1-14.1)  
Ms Orla Nugent (agenda items 1-12, 14)  
Mr Padraic Mellett (agenda items 1-12, 14)  
Mr Tim Conlon (agenda items 1-12, 14)  
Ms Caitriona Ryan (agenda items 1-12, 14)  
Ms Pearl Cunningham (agenda items 1-12, 14)  
Dr Vivienne Patterson (agenda items 1-12, 14)  
Mr Peter Brown (agenda items 1-12, 14)

**Conflicts of Interest**

The Chair reminded all Board members of potential conflicts of interest and asked members to highlight any items that may require attention.

**Quorum**

The quorum for HEA Board meetings, six members, was met.

**Disclosures**

No disclosures were raised

## 1. Report of 411<sup>th</sup> Meeting held 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020

1.1 The minutes were approved. Mr Mellett advised that minutes of the HEA Board meetings July-December will be published on the HEA's website.

## 2. Matters arising

2.1 The Chair enquired how staff will be notified of the Board's vote of appreciation. The CEO advised he would convey this at the next staff town hall.

## 3. HEA Work Programme

3.1 Members raised the following issues;

- Capacity to deliver the programme of work if the outstanding posts are not approved by the Department. The Chair acknowledged the importance of additional resources and system development. The CEO added that the HEA has advised the Department that the HEA will not be able to deliver the full work programme without additional resources. Furthermore, as the remit of the organisation grows, so too will the need for further staff and technology.
- Clarity was requested on the actions envisaged under the digital transformation objective. The CEO advised that the HEA is seeking additional investment €165m p.a. under the NDP to support the HEA's own digital capacity and also that of the HE system. The objectives in the workplan will be updated following engagement with key stakeholders including DFHERIS, HEAnet, HEIs, T&L Forum etc.
- The importance of availing of digital transformation expertise otherwise there is a risk that the funding will not be spent effectively. It would be more appropriate to label this additional funding as transformational investment rather than digital transformation.
- Capacity of the HEA to deliver if the pandemic goes beyond the first 6 months of 2021. The CEO noted the additional work taken on following Covid 19. He added that the HEA will reference the need for resources in the PDA to be finalised.
- Members congratulated the Executive on the delivery of the 2020 workplan, it was suggested they review the amber and red actions to see if they remained relevant. Issues raised included the HEI staff database and reform of the RFAM, should the latter await until there is clarity on future funding framework.
- It was important KPIs were as precise as possible so that delivery could be monitored.
- The development of HEI compacts and the strengthening of HEI governance are interlinked.

**Decision:** Members noted the 2020 workplan outturn and approved the 2021 workplan.

#### **4. Report of Finance and Governance Committee**

4.1 The Chair noted that the Board had received a verbal report of the Committee's 7/12/20 meeting at the last Board meeting. He referenced one further item noted at that meeting, Mr Joe Heavey agreed to stay on the Committee until the end of July 2020, when the term of the Board also expires. The Executive will maintain a rolling review of contracts scheduled to conclude during the year and this will be reported both to the ARC and the Finance & Governance Committee.

**Decision:** Members approved the Committee's report.

#### **5. Approval of new Finance System**

5.1 Ms Cunningham referred to the proposal document circulated with the Board pack and outlined the recommended system noting that Sysco Software Solutions have good public sector experience. She advised that the proposal was the most cost effective of the tenders evaluated. She estimated that implementation will take 7-9 months.

**Decision:** Members approved the acquisition of a financial management system, Microsoft Dynamics 365 Business Central provided by Sysco Software Solutions.

#### **6. AIT-LIT Technological University Application Process**

6.1 Members were advised that the assessment panel's report will be available for consideration at the next Board meeting on March 9<sup>th</sup> 2021 and thereafter will be presented to the Minister by March 19<sup>th</sup> 2021. The CEO briefed members on a meeting between the panel and executive on 27<sup>th</sup> January. It was agreed that after the current process has been completed that the panel should address the Board on future landscape structures. The following issues were raised;

- Constraints which arise from all meetings taking place on-line
- Does the process allow for dissenting voices? It was confirmed it does, a confidential email have been provided for.

**Decision:** Item noted

## 7. Renewal of Partnership Agreement with the IUA for the joint operation of the Irish Marie Curie Office

7.1 Mr Brown introduced this proposal outlining the process undertaken by the Council to date. This included a survey of users undertaken by the IRC executive. Members were advised that this proposal provides for enhanced support which will be funded through additional DFHERIS funding. Members raised the nature of the agreement with the IUA was it a contract or Memorandum of Understanding? Mr Brown confirmed that it was an MoU underpinning a partnership and not a legal contract.

**Decision:** The Board approved the provision of funding to the Irish Universities Association (IUA) of €640,000 from the Irish Research Council administration budget over the next four years for renewal of the partnership agreement with the IUA for the joint operation of the Irish Marie S Curie Office, based in the Association

## 8. Report on Completion in Higher Education

### 9. Presentation of HEA Statistical Data

8.1 Dr Patterson introduced this item. Since the last Board meeting the Executive was working on finalising data for the Completion Report and it was only finalised within the last few days. It was proposed to issue the report in the new format used by Statistics Section for most new reports - a data visualisation story board. This will enable visitors to the HEA website to carry out on-line queries thereby reducing the need for them to submit queries to the executive. Before this report is published on the HEA website a communications plan will be prepared for the media. This is the HEA's second completion report. The report examines new entrants from 2007/08 to allow for progression from longer programmes (Medicine and Dentistry) to be measured. She concluded by noting that overall Irish completion rates compared favourably with international rates.

8.2 Dr Pigott presented the key data;

- Completion rates by HE sector – for level 8 Colleges of Education 93-94%, Universities 83%, IoT 71-74%
- NFQ level – level 6/7 – 61-62%, level 8 – 81-82%
- Field of study – ranging from 55-56% Computing to 93-94% Teacher Education
- Gender – Females 81-82%, males 69-70%
- Geographical location – Cork highest, Longford lowest

- Correlation between leaving cert points and completion rates and the level of degree awarded
- Completion rates having regard to LC grades in Maths and in English

The executive undertook some modelling to allow for variables such as school type. Having regard to this it was possible to compare expected versus actual completion rates using the different criteria such as school type.

8.3 Dr Patterson outlined the next steps before the report will be published. This includes presenting to the DFHERIS and development of a communications strategy. The report will likely generate discussions around questions such as the admission of students who have low LC points and poor progression rates for certain IT courses. These might be best discussed in strategic dialogue discussions with HEIS. She noted that overall progression rates compared favourably with those at further education.

8.4 Members congratulated the executive on its excellent presentation. The following issues were raised;

- Confirmation that this report would be web based. Dr Patterson confirmed she envisaged the bulk of future statistical reports being web based.
- Does the report cover completion rates for international students? It was confirmed it does.
- It was suggested that the staff members involved in preparing the report submit a summary of their work to a journal focused on Irish policy, such as the Economic & Social Review or the Journal of the Statistical & Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, so that wider stakeholders in the Irish policymaking community be aware of the statistics available and analysis undertaken.
- The Board should consider a longer session to discuss the report and potential policy issues.
- How do Irish completion rates compare internationally? Mr Pigott advised that other than the UK there was limited comparable data. An earlier OECD report overestimated Irish completion rates.
- What are the completion rates for students coming through access programmes? Members were advised that the HEA has only started to collect this data, it will be available in future reports.
- Capacity to share and compare data on further vs higher education completion rates. It was confirmed the HEA has a data sharing agreement with SOLAS.
- Are apprenticeship students included in this report? It was confirmed they are not.
- Does the HEA share the data with QQI to assist with their QA processes? It was confirmed the HEA does make this data available to QQI.

**Decision:** Members congratulated the executive for their work on compiling the report. It was agreed the report should be published. The Chair will discuss with the CEO the possibility of a further discussion on the report once it is published.

## 10. HEA Board Evaluation

10.1 The Chair noted that the report demonstrated higher satisfaction levels since the previous self-evaluation exercise. The Chair advised that he was available to discuss with members off-line, any issue raised in the report.

**Decision:** Item noted.

## 11. Governance Ireland Report – Committee Terms of Reference

11.1 Mr Mellett agreed to review the latest terms of reference to confirm they are in line with the GI report recommendations. It was agreed that Committees should make provision to allow for remote participation at meetings. He agreed to review the extent to which they are overlaps between the Committees. The Chair noted that there appeared to be some issues which are being considered by Committees that might be more appropriate for another Committee. He suggested that once the terms of committees have been finalised, the membership and skill sets required by Committees can be considered having regard to this framework outlined in the booklet prepared by state boards for the appointment of Board members.

**Decision:** Item noted.

## 12. Executive Report

12.1 The following issues were raised;

- Extension to the deadline for receipt of proposals under PPP Bundle 2
- Staff departures – it was agreed that in future the stated reasons for the staff departure will be provided.
- HEI space survey, will this take account of the post Covid workplace? Ms Nugent advised that the exercise will focus on existing stock only and is focused especially on older buildings.
- Review of apprenticeship education, the CEO acknowledged the deadline set by DFHERIS was very tight, it was agreed to circulate details of the new governance model to members.
- Mr Brown updated members on IRC stipends.

### 13. Members only session

There were no issues for reporting from the private session.

### 14. Meeting with Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Science and Innovation Mr Simon Harris TD.

The following joined the Minister at the meeting – Ms Tanya Kenny, Ms Sarah Bardon and Ms Joanne Lonergan

14.1 The Chair welcomed the Minister to the meeting and introduced the Board members. In his opening remarks he noted the Authority has excellent staff but has starved of resources over the past ten years. He welcomed the additional investment which the Minister has provided for 2021.

14.2 The Minister in his opening remarks indicated he was very proud of the Board and the HEA as an organisation. He recognised the HEA as an agile ‘can do’ organisation and he conveyed his appreciation to the Board and executive of the HEA for its engagement with him and the new Department, their work during the Covid crisis, and on diversity and inclusion. He outlined the opportunity a new Department for Further and Higher Education offers to terms of making the case for increased investment and ensuring greater visibility for research and innovation. The new Department will be concerned not just with economic development, he wants to ensure it promotes social inclusion. He envisaged HEIs needing to be more agile in future so as to be in a position to offer a wider range of courses to different types of learners. He saw the need for more integration between further and higher education and the need for a single portal for all school leavers covering all further and higher education options.

14.3 The Minister referred to the changing role he envisaged for the HEA, he hopes to have a Heads of Bill to cabinet before Easter with a view to the new legislation being enacted before Christmas 2021. He envisaged a co-regulation model with the HEA playing a supporting role where necessary. The legislation will also seek to reform the governance structures of the HEIs who will have smaller more competency based governing bodies. He envisaged stronger governance and financial frameworks. There will be stronger role for the new HEA/HEC including in research, the development of a 7-10 year HE strategy, data collection and sharing.

14.4 The following issues were raised by members;

- Funding of higher education – is the Cassels report still relevant? The Minister advised that the EU consultant’s report should be available by the end of Q1

2021. He personally did not favour student loans for tuition fees given the negative impact this may have on socially disadvantaged students many whom are risk averse. He envisaged increased exchequer funding and the possibility of increased employer funding. The Chair noted the role targeted funding could play.

- Digital transformation – the Department and HEA need to play a leadership role. The Minister agreed, he noted the HEIs have responded very positively to the current pandemic. He noted the need to enhance digital skills capacity and the need for greater awareness around terminology.
- Opportunity for HE to play a leading role in action on climate change – The Minister agreed that it would be a wise move for HE to seek to play a leading role in addressing societal challenges such as climate change. He saw an opportunity for HE to assist in the upskilling of workers to allow for more retrofitting. The point was made that Ireland is well behind many countries in relation to climate change initiatives. Much of this can be attributed to a lack of education and research into climate change. The Minister noted the need also for businesses to appreciate the business case for more investment in climate change.
- How could student engagement at governance level be enhanced? The Minister indicated he was determined that the student voice was not diluted following his reforms.
- How can the HEA support the Island of Innovation initiative? The Minister indicated he would like to see us move to a single plan for research and innovation. Internationally he would like to build on the ‘Ireland House model’ whereby we can leverage on the international expertise of DFA, EI, IDA etc. On North-South relations he supported the Taoiseach’s proposal that we collaborate where it is appropriate. In this regard he hopes to see a call go out shortly for all island research centres. He envisaged the potential for the CUA alliance to collaborate with NI institutions as regards teaching and research in the north-west. He also raised the potential for east-west collaboration, he recently discussed this at a meeting with Scotland’s Deputy First Minister.
- Has the Minister any other reform priorities in addition to HEI GBs? The Minister noted the need for an integrated tertiary education system and the need for more flexibility in the provision of courses.
- Members welcomed the Minister’s reference to the HEA having a stronger role in relation to research. Reference was made to the relatively low level of funding Ireland provides for research. The Minister noted the potential to seek more funding under the current NDP review.

14.5 In his concluding remarks the Minister acknowledged the need for the HEA to have adequate resources and thanked the Board for its honest engagement. He said he would be happy to meet the Board a few times each year. The Chair



thanked the Minister for his time and welcomed his support for additional resources .

**Next Meeting**

9<sup>th</sup> March 2020

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairperson

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Date