Restructuring Irish Post-Secondary Education – 1970s to 2023+

ELLEN HAZELKORN

BH ASSOCIATES, IRELAND

OISE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

4 MAY 2023

BH ASSOCIATES

Overview of Presentation

Massification to Internationalisation: Setting the Context

Phase 1 - Reconfiguring post-secondary education, 2011-2021

Phase 2 - Progressing a Unified Tertiary System, 2022-

Issues and Challenges

BH ASSOCIATES

MASSIFICATION TO INTERNATIONALISATION: SETTING THE CONTEXT

Overview

Ireland has been radically transformed from being a labour-exporting society to one heavily dependent upon FDI and highly skilled labour and skilled-immigration.

From being heavily dependent on protectionist policies and agriculture, it is now one of the most open economies in the world and one of the best performing in the EU.

1. The big story has been massification. For a country lacking natural resources, the objective has been to get more people well-educated.

2. EU membership and internationalisation of the economy has been the other big story –

   - Realisation that Ireland's prosperity is tied up with its graduates and thus quality, excellence and competitiveness of its higher education and research system.

BH ASSOCIATES

Post-secondary expansion 1970s-1990s

Share of 25–34-year-olds w/ tertiary attainment rose from 30% in 2000 to 63% in 2021.

- Ireland is one of 14 OECD countries where at least half of 25–34-year-olds have a tertiary education.
- Significantly outpaces EU levels.

91% completion of secondary school; ~5% leave without completion

- ~66.5% enrol in HE;
- BUT only ~20.5% VET;
- ~13.5% NEET

Demographic changes significant

- Highest birth rate in EU and lowest death rate; ageing fastest in EU
- 60% of people in the labour force today will still be eligible workers in 2035

BH ASSOCIATES

Trends in share of tertiary-educated 25–34-year-olds (2000-2021)
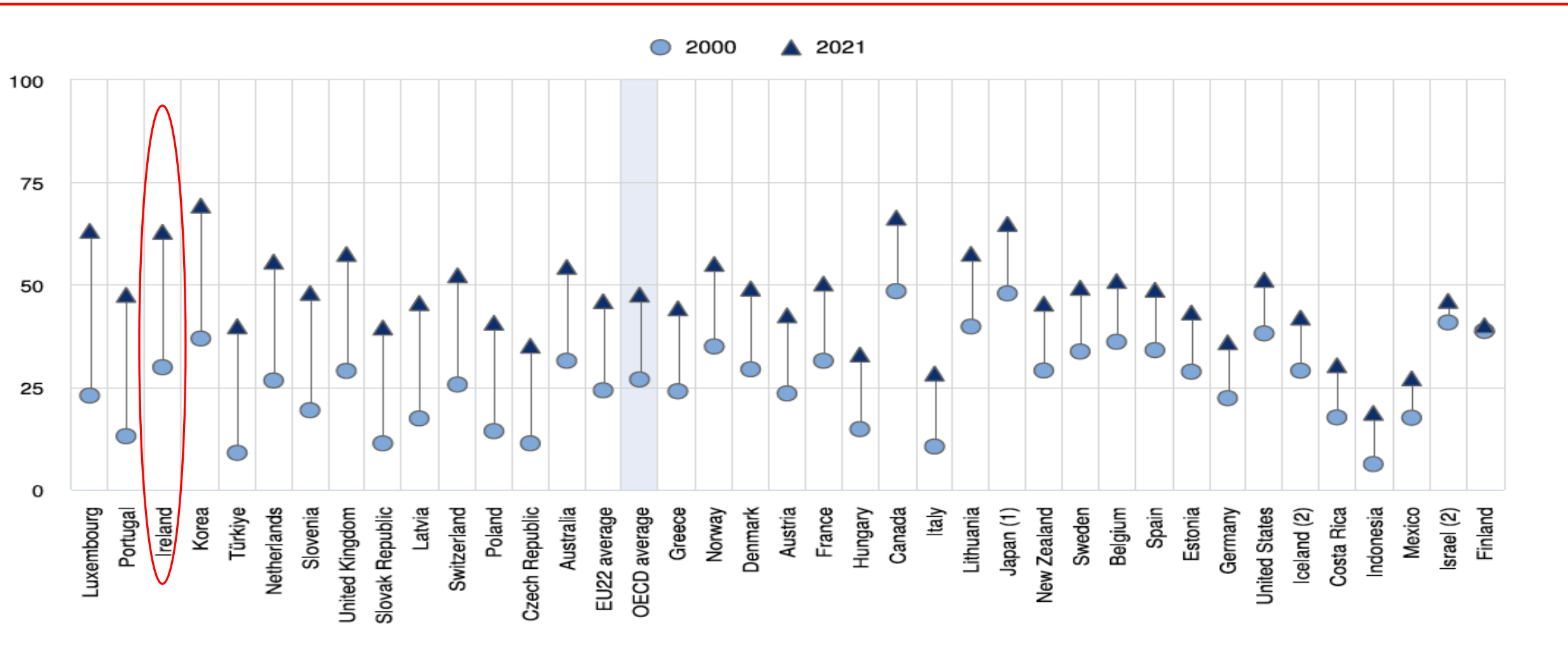
Some stats

HE qualification socially/economically seen as vital for successful labour market participation and personal success.

Graduates earn 81% more than those with upper secondary.

BUT:

- Some evidence of over-qualification with approximately 15% of the labour force considered to be overqualified graduates
- Major skills shortages exist in key areas of the economy, including in jobs requiring moderate level skills (typically those acquired via FET).

Regional disparities reflects 40% economic activity around Dublin

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

Post-secondary system today

Universities = 8

Technological universities = 5

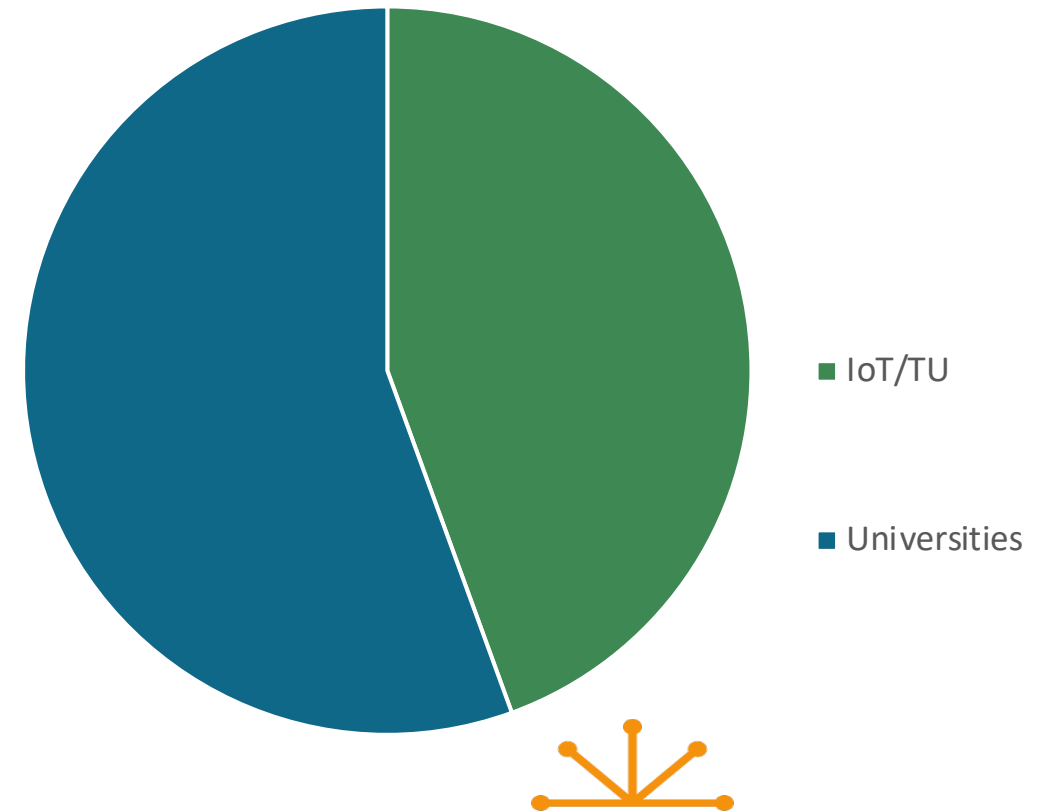Institutes of Technology = 2

Other publicly funded colleges = 11

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

Education & Training Boards = 16

FET colleges = 200+

Academic Year 2022 Student Enrolments

- IoT/TU
- Universities

BH ASSOCIATES

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

System (re)shaping, 2011-

National Strategy for Higher Education 2011

Restructuring HE Landscape

Establishing Technological Universities 2013-2022

Reconfiguring VET/FET, 2013 -

Progressing Unified Tertiary Education Sector 2022-

Transformation of landscape

Transformed number/size of institutions and national/internat'l role and orientation.

- Universities Act 1997 (Government of Ireland, 1997, S12(f)) described university responsibility "to support and contribute to the realisation of national economic and social development"

- Institutes of Technology (IoT) to "provide vocational and technical education...with particular reference to the region served by the college" (Government of Ireland, 1992; Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992 S5(1)).

- SOLAS established to monitor and coordinate FET provision (Further Education and Training Act, 2013)

- Redesignation of IoTs as technological universities (Technological Universities Act 2018)

- Higher Education Authority Act, 2022, strengthens system governance and accountability.

National Strategy for Higher Education 2011

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

- Strategic steering and shaping of HE higher education landscape creating a coordinated and "coherent" system of a smaller number of larger and diverse institutions, referred to as "directed diversity" (Boland, 2009).

- Publicly-funded HEIs should respond more directly to national needs and accordingly should participate in regional clusters.

- Mergers of IoTs resulting in redesignation as technological universities (TU) with distinct missions.

National Strategy
for Higher Education
to 2030

Report of the Strategy Group
January 2011

Policy shift

Diverse/differentiated missions, greater consolidation and collaboration between institutions, emphasis on widening access and regionalism.

Significant impact on the way HE has been viewed in terms of nation-building.

- Meet needs of wider range of students, communities and enterprises in their region.
- Bring together institutions so that needs of region can be identified and provided for in a coordinated way, in partnership with other education providers, and with business interest and the wider community (HEA 2013).

BH ASSOCIATES

Regional Technical Colleges (RTC)

Vocational education sector created "for trade and industry over a broad spectrum of occupations ranging from craft to professional level, notably in engineering and science, but also in commercial, linguistic and other specialties"
(Government of Ireland, 1967).

Beginning 1960s, decision to create regional colleges to meet economic imperative for technically qualified people to underpin industrial development.

Support of European Social Fund (ESF) was crucial – focused on short-cycle programmes.

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

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

Technological Universities

Decision aimed at addressing social and economic needs of region and strengthen industry-focused research.

- Focus on science and technology programmes which are vocationally and professionally oriented.
- Expected to play a pivotal role in facilitating access and progression particularly through relationships with the further education and training sector.
- Merger of at least two IoTs required.

TU Mission & Functions
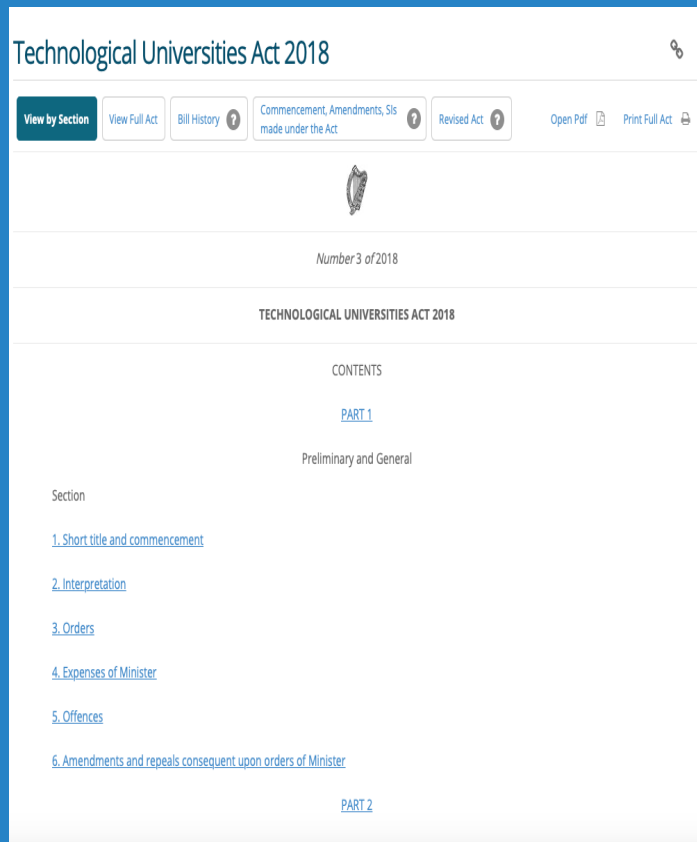
Functions of a TU will have particular regard to **needs of the region** in which the campuses are located

- TUs will **collaborate with business, enterprise, the professions, the community, local interests** and related stakeholders in the region in which the campuses of the technological university are located—

    (i) to promote the **involvement of those stakeholders in the design and delivery of programmes** of education and training, and

    (ii) to ensure that, innovation activity and **research undertaken by the technological university reflects the needs of those stakeholders** & includes research relevant at regional, national and international levels

- TUs will support **entrepreneurship, enterprise development and innovation** in business, enterprise and the professions

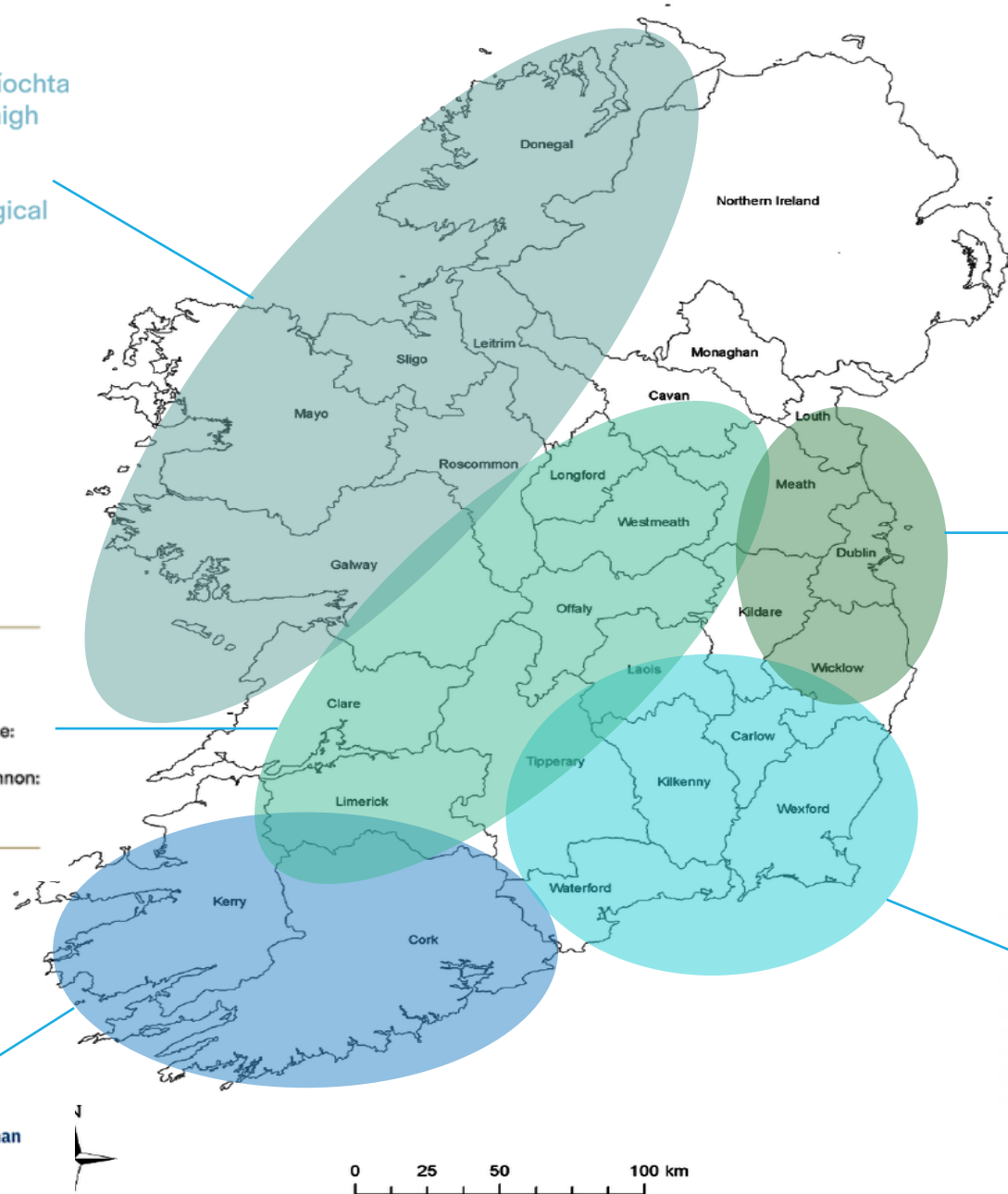# Mergers & Designation Process 2019-2022

- Technological University Dublin, established January 2019. Merger of 3 IoTs

- Munster Technological University (MTU), established January 2021. Merger of 2 IoTs. Minister set conditions and requirement for further review.

- Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, established October 2021. Merger of 2 IoTs

- Atlantic Technological University, established April 2022. Merger of 3 IoTs

- SouthEast Technological University, established May 2022. Merger of 2 IoTs

BH ASSOCIATES

Reconfiguration of FET

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

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

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

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

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

Evolution of a FET system

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

First strategy: 2014-2019, 2020-2024

Governance seek to parallel HE: SOLAS = HEA w/ DFHERIS as coordinating structure

Educational provision: apprenticeships, traineeships, post-leaving certificate, community and adult education, core literacy and numeracy services across levels 1-6 on the NQF

Two key areas of focus:

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

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

BH ASSOCIATES

PHASE 2 - PROGRESSING A UNIFIED TERTIARY SYSTEM, 2022-

Unified Tertiary Education Strategy

Minister launched policy vision for a more unified tertiary education and research system in 2022.

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

Minister wants this to transcend having separate HE and FET strategies

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

Emphasis on pathways and regional clusters

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

BH ASSOCIATES

Progressing a Unified Tertiary Education Sector 2022-

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

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

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

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

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

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

BH ASSOCIATES

1. Massification

Irish post-secondary expansion comparable to experience elsewhere w/

- Comprehensive transformation in the role, scale and expectations of higher education
- System thinking is emergent and evolving – but too many potential counter initiatives and actions
- FET and RTC/IoT sector playing significant roles in expanding access and participation, especially outside major cities
- Traditionally have significantly more learner supports and diverse delivery although still working off old model of strict divisions between ft/pt learners, 'traditional'/'mature'

BH ASSOCIATES

2. Technological Universities

TUs = response to massification/political pressure – but process itself led by/driven by Ministry

- *TURN Report* (2019) – w/ strap-line "Connectedness & Collaboration through Connectivity" – set out "vision and ambition" and "distinctive national and international contribution"
- Criteria were aligned with internat'l criteria – which arguably could/will push greater convergence

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

BH ASSOCIATES

3. Missions & boundary crossing

Over-emphasis on HE reflects social-cultural factors and international trends – and undermining policy intent and 'boundaries'

- Level 6 (sub-degree certificate) is both FE and HE (IoT/TU) – encourages learners to apply to/enrol in HEIs
- Pressure for links bw FET/HE (e.g., pathways) could produce unintended consequences – encouraging predatory behaviour and learner capture esp. as demographics change
- Boundary between universities and TUs becoming more porous

Funding system is geared towards full-time undergraduate students

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

4. FET

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

Sector only beginning to understand the challenges of meeting goals

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

Strategic capacity, curriculum, QA, human and capital resources

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

Governance arrangements unlikely to deliver results

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

5. Middle-level skills

Evidence of hollowing out middle level skills:

- Projections that ~45% of jobs will require medium level skills has been missed
- Major skills shortages especially in areas requiring moderate level skills (typically skills acquired through FET programmes).

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

- Trying to focus TUs on SME sector
- Failure to recognise importance of skills – and especially role of skills with regard to innovation system

6. Regionalism

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

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

This *potentially* makes criteria for technological universities 'unique'/critical

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

BH ASSOCIATES

Some proposals doing the 'rounds

Single integrated agency for tertiary education

Significantly strengthened FET system

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

National Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (mandatory)

Guided and Navigable Learning Pathways

Learner Guidance System for all learners

Regional Research and Innovation Eco-Systems

BH ASSOCIATES