

Higher Education Authority**Report of 415th Meeting held on 8th June via teleconference**

Present: Dr Bahram Bekhradnia (agenda items 1-9)
Mr Tony Donohoe (agenda items 1-9)
Dr Judith Eaton (agenda items 1-9)
Professor Orla Feely, Deputy Chair (agenda items 1-9)
Dr Sharon Feeney (agenda items 1-9)
Ms Lorna Fitzpatrick (agenda items 1-9)
Mr Michael Horgan, Chairperson (agenda items 1-9)
Ms Darina Kneafsey (agenda items 1-9)
Dr Deirdre Lillis (agenda items 1-9)
Dr Ronan Lyons (agenda items 1-8)
Dr Jim Mountjoy (agenda items 1-9)
Dr Sinéad O’Flanagan (agenda items 1-9)
Mr Pól Ó Móráin (agenda items 1-9)
Dr Lynn Ramsey (agenda items 1-9)
Dr John Wall (agenda items 1-9)

In attendance: Ms Claire Austick (agenda items 1-9)
Dr Alan Wall (agenda items 1-9.1)
Mr Padraic Mellett (agenda items 1-8)
Mr Tim Conlon (agenda items 1-8)
Ms Caitriona Ryan (agenda items 1-8)
Ms Pearl Cunningham (agenda items 1-8)
Dr Vivienne Patterson (agenda items 1-8)
Mr Peter Brown (agenda items 1-8)
Mr Neil McDermott (agenda item 5)
Ms Denise Frawley (agenda item 5)

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.

The Chair notified members of the sad death of Ms Liz Anne Worrall, a member of the Executive. It was agreed the CEO would write to the family of Ms Worrall to convey the sympathies of the Board and Executive.

The Chair welcomed Ms Clare Austick, the incoming President of the Union of Students in Ireland, who will join the Board on 1st July. He also thanked Ms Lorna Fitzpatrick whose term ends on 30th June, for her contribution to the work of the Board over the past two years.

Members congratulated Professor Orla Feely following her election as President of Engineers Ireland.

1. Report of 414th Board meeting

1.1 The minutes were approved.

2. Matters arising

2.1 No issues were raised.

3. Report on Higher Education Institutions Budget 2021 Submissions and Budget and Accountability Meetings

3.1 Ms Cunningham introduced this item. She noted that Covid 19 has heightened the financial challenges facing the higher education institutions. This is particularly evident in universities that have a high dependency on revenue from international students, student accommodation income and commercial activities. All Institutions have had the additional costs of transitioning to online delivery, as well as the costs of complying with public health measures. She outlined that HEIs are actively working to mitigate these impacts by imposing targeted cost cutting measures and imposing tight financial controls in order to remain viable and financially sustainable. Steps taken by institutions include;

- Delaying the filling of posts/not renewing contracts
- Making non-core staff redundant or availing of wage subsidy schemes where possible
- Delaying maintenance/capital projects
- Cutting discretionary expenditure

Overall the sector is budgeting a combined deficit for 2021 of €22m, this compares with a combined surplus of €41m in 2020. She outlined the position in those institutions proposing the largest deficits noting that the HEA will be closely

monitoring their financial position. DFHERIS have been updated on the budget projections and the impact of COVID on the sector and the HEA has requested additional funding for the sector. She concluded by outlining the key risks reported by the HEIs at the budget and accountability meetings.

3.2 Members complimented the executive on the excellent report noting that it provides a comprehensive view of the system on one infographic. The material will be of help to DFHERIS in its dealings with DPER. The following points were made;

- The suggestion that HEIs would use advance research funding to support recurrent activity was not an appropriate solution.
- The moral hazard associated with providing funding to certain institutions who did not manage their finances. The CEO noted that the HEA has an obligation to support the HEIs and that students should not have to suffer as a result of loss of income and increased costs due to these exceptional circumstances. He clarified that mechanisms would be put in place to provide funding equitably and that may include provisions to repay additional funding provided.
- Were the figures in the memorandum based on the financial year or calendar year? It was clarified that budgets submitted were based on the calendar year as institutions are allocated their grants on this basis.
- Capacity of HEIs to absorb additional new entrants this year. Members were advised that discussions were ongoing with the HEIs on this, some have signalled they do not have the capacity to increase their intake.
- The report highlights the extent to which HEIs are reliant on competitive programmes such as Springboard. It was however acknowledged that such programmes were designed to encourage HEIs to be responsive to the need for emerging skills.
- The fact that HEIs have limited capacity to cut pay costs may impact on other expenditure including student services.

4. Committee Reports

Audit and Risk

4.1 Dr Feeney introduced the Audit and Risk Committee's report. The Committee received a satisfactory audit report on the Erasmus + Programme, however, there remained a number of outstanding issues which the executive was dealing with. The Committee agreed to include a review of the Erasmus + programme in its annual internal audit work programme.

4.2 Risk Management

The Committee reviewed the Corporate Risk Register, Sectional Risk Registers and the Risk Appetite Statement and recommended the latter be amended to include a statement that the risk appetite for IT Security be classified as low. It was agreed that the executive and Internal Auditor would develop a new iteration for both the Corporate and Sectional Registers to ensure consistency in risk categorisation and calculation of residual risks as part of a future internal audit review of Risk Management.

Decision: Members approved the Corporate Risk Register and the revised Risk Appetite Statement.

4.3 Internal Audit Workplan

The Committee met the new internal auditors and agreed that a representative should attend ARC meetings. The Committee agreed the executive would have further discussions with Deloitte and circulate a revised internal audit work plan for approval by the Committee.

4.4 The Committee received updates on procurement and IT Security and made a number of proposals at members only session including that IT Security be a standing item and exit interviews should be considered for key services firms, including internal audit firms. The Chair of the Committee and at least one other Member should participate in such exit interviews. The Committee also recommended that two bank accounts be closed.

Decision: Members approved the closure of two bank accounts and the Committee's report.

Finance and Governance Committee

4.5 The Chair introduced the Committee's report. The Committee considered a report from the executive on the 2021 HEI budget submissions and budget and accountability meetings.

The Committee complimented and thanked the HR unit for its annual report. The Committee received an update on the IUA's projects, funded by the HEA, including the HEA's Building Capacity for Growth and Change. Overall the report demonstrated some very positive actions.

The Committee also noted the management accounts for March 2020.

4.6 Irish Research Council Commitment of Funding for COALESCE and Ulysses 2020 awards

Decision: Members approved the funding commitment under the COALESCE (€3.4 million) and Ulysses 2020 (€37,500) awards.

The Committee was briefed by the IRC executive on their recommendation to make additional awards under the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Programme because of an error in the categorisation of awards. The error giving rise to the requirement arose in the transfer of data to an Excel spreadsheet, resulting in a mis-categorisation of applicants as Category 1 (EU/resident) who were, in fact, Category 2 (non-EU/non-resident) and the subsequent issue of offers to a number of Category 2 applicants that should have been issued to Category 1 applicants. The IRC Executive considers that the outcome would be open to challenge if the ranked order of merit was not strictly followed in the making of awards, as is standard practice. The issuing of the additional awards will ensure that this is the case, The IRC Executive is recommending this course of action and will put additional measures in place to prevent the mis-categorisation error from occurring in the future.

The matter has also demonstrated the need for clear oversight of the IRC's funding transactions. It was noted that the Research and Graduate Education Committee have an oversight role in relation to the IRC's strategic activities only.

As additional information was still outstanding, it was agreed to defer this matter to the next meeting.

4.7 FSD Contingency Fund 2021 Allocations

Decision: Members approved the allocation of €361,899 from the Fund for Students with Disabilities, HE Contingency Fund.

4.8 Report on GMIT working group mid-term review

Members were advised that Mazars reported that despite the best efforts of those involved, the financial position and target position envisioned by the working group cannot be achieved within the original five year timeframe. The review noted that while student numbers have successfully increased in line with targets, the type of additional student have been in categories that attract lower income. Members noted that policy on the funding of regional campuses was a matter for the Department to determine. Members also noted that the funding position of the Mayo campus may be resolved within the overall funding framework of a new Connacht Ulster Alliance Technological University should this be approved by the Minister. It was agreed that the Mazars report would be shared with the CUA advisory panel.

Decision: Members agreed that the report should be submitted to the Department.

Decision: Members approved the Committee's report.

Policy and Strategic Planning Committee

4.9 Ms Kneafsey introduced the Committee's report. The Committee received updates on access and strategic planning. It was agreed that the HEA legislative process be discussed at the next Board meeting.

4.10 Student/Course Match in Higher Education

An analysis of data on Student/Course Match in Higher Education, concerning the socio-economic status and subject choice between 2015 and 2018 was presented. Along with this analysis, an article was also proposed for publication on the HEA website.

Decision: Members approved publication of this paper.

4.11 Analysis of Graduate Earnings across HEI's

Members were advised that this report builds on an earlier report with the earnings in respect of individual HEI graduates now being published. The HEIs have been provided with data for their institution and have agreed to the report being published. The executive will, in the first instance, prepare a communications strategy so that the context for the data is fully explained. Dr Patterson advised that the HEA continues to collaborate with the CSO. The CSO has published similar reports in the past but the HEA's report goes into more detail as to the factors contributing to the earnings for each HEI. While the HEA publishes a Graduate Outcome report annually, it is not envisaged that the HEA will publish earnings by institution each year.

The executive will work with those institutions who may be negatively impacted by the report. Dr Patterson confirmed the Statistics section can present a further deep dive analysis of the Arts and Humanities data to the PSP Committee.

The Board congratulated and complimented Dr Patterson and Dr Piggott on these reports and articles.

Decision: Members approved publication of this report.

Decision: Members approved the Committee's report.

Research and Graduate Education Committee

4.12 Professor Feely presented the Committee's report. The Committee noted in particular the importance of HEIs ensuring they complied with export control requirements. The executive was requested to make a number of changes to the briefing paper. The Committee also considered the General Scheme of the Higher Education Authority Bill, 2021 and noted the need for further detail as to the role of the HEA in relation to research. The CEO advised members that the HEA has been invited to attend the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science as part of the Committee's Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the proposed new legislation. It was agreed the executive would recirculate the HEA's earlier submissions to the Department for information of members.

Decision: Members approved the Committee's report.

System Development and Performance Management Committee

4.13 Mr Donohoe introduced the Committee's report. The Committee received updates on the development of a new system performance management framework, the new technological universities, the strategic dialogue process and the TUTF. The Committee met with representatives of the OECD who are undertaking a Review of Technological University Academic Contracts, Career Paths and Organisation. The OECD provided some insight into the responses gathered so far from consultations with other stakeholder groups and invited submissions from committee members as the review progresses.

4.14 Mr Conlon raised the HEA's panel of names for nomination to the Minister to serve on a Technological University Advisory Panel. While the advisory panel for the TUSE application is now in place, the executive will need to supplement the list of names so as to be in a position to forward four names to the Minister for the CUA panel. Members agreed to the addition of names in accordance with the criteria agreed in memorandum A 20-21. Members will be advised of the additional names added to the panel.

Decision: Members approved the Committee's report.

5. Presentation on the Development of the National Access Plan, 2022-2026

5.1 Ms Ryan addressed the following in her presentation;

- Project plan and timeframe for the development of a new plan – April-November 2021

- Consultation phase – the HEA has been asked to take the lead on this. This has included meetings with individual stakeholders, the annual access forum attended by 153 people and the student consultation event.
- Early consultation findings. These included;
 - Need for greater coherence around student supports
 - Need for a whole of institution approach
 - Need to meet student expectations, in particular students need to have a sense of belonging
 - More collaboration between different education providers including more pathways into higher education
 - Different types of disadvantage urban vs rural
 - Importance of target groups
 - Impact of Covid and the need for flexibility in provision
 - How to assist target groups navigate multiple sources of information
- Shaping the new plan – there is an expectation that the new plan will look and feel different. A new title such as “Inclusive Access and Student Success in Higher Education – A National Strategy” might be considered.
- Student centred principles that might underpin the new plan
 - Inclusivity
 - Flexibility
 - Sustainability
 - Coherence
 - Clarity
 - The above to be underpinned by evidence driven data
- Target setting – it was noted however that it may not be possible to get good data for all target groups.
- Next steps – a presentation of the outcome of the consultation process will be made to the Policy and Strategic Planning Committee. The new plan is scheduled to be presented to the Minister and published before the end of 2021.

5.2 Members thanked Ms Ryan for her presentation and her enthusiastic commitment to the access agenda. There was broad support for a new title. The following points were made;

- The new plan should have regard to the new rural development policy – Our Rural Future. There may be a possibility to develop rural learning hubs.
- Difficulties faced by families seeking to support a second or third child attend higher education.
- Need for timetabling to have regard to students who rely on public transport.
- Consideration be given to the new NStEP framework
- The level of funding available for life-long learning

- The need to have regard for the transitioning of access students to the labour market.
- Has digital delivery been an enabler or hindrance to access participation? Ms Ryan referenced improvements in connectivity with the rollout of Edu-roam. The provision of laptops has been of help. Against that broadband connectivity for some rural based students remains a challenge. The lack of digital skills was a challenge for many higher education students – both access and non-access.
- HEIs may need to be provided with further incentives to support the access agenda – too much is left to their outreach programmes and access offices. Consideration might be given to supporting students who mentor new access students.
- Importance of partnership with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Decision: Item noted

6. 2020 Annual Report

Decision: Members approved the draft annual report subject to the Chair's review of his letter to the Minister.

7. 2022 HEA Estimates

7.1 The CEO advised that the HEA is looking for c.€600m in additional funding for allocation to Higher Education Institutions. Due to the shorter timeframe to provide estimates to DFHERIS, it was not possible to submit this through the Finance & Governance Committee, as would normally be the case. A significant proportion of this request is to meet a shortfall in university pension funding. The HEA itself is seeking an additional amount of c.€4m. The estimates make some provision for additional staff and resources having regard to the EY BPR report, additional staff and board member development. The following issues were raised;

- Has additional funding been sought for research? Members were advised that some increase has been sought, however there may be further opportunities under the new NDP.
- Does the HEA need to provide for additional office space given the likelihood of remote working? The HEA will need to continue to allow for social distancing over the medium term and new staff will need to be accommodated.
- Need to provide for rising capital costs and PPP costs. This is mainly a matter for DPER and DFHERIS.

- Are the HEIs given any direction on how additional funding for additional student numbers should be spent? Members were advised that this funding is currently provided retrospectively through the annual core grant which is provided for teaching, research and support activities.
- Has provision been made for enhanced cyber security costs? As noted in the board memo, it is assumed that costs relating to improving the robustness of systems against cybersecurity attacks will form part of the National Plan.

Decision: Members approved the HEA's 2022 estimates submission. It was noted that these Estimates are indicative and will be adjusted by the Executive as further clarifications are received prior to final submission.

8. Executive Report

8.1 The Chair welcomed the progress being reported on the business plan. He noted the ambers, including the recruitment of staff, were outside the HEA's control. The CEO reported that the HEA has now secured approval for 13 new posts. The HEA will be attending the Public Accounts Committee on 1st July.

8.2 Members raised the following;

- Were any changes to the Employment Control Framework anticipated? The CEO advised that the HEA is seeking to secure more discretion to fill posts rather than secure retrospective approval.
- Springboard – Members were advised that recommendations were with the Minister, a decision was expected soon.
- Protected disclosures from HEI staff. The CEO advised that these were currently being reviewed, some may not fall within the parameters of the legislation. The HEA has included in its estimates provision to outsource some of the work associated with the processing of protected disclosures.
- International Education Strategy – Members were advised that this is still under consideration within DFHERIS. The feedback on international recruitment for 2021/22 is broadly positive. Arising from Brexit there is an increased interest in students taking up placements under the Erasmus + programme. Capacity in the HEIs to accommodate the additional demand is constrained. The academic staff mobility programme has not yet been launched.

9. Members only session

There was no substantive matter to report.

Next Meeting

27th July 2021

Chairperson

Date