

Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann Royal Irish Academy

Higher Education Futures Taskforce Call for Input

Introduction

The Royal Irish Academy (RIA), established in 1785, is an all-island, independent body of peer-elected experts from the sciences, humanities and social sciences. Members are elected on the basis of their outstanding contribution to scholarship and learning. The RIA currently has c. 500 members, and by drawing on their expertise makes a significant contribution to public debate and policy on issues in higher education, science, research and culture.

There is need for a new policy framework for higher education on the island of Ireland. The existing policies date from 2009 (in Northern Ireland) and 2011 (in the republic), and the policy landscape has significantly changed since that time. Among the factors that have had an impact are the development of technological universities; enhanced emphasis on linkages with the further education sector; commitment to greater north–south collaboration in higher education provision and research; Brexit; changes in higher education delivery and in organisational models, accelerated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; and a growing awareness of the value of a strong science–policy dialogue.

The establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) offers an exciting opportunity to refresh strategic priorities for higher education and research, to consider the all-island system of research funding, and to highlight and engage with the reservoir of expertise and talent housed and nurtured within Ireland’s higher-education system, north and south. The national research and innovation strategy is also scheduled for renewal in 2021. These developments are complemented by the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland)’s long-term vision of a higher-education sector that is vibrant and of international calibre; pursues excellence in teaching and research; plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable knowledge-based economy; supports a confident, shared society; and recognises and values diversity.¹

¹ Department for the Economy, ‘Graduating to success: a higher education strategy for Northern Ireland’ (Belfast, 2012); available online at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-strategies-northern-ireland> (29 January 2021).



In September 2020, the president of the Royal Irish Academy convened an all-island taskforce—the Higher Education Futures Taskforce (HE Futures)—to help identify how the all-island higher education system should evolve and position itself to meet changing societal needs and challenges—regionally, nationally and internationally.

The taskforce will consider how higher education can flourish, in a sustainable way, and the group will consider how the higher education system, as well as the wider Irish society, can work collectively towards shared aims in the period to 2035. Details of the membership of the taskforce are available on the RIA website: <https://www.ria.ie/bios/higher-education-futures/all>

Call for input

The RIA’s HE Futures Taskforce has identified five priority themes under which to focus discussion and debate on the future development of higher-education policy and practice on the island of Ireland: **Vision and value; Models of higher education; Regions and place; Equality, diversity and inclusion; and Research and innovation.** Sub-groups have been established to focus on each of these themes, and the taskforce is issuing a call for input (CFI) to inform and to seek the views of stakeholders on these key issues facing the higher-education sector.

Vision and value

The taskforce will offer a vision for higher education on the island of Ireland to 2035, focusing on the value and beneficial contribution of, and difference made by, higher education for students, educators, researchers, society, culture and the economy. It will consider what needs to change and what must remain in the vision for higher education in 2035; what the student of 2035 will want from his/her higher education experience; and how higher education can best serve society in the intervening years.

Current policy ambitions for higher education on the island of Ireland exist in a reality for higher-education institutions of increasing operating costs and reduced budgets, changing governance structures, pressure to seek revenue from non-government sources, and growing regulatory demands to demonstrate attainment of high-quality academic standards.

All of these challenges must be met while aspiring to improve reputation and utility and adapt to a post-Brexit environment. For students, these ambitions exist within a context of rapid changes in the world of work, in which graduates are likely to change sectors up to three times in the ten years after graduation, and an utterly transformed university experience on foot of the coronavirus pandemic.

Questions to be considered in the CFI under the theme ‘Vision and value’:

- 1. What do you see as the major drivers of change for higher education in the decade ahead?*
- 2. What will the student of 2035 want from his/her higher education experience?*

3. *What challenges do you think future students will face after graduating? How can a future higher education institution prepare its students for those challenges?*
4. *How might the consequential changes (regionally, nationally and globally) resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit, influence and accelerate evolution in the higher-education system in Ireland, such as to ensure a sustainable, relevant and impactful future for the sector across the island of Ireland?*

Models of higher education

Globally, evidence is growing that the pace of technological innovation, forces for globalisation, and lengthening life expectancy all drive the need for multiple lifetime career changes and demand lifelong learning and re-skilling. The taskforce will consider the implications of these changes for future models of higher education.

Digitalisation, artificial intelligence and robotics enhance learning methods and yet threaten many traditional career paths. New, interdisciplinary programmes will promote the skill sets and improve the employability of the graduates of the future. Higher education must equip learners with the skills, competences and attitudes that enable people to work, live and learn in a complex world that is increasingly digital.² All graduates will arguably need to have basic competence in key areas ranging from an ethical approach to research and work, tackling the climate crisis, democracy, the digital society, equality, diversity and inclusion, etc.

COVID-19 has accelerated change in teaching practice. The delivery of teaching online over an extended period of time has, however, also shown that higher-education delivery is not transactional but interactive and dialogic. So too is the university experience, and future models must have a clear vision and pathway by which to continue to deliver an excellent, but different, university experience for students.

The delivery of learning online opens up innovative, long-distance pathways for study, which will have an impact in terms of the recruitment of both domestic and international students. At the same time, it can present barriers to inclusion and create the challenge of ensuring that all students have fair access to resources. Higher-education provision must consider the main opportunities and challenges associated with long-distance, online teaching and learning, including ensuring equality of opportunity in terms of access and inclusion.

The future interface between industry and higher education raises many significant questions, particularly in the context of life-long learning, as both sectors consider how best to support and reward staff already in the workforce. Issues such as models of delivery, curriculum development, the provision of industry-specific bespoke programmes, allocation of costs of programme development and delivery are key parts of this discussion. In addition, it should be noted that there is a crucial role for industry/business as partners in education delivery,

² National Forum on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 'Building digital capacity: principles and first insights from the sectoral consultation on building digital capacity in Irish higher education' (Dublin 2014), 5; available online at: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/NF-2014-Principles-and-First-Insights-from-the-Sectoral-Consultation-on-Building-Digital-Capacity-in-Irish-Higher-Education.pdf> (29 January 2021).

particularly in shaping and providing experiential learning and lifelong learning in disciplines where this is extremely important.

The impact of COVID-19 has accelerated discussions about and changes in practice towards hybrid teaching and learning environments (virtual and on-campus), the internationalisation of higher education, and student and academic mobility. This has led to a renewed focus on the importance of the third mission of higher education—that is, civic, societal and political engagement activities—including its need to attain and maintain progress in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals.

Questions to be considered in the CFI under the theme 'Models of higher education':

- 1. From your perspective, what are the strong characteristics and deficiencies in graduates that you encounter today? What should change in order to ensure that future Irish graduates are equipped for life?*
- 2. How do you envisage partnership between universities and external stakeholders (business, cultural organisations, voluntary bodies) in co-delivering education (especially experiential and lifelong) evolving and operating in the future?*
- 3. What reforms do you recommend in order to convert Ireland from a globally average research performer and innovator to a leader in the next ten years?*
- 4. What should universities change in order to grow their impact and influence?*

Regions and place

This sub-group in the HE Futures Taskforce aims to consider the question of what Ireland actually needs in relation to higher education across the island, and how we can address that need. It acknowledges that there has been historic under-provision of higher-education opportunities in the north-west and south-east regions and that redressing these imbalances should be considered. The group is particularly interested in considering how the new Technological Universities (TUs) will change the higher education institution landscape in Ireland, and in considering how the opportunities they will bring can be enhanced for maximum benefit to the sector as a whole.

The need to address infrastructural challenges across the island, such as limitations in transport and broadband access, and the potential impacts of these issues on institutions of higher education and on student access to education, will be considered by the group. The growing need to address broadband issues in light of the growth of online teaching and learning will be a key focus, given that online learning can negate the obstacles some rural students face in terms of accessing teaching. Furthermore, thought will be given to how higher education institution could develop their specialities in certain areas, now that location is becoming less important as online learning becomes more prevalent. In addition, the potential economic benefits associated with a more regionally balanced higher-education system, including the potential to attract foreign direct investment and indigenous high-technology start-ups, are unlikely to be fully realised in the absence of appropriately developed regional transport systems.

The group acknowledges the unique and unprecedented changes and issues that are now facing the higher-education sector in Ireland—namely the imminent impact of Brexit and the need to address the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, and the changes these will bring. Nonetheless, the group believes that the quality of education across the island and knowledge capital will continue to improve and provide many further benefits to society and the economy as it continues to grow. There is now an all-island opportunity to develop post-graduate programmes collaboratively through online teaching, and to rethink how programmes are delivered in the longer term.

Finally, the group will consider the idea of creating a new cross-border university for Ireland. What benefits would this bring to higher education? What would we want it to focus on? Where would it need to be located? How could it build a distinctive ethos and create links to the region of its foundation? This visionary, long-term thinking will help us to identify what the higher education system in Ireland actually needs to continue to flourish, and how the education system, as well as the wider society, can work towards those aims.

Questions to be considered in the CFI under the theme 'Regions and place':

- 1. How can we ensure that the new, and pending, technological universities maximally benefit the regions they serve?*
- 2. Should a cross-border university for the RoI and NI be considered? What needs could this university address?*
- 3. In the aftermath of Brexit, how can we ensure that higher education institutions have a positive impact on regional and economic development, supporting human capital and improving social equality?*
- 4. How might the changes to teaching and learning instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic best be utilised by higher education institutions to support regional and human capital development?*

Equality, diversity and inclusion

The 'Equality, diversity and inclusion' (EDI) sub-group will consider what can be done to improve equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education on the island of Ireland at a national and institutional level for various cohorts of students and staff.

Equality, diversity and inclusion strategies are increasingly prioritised within higher education policy and practice, as evidenced through the 2017 National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education,³ the establishment of the Higher Education Authority's Centre for Gender Equality, Athena Swan designation of EDI leads in higher education institutions, and the Higher Education Authority's Senior Academic Leadership Initiative.

³ Higher Education Authority, 'National plan for equity of access to higher education 2015–2019' (Dublin 2015); available online at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf> (29 January 2021).

Key issues for students include access, student experience, retention and outcomes. For staff, key issues include the differing experiences and outcomes for academic staff, contract staff, and administrative and technical staff in terms of recruitment, precarious contracts, promotion, governance and leadership, and the role played by institutional policies and cultures in promoting positive outcomes. National and institutional research policies and culture are also key to positive EDI outcomes. All policies and processes must take into account the following factors: disability; gender; ethnic background, including migrants and asylum seekers as well as members of the Traveller community; socio-economic background; sexual identity; educational background, including alternative pathways into higher education such as routes through further education programmes and RPL; religious background; and age.

The sub-group is working on issues relating to EDI in higher education on the island of Ireland in the following areas: disability; gender; race; sexual identity; religious background; civil status; marital status; age; membership of the Traveller community; and socio-economic background. The questions listed below will help us in our discussions and in understanding the opinions of various stakeholders on these issues.

Questions to be considered in the CFI under the theme 'Equality, diversity and inclusion':

- 1. What do you think the obstacles are to improving equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education on the island of Ireland for students? For staff? For funders? For policymakers?*
- 2. Do you think that the sectorial initiatives relating to EDI go far enough? If not, what areas could be improved?*
- 3. What data do you use in making EDI decisions?*
- 4. How do you think that the higher education sector on the island of Ireland can improve in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion, and do you feel that the sector would benefit from a national charter on EDI?*

Research and innovation

The performance of research and academic scholarship in the context of a growing higher-education and public-research-performing research system requires consideration. What should the future model be? For example, Ireland's new technological universities are required by their legislation to grow their research and innovation activities. Over the past two decades, the investment in inter-institutional centres and collaborative initiatives, whether regionally or nationally, reflects the dominant national policy for the development of the higher-education and research-performing system. Models for future growth such as the 'distributed excellence' model used in Germany, the UK 'levelling-up agenda', and potentially others, will be considered as potential models for Ireland to adopt and build on.

The 'Research and innovation' sub-group will discuss how Ireland can pursue a more co-ordinated approach to research collaborations across the island and with our international partners. Particular attention will be on the European and global context in which research and innovation takes place, and on how we can maximise future collaborative opportunities with international partners. Furthermore, post-Brexit there may be opportunities to reinforce

and expand UK–Ireland research collaboration and develop unique all-island research structures within an Ireland–UK–EU funding initiative. There will be an over-arching focus on how the creation of an ‘Island of innovation’ requires an all-island approach.

These considerations are key in terms of the environment underpinning the conduct of research, and the optimal delivery of knowledge output and talent. In the context of an ‘Island of innovation’, other matters such as policies and mechanisms for the provision and sustainability of, or access to, critical physical and support infrastructure require attention.

Fundamental environmental factors that would reflect a healthy and sustainable research and innovation system will also be the subject of reflection. The need for a balance across the spectrum of research and across disciplines for the long-term benefit of the island and humanity, whilst also endeavouring to contribute in a meaningful way to addressing more pressing global challenges, will be a key area of contemplation.

The group will give particular thought to the ‘island of talent’ concept, and to how we can ensure that fostering talent and human capital is a key focus of higher education. Models of employment rights and contracts will be examined, and the ways in which they support, or fail to support, the development of early and mid-career researchers will be considered. The group will examine whether greater collaboration and transferability of personnel and knowledge is needed between the higher-education system and the private, public and third sectors, and how greater collaboration and engagement with civic society may be enabled. Focused initiatives, such as travel grants, can be excellent career catalysts, and there is a need to build of a system in which talented researchers can access the supports they need at the career stage in which they need them. In a global context, issues remain in terms of tax, pensions and supporting mobility. Enabling and supporting equality, diversity and inclusion in research, including a broad consideration of ethical issues, are imperatives.

The group shares the fundamental belief that Ireland must support the full spectrum of research (with a concomitant suite of funding programmes being available) and show a real appreciation for human capital. There is, furthermore, now an opportunity, seeded from the demands of our response to the challenges raised by COVID-19 and climate change, to embed research more deeply as a factor in central and local government decision-making.

Questions to be considered in the CFI under the theme ‘Research and innovation’:

- 1. How can we encourage and support excellence to flourish within the island of Ireland research and innovation eco-system (within both NI and RoI and collaboratively)?*
- 2. What are researchers/research funders/policy-makers on the island of Ireland not doing that would increase and strengthen its international research and innovation reputation?*
- 3. What are the systemic deficiencies (within both NI and RoI and collaboratively) that need to be addressed in order to enhance the system and support excellent research and innovation that will have greatest impacts in Ireland and globally?*
- 4. What mechanisms or solutions (within both NI and RoI and collaboratively) should be put in place in order to achieve the ambition of establishing the island of Ireland as a global leader in research and innovation and of becoming an ‘island of talent’ for internationally relevant research and innovation? What are the current barriers to this? How can we attract, retain and develop talented and diverse people in research and innovation?*

Input of stakeholders

Stakeholders are invited to provide inputs to the taskforce under the five themes identified in the CFI. Key questions have been highlighted to guide submissions, but respondents should feel free to go beyond these in their responses and to flag additional important issues that they feel should form part of the taskforce's deliberations.

Deadline for submissions

Responses to the Call for Input must be submitted by 26 February 2021.

Please try to limit your responses to no more than 250 words per question. Stakeholders should feel free to omit answering questions they feel are of limited importance to their organisation. Alternatively, views, insights and reflections on the future of higher education on the island of Ireland can be submitted to the taskforce by email to the following address: policy@ria.ie

Timetable and outputs

It is planned that the work of the taskforce will be completed by late summer 2021. Each of the five subgroups will produce free-standing position papers in advance of this. The final report will include the five position papers and a summative and integrated proposed framework for higher-education development across the island of Ireland based upon those papers.

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