

Higher Education Authority
Report of Meeting of the Board of the HEA held on 23rd January 2024

- Present:
- Mr Michael Horgan, Chairperson (agenda items 1-11)
 - Mr Dermot McCarthy (agenda items 1-11)
 - Dr Fiona Killard Lynch (agenda items 1-11)
 - Dr Niall Connors (agenda items 1-11)
 - Dr Rory O’Sullivan (agenda items 1-11)
 - Dr Rosemary Day (agenda items 1-11)
 - Ms Lianne Patterson (agenda items 1-11)
 - Ms Nessa McEniff (agenda items 1-11)
 - Ms Paula Fyans (agenda items 1-11)
 - Mr Chris Clifford (agenda items 1-11)
 - Professor Anne Scott (agenda items 1-11)
 - Professor Mark Rogers (agenda items 1-11)
- In attendance:
- Professor Daniel Carey, IRC Chair (agenda items 1-11)
 - Professor Marie Clarke, SETL Committee Chair (agenda items 1-11)

 - Dr Alan Wall (agenda items 1-11.1)
 - Ms Orla Nugent (agenda items 1-10)
 - Mr Padraic Mellett (agenda items 1-10)
 - Mr Tim Conlon (agenda items 1-10)
 - Ms Caitriona Ryan (agenda items 1-10)
 - Dr Vivienne Patterson (agenda items 1-10)
 - Dr Louise Callinan (agenda items 1-10)
 - Ms. Pearl Cunningham (agenda items 1-10)
 - Mr. Peter Brown (agenda items 1-10)
 - Ms Sheena Duffy (agenda items 1-10)
 - Ms Orla Christle (agenda items 1-10)
 - Ms Eilis Noonan (agenda items 1-10)
 - Dr Jennie Rothwell (agenda item 7)

Opening Remarks

The Chair welcomed Members to their first Board meeting. The Chair mentioned that additional time had been provided under “ matters arising” to allow for explanation and clarification of items in the minutes, for the benefit of the new Members.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest were declared.

Quorum

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

1. Report of previous meeting

The Report of the Meeting of the HEA Board on 6th November 2023 was approved. Mr Mellett advised Members that the Reports of the Board Meetings from the previous six months will be published on the HEA website shortly.

2. Matters arising

2.1 Meeting with outgoing Board

Members discussed the possibility of a meeting between the outgoing and incoming Board Members as suggested in the November Report. Members decided to revisit the possibility at a later date, if thought necessary, recognising that they are free to consult at Committee level.

2.2 HEIs

The CEO briefed Members on ongoing matters relating to financial management and governance in higher education institutions, in particular in relation to the financial deficits in UCC, TU Dublin and DkIT.

2.3 NTO

The CEO provided some background information to Members on the National Tertiary Office (NTO). The NTO, jointly managed by the HEA and SOLAS, is advancing a strategic approach to enhancing the pathways between the FE and HE sectors in a number of specific programme areas.

3. Report of the Student Engagement and Teaching & Learning Committee 22nd Nov

Professor Clarke presented this report.

3.1 National Forum

It was noted that an additional Assistant Principal post was open at NFETL focusing on Enhancement and Digital Innovations, including initiatives such as Open Courses and the National Resource Hub, and Professor Clarke thanked Mr. Colin Lowry for all of this work in this area.

3.2 Healthy Campus

It was reported that the Committee had received an update on the Healthy Campus programme and its alignment with Student Engagement and Success. There was a discussion at the Committee meeting on mental health, climate anxiety, and the role of institutions in shaping student mindsets and well-being.

3.3 Nominations for International Committee Members

A nominations list and decision-making process was agreed upon, with a plan to bring selected candidates to the Board shortly.

Decision: Members noted the Committee's Report.

4. Report of Irish Research Council 8th Dec

Professor Carey presented this report.

4.1 Amalgamation

It is now expected that the new research agency will be established in late Q2 2024. The Research & Innovation Bill was published in early January. The Bill now includes an enhanced role for the HEA in terms of the research landscape. Board appointments are still ongoing for the new agency, and an operational consultation is planned by the CEO designate of the new agency, nine months into its establishment.

4.2 LAUREATE Update

Council Members viewed as problematic the fact that the Laureate programme was at risk due to no funding being set aside for it next year, and recommended strongly that funds be reallocated within the new agency in 2024 in order to fund the programme in 2024.

4.3 The following issues were raised:

- Can transfer of staff to the new agency happen in advance of the enactment of the legislation? The Minister will issue an order designating the transfer of certain existing HEA staff working in IRC to the new agency. Parity of esteem with the staff working in SFI will need to be considered as the Transfer of Undertakings (TUPE) process is worked through.
- The issue of unbalanced patterns in the gender and regional distribution recognised in the ERC Advanced grants to Ireland, indicating a similarly unbalanced pattern in the IRC Advanced Laureate awards was discussed. Specific criteria for evaluation of the applications may be required.
- The issue of Members of the Board of the new research agency being precluded from being involved in research grants was discussed. The IRC Director confirmed that there is a section in the Bill around conflict of interest, however this issue is not yet fully resolved.
- The ongoing role for the HEA in the promotion of research was raised - the HEA Act 2022 makes HEA responsible for planning of research in the HE system. HEA will maintain a role in the research landscape, and HEA-run programmes such as the North South Research Programme further highlight this.

Decision: Members noted the Committee's report.

5. Proposed Approach to 2024 Grant Allocation

5.1 Ms Nugent presented this report. The Board was asked to approve the proposed approach to the 2024 grant allocations for recurrent purposes enabling the HEA to notify institutions of their 2024 allocations.

Ms Nugent noted that typically this would go to the Finance Committee in December.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) has advised the HEA, on a provisional basis, that the allocation for 2024 for the B4 Subhead (Recurrent funding to HEA institutions) is €1,380,683,000. It is understood that the funding from the National Training Fund (NTF) under the Enterprise Focused Higher Education Provision (EFHE) will remain at the 2023 allocation of €148,352,000, giving a total provisional recurrent provision of €1,529,035,000 for 2024.

The DFHERIS has also advised on a provisional basis that the allocation for pensions under Subhead B10.2 is €109,849,000, an increase of €4,830,000 on the original 2023 allocation.

DFHERIS is expected to provide formal notification of the grant in the coming weeks and the HEA will follow the approach proposed to prepare and notify institutions of their 2024 allocation. The Higher Education Authority Act 2022 requires the HEA to notify institutions by 1st March of the funding to be provided.

The Deputy CEO explained that DFHERIS inform HEA of the overall recurrent grant allocation and direct allocations within the overall recurrent grant for strategic designated purposes. These are known as top slices/ear marked funding and are reviewed with sectoral representatives. The HEA follows a standard process including allocations in accordance with the Top slices/earmarked funding, free fees, nursing and a final allocation in accordance with the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM).

Upon completion of the allocation process the resulting allocations are independently reviewed by an expert prior to finalising the 2024 grant. The Executive will bring the institutional allocations for information to the next Finance Committee meeting.

5.2 The following was raised:

- It was noted that the details of the provisional grants were made available for all HEIs to view.
- In terms of the RGAM distribution, is the HEA reliant on input data from HEIs and how is this verified? There are Standard Operating Procedures in place, requiring validation of each institution's RGAM return with a final verification and confirmation by the Institution and there is a final check against the Student Record System (SRS).
- As the mode of entry changes (e.g. FE to HE) what will the HEA need to consider when supporting each sector to make funding predictions? It was acknowledged that this was a complex issue, and the HEA will need to manage this with the sectors. A related issue is the progression from 1st to 2nd year. Dr Patterson noted that competitive funding through the NTF is also driving behaviour in the sector.

- Any changes to the proposed approach? Members were advised the approach was consistent with previous years.
- Currently there is no specific allocation for demographic funding in this year's grant. This is due to a trend in student numbers returning to pre-Covid levels.

Decision: The Board approved the proposed approach to the grant allocation for recurrent purposes enabling the HEA to notify institutions of their 2024 allocations.

6. 2023 Recurrent Grant Outturn

6.1 Ms Cunningham presented this Memorandum. The Board was requested to note the final 2023 grant allocations in respect of Recurrent and Pensions grants.

Original budget 2023 recurrent funding allocation from the Department was €1,434.3m - €1,286m from Vote 45 subhead B04 and €148.3m from the National Training Fund for Enterprise Focused Higher Education. In December 2023 the Department provided additional supplementary recurrent funding of €155.5m.

Recurrent funding income and recurrent grant payments made in 2023 is set out in the table below:

Recurrent Funding Income

	€'000	€'000
DFHERIS General Vote 45 Subhead B04		
Opening Balance at 1 Jan 2023	11,628	
Original Budget 2023	1,285,961	
Supplementary Budget 2023	155,497	
Less NTO Administration Costs	(260)	
Closing Balance at 31 Dec 2023	(1,944)	
		1,450,882
NTF Enterprise Focused Higher Education		148,352
Health Services Executive		5,903
Recurrent Funding Income 2023		1,605,137
Less Refunds paid to DFHERIS		(830)
Total		1,604,307

Recurrent Grant Payments

	Gross €'000	Refunds €'000	Net €'000
Core Grant	895,033	0	895,033
Fees Grant	323,435	0	323,435
Student Contribution	142,368	8,758	133,610
Nursing	53,879	0	53,879
Strategic Initiatives	211,417	13,067	198,350
Total	1,626,132	21,825	1,604,307

The DFHERIS provides an annual allocation for Pensions under Vote 45 Sub-head B10.2 for pensions costs arising in the universities and specialist institutions. Pension costs for the

technological sector are provided separately outside of the HEA. Original budget 2023 pensions funding allocation from the Department was €105m. In December 2023 the Department provided additional supplementary pensions funding of €56m towards meeting projected shortfalls in University pensions, bringing the total pension funding provided to €161m.

6.2 The following queries were raised:

- One of the Strategic Initiatives, “Literacy and Numeracy Funding” was queried. It was confirmed that this funding is allocated to providers of initial teacher education at the direction of the Department of Education to support the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.
- It was queried if emergency funding will be provided for Palestinian refugees similar to the funding for Ukrainian students- no information has been provided yet from the Department on this matter.
- Further details on Strategic Skills, EDI or other initiatives can be provided on request.
- Is the amount of reallocation of funding for this year- €13 million, typical compared to other years? This was confirmed as typical and is in the context of €1.4bn grant.

Decision: Members noted this Memorandum.

7. Contract for Advance HE Athena Swan Ireland

7.1 Ms Duffy and Dr Rothwell presented this memorandum. The Board was requested to approve the proposal for the continued extension of Advance HE’s Athena Swan Ireland Charter to Irish HEIs for the period 1st April 2024–31st March 2029, further to the conclusion of the current agreement period on 31st March 2024.

Dr Rothwell noted the following points:

- Athena Swan has been in the Irish HEI sector since 2014. It has evolved in this time and is now a unique charter and process for Ireland that takes both the national and European context into account. Awards are made by peer review panels which are comprised of Irish HEI sector staff.
- Advance HE is the only entity, nationally or internationally that can provide access to the Athena Swan charter for Irish HEIs. The charter is proprietary in nature and on that basis, best procurement practice has been followed. Additional value comes from learnings and accessing the expertise from other charters, UK and international (Australia, Canada, US and others).
- The charter has been reflective of and responsive to national policy considerations like the HEA’s reviews of gender equality in 2016 and 2022 and the Race Equality Implementation Plan.
- It is important to note that since 2022 the European Commission has made it a requirement for public bodies to have a Gender Equality Plan in order to receive competitive research funding from Horizon Europe. Irish HEIs already met this requirement because they had developed Gender Equality Plans through the Athena Swan process. Under the previous framework programme, Horizon 2020, Ireland achieved over €1 billion in funding.

Athena Swan has been successfully embedded into the Irish HEI context:

- Currently 19 institutions hold awards: 6 HEIs have renewed their Bronze Awards, 2 HEIs have achieved Silver Institution Awards. 105 departments or sub-units hold awards.
- Irish HEIs are firmly invested in this process, which is a recommendation of both HEA National Reviews of Gender Equality Review (2016, 2022) and the Gender Action Plan 2018-2020 (2018)
- Accreditation is linked to national research funding (the HEA issued a statement on this in August 2019).

7.2 The following queries were raised:

- Clarification was sought on whether this was a multiannual commitment, and it was confirmed that the proposed funding allocation was for five years. It is expected that demand will continue to be strong due to the pipeline of applications and renewals and the updated Charter gives HEIs opportunity to engage with broader EDI policy.
- International metrics, how are we performing internationally? Ireland is seen as a leader in this space based on the progress made, and Athena Swan is seen as a leading support mechanism internationally. It was noted that the HEA support to the sector is key, and the central approach and reporting has helped to embed policy objectives.
- Further detail was sought on the alignment to the Irish sector and if the Ireland Charter is tailored to Irish system. The charter is aligned to national policy and has a steering group comprising HEIs and HEA to ensure it meets the requirements of the Irish HE system.
- Inclusion of AHSS? Since 2015 AHSS departments have been included. The Charter was also expanded to include all staff, not just limited to academic staff and students.
- Are there other financial supports available to HEIs to embed this? HEA support enables them to participate in the charter, e.g. Recommendations from first Gender Equality Review recommended the appointment of senior academic leaders to raise the profile within HEIs, as well as the HEA's Gender Equality Enhancement fund to fund specific projects.
- Any alignment with DORA was included when redeveloping the charter.
- Alignment with national research funding? It was confirmed that the HEA and research agencies issued a statement in 2019 requiring that HEIs comply with timelines to be eligible for national research funding provided by HRB, IRC, SFI etc . This applies to all publicly funded HEIs

Decision: The Board approved this proposal.

8. HEA Governance

8.1 Committee Membership

Members were requested to approve membership of the HEA standing committees as per the table below. The positions of Chairs of the Committees and Deputy Chairperson were agreed as follows:

- Chair of the Finance Committee: Rory O’Sullivan
- Chair of Audit and Risk Committee: Fiona Killard-Lynch
- Deputy Chairperson: Paula Fyans

Audit and Risk Committee	Finance Committee	Student Engagement & Teaching and Learning Committee
Dr Fiona Killard-Lynch, Chairperson	Dr Rory O’Sullivan, Chairperson	Mr Chris Clifford
Dr Rosemary Day	Mr Chris Clifford	Ms Rosemary Day
Dr Niall Connors	Dr Niall Connors	Ms Paula Fyans
Ms Paula Fyans	Dr Fiona Killard-Lynch	Ms Nessa McEniff
Mr Dermot McCarthy	Mr Dermot McCarthy	Dr. Rory O’Sullivan
Ms Lianne Patterson	Ms Nessa McEniff	Prof. Anne Scott
Prof. Mark Rogers	Ms Lianne Patterson	External Members:
Prof. Anne Scott	Prof. Mark Rogers	Prof. Marie Clarke, Chairperson
External Member:	External Member:	Mr. Bryan O’Mahony
Ms. Anne Brady	Ms. Anne Brady	Ms. Martha Ni Riada
		Ms. Hannah Kelly
		Ms. Roisin Morris-Drennan
		Dr. Aine Ni She
		Prof. Paul McSweeney
		Ms. Claire McGee
		Prof. Kersten Mey
		Dr. Leo Casey
		Prof. Frances O’Connell

Decision: Members approved the structure and membership of the standing Committees.

8.2 Committee Terms of Reference

- The Chairperson proposed a change to the Terms of Reference of the Finance and Audit & Risk Committees. In both, the membership is described as “The Committee

shall consist of a *maximum* of five (5) Board Members”, which will be amended to read “a *minimum* of 5 Board Members” to allow for the membership above.

- The Chair also suggested that the Committees consider a term of two years for their new Chairs when reviewing the Terms of Reference to allow for other members the opportunity to gain experience as chair of a Committee.

Decision: Members approved the update wording of the Board Membership in the Committee Terms of Reference.

8.3 HEA Seal

Members were requested to approve the seal of the HEA as per Section 7(3) of the Act, which will be authenticated by the signatures of the CEO and the Chairperson.

Decision: Members approved the seal of the HEA.

9. Briefing HEA Senior Management Team

9.1 Members of the Senior Management Team from the Irish Research Council, Research & Research Policy and EDI, Communications & International Programmes briefed the Board on ongoing projects in the sections and priorities for the year.

Members noted this Briefing.

10. Executive Report

10.1 Funding Allocations Made by CEO

The CEO advised Members of three funding allocations listed in the Report, which were made in accordance with the delegation of certain funding decisions to the CEO agreed by the Board in 2023. A register of these allocations is maintained by the Executive. These delegated funding decisions are brought to the next available Board meeting by the CEO in the Executive Report.

A balancing payment of €22,135 to SETU in respect of a project funded under the Innovation and Transformation Fund was approved by the CEO in December 2023 and funds were subsequently transferred to the institution.

The Second Call of the Gender Equality Enhancement Fund 2023 closed for applications on 31st October 2023. Nine proposals were received assessed by a panel of 3 members according to the criteria set out in the funding guidelines. Four proposals met the funding threshold. HEIs were notified of the outcome in December 2023. The funding allocation of €154,383 was approved by the HEA CEO.

An expression of interest process and funding allocation for the development of new Open Courses in the National Forum for Teaching & Learning was approved by HEA Board at its September 2023 meeting. All proposals met the criteria and were recommended for full

funding. A total of €154,754 has been allocated for the approved proposals, ensuring a broad impact across the sector.

10.2 The following queries were raised:

- The Executive agreed to circulate further detail on the System Performance Framework, which are expected to be in place by Q3 2024.
- The transfer of funding for three Institutions previously directly funded by DFHERIS to the HEA was noted. The three institutions are: Carlow College, St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth (SPPU), and National College of Ireland (NCI). Funding conditions will be applied to these institutions in line with the HEA Act
- It was suggested that funding opportunities provided by the HEA could be collated into a single online resource - the Executive agreed to investigate this further.
- It was noted that the MyPhD website should be reviewed, and further focus be given to AHSS on the resource.
- It was confirmed by the Executive that the North South Research Programme timelines are progressing well without major delays, the Department of An Taoiseach have some feedback on the current proposals.
- It was noted that there is a conference planned by HEA Statistics and Policy & Strategic Planning in relation to student success and progression in higher education on 29th February 2024. All Board Members are invited to attend.

Members noted this Report.

11. Members Only Session

No decisions or recommendations were made at the Private Session

Next Meeting: The date of the next meeting was agreed as Tuesday 26th March.

Chairperson Date