

Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) response to the invitation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to make a submission on the topic of a *"unified tertiary system"*. (July 2022)

Introduction

The TUI would like to thank DFHERIS for the opportunity to make this submission on the topic a unified tertiary system.

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (21,000+) in Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities and those working in out of school services.

Overview

The TUI strongly believes that additional support is needed for both the Further Education and Training sector (FET) and Higher Education (HE) sector and that stronger links between those institutions would / could be beneficial. Ensuring broad regional provision in the Technological Universities (TUs), Institutes of Technology (IoTs) and in ETBs is a priority for the Union. To this end a unified system must have regard to ensuring well-defined pathways in regions of Ireland with clear and tangible connections between ETB FET colleges and centres and the local HE provisions.

A crucial aspect of ensuring a unified system provides appropriately is to ensure that competition between providers is minimised and that an appropriate role for each provider is identified as it would relate to the journey of an individual student through education. The aspiration to provide learners with appropriate pathways must not be undermined by attitudes of autonomy causing multiple institutions to provide for one pathway. A core requirement for a unified system, as well as avoiding duplication, is to form tangible access pathways for students to progress through the system. This may require formal agreements between ETBs and TUs/IoTs in relation to recognition of prior learning (RPL) and access routes to, for example, year 2 or 3 of a Level 8 recognising the prior learning involved in a Level 5 or 6.

A unified system must be carefully and centrally managed through national fora involving the key stakeholders in the FET and HE sectors. In this regard, the TUI is of the view that the FET Stakeholders Forum and Partnership of Stakeholders in the Technological Sector (POSITS), and the Steering Group, which were established to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, have proven to be dynamic and productive fora and are ideally placed to coordinate engagement on developments in both FET and HE.

The issue of funding of higher education has been a complex one for many years but has come to the fore especially since cutbacks of the last decade, combined with rapidly rising student numbers and the publication in 2016 of *Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education*, which will hereafter be referred to as the Cassells Report. Equally, the implementation of a FET Funding Model proposed in SOLAS' *Further Education and Training Funding Model Review, June 2022*, must have regard to ensuring the continuity of provision for students from FET settings into HE settings.

In relation to the issue of roles within the system, it remains the view of the TUI that there is no role in an education system, unified or otherwise, for private provision.

Provision for various levels of disadvantage is also important in the context of a unified approach and students who have accessed supports in post-primary, in particular DEIS and Additional Educational Needs (AEN) supports, should have continuity of such supports through the rest of their education. Furthermore, learners returning to education settings that may not have had sufficient supports in earlier educational settings should have access to the resources they require to ensure equality of opportunity for all members of society.

Issues of parity of esteem are expanded upon within this submission. Nonetheless the Union wishes to highlight, in particular, the detrimental effect of precarious and underpaid employment on the tertiary education sector. In this regard, the HPAL conversion process must be concluded. Furthermore, the Government's failure to conclude issues related to the putative grade of tutor – in terms of a nationally agreed contract and incremental salary scale, does little to assure the TUI – or indeed many stakeholders – that the value of the pathways provided by these staff is equal to the value of other pathways.

It is also necessary to recognise that our class sizes are among the largest in Europe (OECD, 2021) and a quality education system will need to address this by increasing staffing to reduce class sizes.

Future Funding Model for Further and Higher Education

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland 2019b; DCYA, 2020). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019b) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future.

It is important to note that in 2019, and again in 2021, Ireland only spent 0.9% of GDP on tertiary education, compared to 1.4% in the OECD (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2021). The ratio of students to teachers in Irish tertiary education is also very significantly above both the OECD and EU averages and has risen dramatically, from already unsustainable levels, in the last year (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2021). The funding deficit, even aside from anything to do with Covid-19, will get worse in coming years as, similar to above, student numbers are estimated by the DES to rise by almost thirty thousand in tertiary education in this decade (DES, 2018). In terms of overall expenditure on education, Ireland and Greece were the only EU member states in 2015 to spend significantly less than the UN SDG 4 minimum of 4% of GDP on education (UNESCO, 2022). Based on data in Cullinan and Flannery (2017), the Exchequer invested about \pounds 1.2bn in higher education in Ireland in 2010/11 and generated an economic return, even without counting downstream impacts such as health benefits, of c. \pounds 3.4 bn, i.e. 2.8 times.

Even without an increase in student numbers over the next decade, the third level budget is forty percent (approximately €100 million) off where we were ten years ago (Irish Times, January 23rd, 2020). Student numbers will, however, continue to increase (DES, 2018). This trend is already evidenced by the Cassells report, which made clear that €600m was needed by 2021. The TUI would like to acknowledge the positive moves that Minister Harris made recently in the form of approximately €300m in additional funding. However, we're now in 2022 and that funding is less than half what the Cassells report said was needed each year.

The FET sector is almost as large as the HE sector. In 2020 there were 151,630 enrolments (SOLAS, 2021). It provides courses geared for local need in every town and city in the country. Those enrolments are split almost exactly equally between full-time and part-time. Over 60% of the enrolments are female students/learners. Just over one-third of all FET enrolments are under the age of 25 years, but interestingly over 25,000 of those enrolments are over the age of 55 years. This shows how important FET is in terms of lifelong learning and capacity building as well as learning for learning's own sake. The need for capacity-building amongst learners is also emphasised by the fact that 34,000 enrolments are by learners who do not have upper secondary education at all. Indeed, over 20,000 enrolments are on courses at Level 3 or below on the NFQ.

Parity of esteem for pathways other than the path straight from post-primary directly to Level 8 should be actively encouraged in Irish society. In this regard, specific interventions (including CPD for Guidance at all levels and media strategies) will be required to highlight, inter alia, FET pathways and apprenticeships – both as alternative routes to navigate the education system from Level 1 – 10 inclusive and for employment. A unified system must avoid any 'dead ends' and ensure that all students can find pathways within the continuum of education. For example, as well as the more common pathways currently available, processes to provide access to HE from apprenticeships will be required. It must also be highlighted that alternative pathways through FET can lead directly to employment which is of no less value to society than that which follows a path through HE. The value of FET, both for lifelong learning and, indeed, mobility between employments and within careers cannot be underestimated and the parity of esteem between FET and HE as equally appropriate pathways to employment must be evident within any unified system. In relation to mobility

within and between employment, increased funding for part-time courses is necessary at both FET and HE levels.

According to the then CEO of the HEA "the scale of the funding challenge for higher education is enormous" and that spending on tertiary education in Ireland in 2018 was only threequarters that of the OECD average (conference speech, Graham Love, June 13th, 2018). OECD/EU (2017) notes that student numbers in higher education are expected to grow 30% in the next fifteen years. It notes that state funding of HEIs was 76% of their total funding in 2007/08 but was only 51% of their total funding in 2015/16. The EUA (2021) has reported that public funding of third level education in Ireland, as a percentage of GDP, fell a shocking 62% between 2009 and 2019. In the same timeframe, student numbers rose 28% and staff numbers fell 8%.

Exchequer funding of higher education is a true investment with a large return. OECD (2019) has found that the public net financial returns of a man attaining tertiary education is \$369k in Ireland, compared to an average of \$148k in the OECD and \$165k in the EU23. The equivalent figures for women are \$143k in Ireland, \$77k in the OECD and \$90k in the EU23. As noted by the EU Commission (2022: 97), "the social benefit of educational policies may exceed the sum of private benefits".

Investment in education as a public good, and a necessary public service, as tertiary education, certainly is, has large public support. For example, a two-to-one majority of the public would prefer Government to spend money on public services rather than more tax cuts (Sunday Independent / Kantar Millward Brown poll December 16th, 2018). Despite this CSO (2020) found that between 2007 and 2016, real expenditure per student at third level education decreased from €10,806 in 2007 to €7,089 in 2016, a drop of 34.4%. Some of the necessary additional funding for HE could be obtained, as recommended for many years by the TUI, by an increase of one percentage point in the rate of Corporation Tax with the proceeds ring-fenced for HE. Such a levy would have yielded €947m in 2020 (TUI, 2022).

Investment in the Further Education and Training sector also needs to be addressed through the appropriate implementation of a future funding model. In this regard, the model will have a direct effect on the recruitment and retention of staff. This needs to be the subject of careful consideration and collegial consultation in the manner of its implementation. Priorities in the Programme for Government can only be adequately addressed if accompanied by significant additional funding which is an investment in future growth and prosperity. Areas such as Youthreach, adult literacy, post-leaving certificate programmes etc have for too long been a 'Cinderella' of the system and the funding model must have a clear, but open, interpretation of what constitutes an appropriate outcome for each programme to ensure continuity of funding as well as availability of additional funding to respond dynamically where local need arises.

As noted by Clarke, Kenny and Loxley (2015: 11), the third level sector

"as a whole experienced a 29% reduction in funding (€385,688,801.00) from 2007 to 2014. When the funding is disaggregated per sector the cuts experienced were; IoTs 32% (-170,719,711.00), Universities 26% (-€200,610,172.00) and Colleges 24% (-€14,358,919.00). During the same period staffing numbers in the public sector were reduced by 10% (32,000)."

Extend a DEIS-type model to HEIs and FET

There is a need to develop an increased funding model for IOT/TUs, and for FET provision, based on the deprivation indices of region in which they are located. This could be done by extending a DEIS style designation system to FET and HE, using the Pobal Deprivation Maps to designate students from disadvantaged areas attending FET colleges/centres/IOT/TUs to secure increased funding to facilitate supports e.g. decreased class size, extra access initiatives, increased apprenticeship funding and lifelong learning initiatives.

With the Pobal Deprivation score, it is possible to derive an objective measure of the socioeconomic composition of each region served by a particular FET College/Centre or HEI, allowing for a DEIS style model to be utilised for relevant FET colleges/centres/IoTs/TUs with additional funding scaled to meet the metrics considered in the Pobal Deprivation score. Disadvantaged student access rates are easy to measure, and qualitative data on student outcomes from disadvantaged areas in the HEI sector could also be gathered. There is long-term expertise among ETB FET/IoT/TU staff in the sector, in employing innovative teaching and learning methodologies, arranging work placements, mentoring activities, and finding employment for graduates.

It is vitally important that supports are specific and appropriately targeted – both regionally and toward need. It is more damaging to the system to supply money to ETBs/TUs/IoTs without a clear and transparent process for the allocation of those funds. For example, the SOLAS Reach fund seeks applications from Community Education Groups under a set of criteria. It is not clear, however, how ETBs will assess these applications and how robust the process for ensuring the most appropriate allcation of such funds, to support those most in need, will be.

Consideration of a free transport scheme for FET and HE should also be prioritised as rents rise and the growing student housing crisis deepens.

It is important that staff in FET and HE settings have secure employment. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education has itself raised significant concerns about precarity. It (Oireachtas, 2022: 12) stated that:

"The issues of Staffing Levels and Precarious Employment in both the traditional and Technological Universities need to be reviewed urgently or by end of 2022 at the latest, by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, in liaison with the Universities. Staffing Levels have not increased in line with extra students, courses and increased services provided by Third Level Institutes and, so, there needs to be an analysis / workforce plan of staffing requirements to restore staff levels. In addition, the Employment Control Framework is completely arbitrary and needs to be abolished. The aim must be to ensure there are sufficient staff at all grades to deal with the projected increase of students, extra courses and increased services. Regarding Precarious Employment, the Review should include an examination of Hourly Paid Academic Contracts, Researchers, Postgraduate Workers and outsourcing of Support staff roles."

Future Expansion of the Technological Universities

It is important that all IoTs have the opportunity to become TUs if that is the wish of the community concerned. It is imperative that the two remaining IoTs, IADT and DkIT, are expedited into the Technological University sector. TUI members in both institutes have communicated to management, DFHERIS, the HEA and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, their wish to move towards Technological University designation. The TUI will not tolerate a situation where the coherence of the sector is threatened by any failure to ensure that all of our members are comprehended within the TU Sector – including those in IADT and DkIT.

Future Expansion of Craft Apprenticeships and New Generation Apprenticeships

The TUI strongly welcomes the greater focus on the value of apprenticeships recently and particularly welcomes recent announcements by Minister Harris of an expansion of apprenticeship places. It is also noteworthy that apprenticeships now extend up to level 10 on the NFQ. As part of this long sought and positive development the IoT/TU sector is playing a key role in supporting young people to access HE whilst also working in a paid job. Equally, the apprenticeships being developed within the ETB sector, and by consortia of ETBs, are most welcome.

Nonetheless, a guarantee is needed that completion of apprenticeships should be available from providers i.e. providers should be responsible for ensuring work placements. The placing of apprenticeships on the CAO platform is welcome, but this remains a somewhat cosmetic development and it must be further developed to ensure parity of esteem for such courses.

Oireachtas (2022: 8) stated that

"Craft and New Generation Apprenticeships will be critical to Ireland's economic future. Higher Education Authority (HEA) funding is urgently required by the TUs to ensure there is sufficient physical space and lecturer capacity to deliver education and training to the highest international standards."

In this context, it remains important to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of each provider are clearly defined. For example, Phase 2 is undertaken in ETB Training Centres/FET Provision and Phases 4 and 6 must remain the responsibility of the IoT/TU sector. The TUI has been, and remains, fundamentally opposed to confusing the apprenticeship pathway by engaging in attempts to run Phases 4 and 6 in settings other than IoTs/TUs.

Access, Diversity and Inclusion to Include Digital Learning and Student Grant Support

As noted by the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 "as a country we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by increasing levels of participation in higher education". The TUI welcomes the commitment given in the Unified Tertiary System Policy Platform for the FET sector to be included in the National Access Plan.

The TUI believes that higher education should be available, as a public good, to all who want it. Traditionally some groups have been significantly under-represented amongst the HE student body. Social inclusion means that there must be equity of access. The TUI has long campaigned for the rights of those under-represented groups and continues to do so. Kovacic et al. (2021) note the extraordinarily high level of third-level education in Ireland. Indeed it is the fourth highest in the EU. However, the same study also notes that "a ratio of 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas to 10 students from affluent areas attend third-level" (Kovacic et al., 2021: 5). The TUI welcomes the recent announcement by the Minister of his intention to increase the level of SUSI grant payments. This is a positive step but still a small step in supporting under-represented target groups to access higher education. The TUI is strongly of the view that measures must also be taken to support under-represented target groups in accessing FET and in also supporting them to have their qualifications recognised by HEIs. The issue of pathways, as alluded to in the Policy Platform, must be clarified and expanded.

In addition to students who enter higher education under access programmes, a significant number of entrants to third level colleges, particularly to the Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities, initially undertake courses at Levels 6 and 7 on the National Qualifications Framework. Many of these students, in addition to induction support and foundation programmes, may require considerable, and sometimes customised, support to enable them to complete. HEIs need to be resourced adequately to provide and continue these supports. The absence of such supports will simply guarantee on-going and unnecessary attrition rates. Pastoral supports such as guidance counselling services in both post-primary and tertiary institutions are vital here. Supports for students with disabilities are also essential. The Policy Platform makes reference to the need for additional counselling supports. The TUI calls on the Minister to significantly increase funding and staffing in counselling and guidance supports in post-primary, FE and HE.

It is also important to ensure that HEIs recognise the value of a Level 5, 6 or 7 as a pathway towards a level 8 and that students are not required to duplicate their learning. For example, HEIs should have RPL and/or access procedures available for relevant ETB FET courses to progress to an advanced point on related courses in the local HEI. Such arrangements may also provide for the interaction of staff in the various settings, which would be of benefit to devising and clarifying pathways through a unified system. For example, interactions between an ETB providing a Level 5 or 6 in Nursing Studies and a HEI providing a Level 8 in nursing could provide, not only opportunites for a tangible pathway, but also influence programme development in both institutions to ensure the smooth progress of a student through such a pathway.

In post-primary, third level, and further and adult education settings, TUI members engaged in Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) for extended periods since March 2020. ERTL has been demonstrated to involve enormous, unsustainable educational, technical and workload challenges. Due to a range of issues, some students experience very significant difficulty in continuing to engage in education once it has been removed from the physical setting of the school, college or centre. The importance of the shared classroom environment and of the personal relationships, peer learning and all of the interactions at the heart of good educational practice cannot be overstated and their loss cannot be replaced. TUI members witnessed the impact of economic pressures on student engagement, not least in the great difficulties faced by some families and households in adapting their homes into suitable learning spaces despite their best efforts. The lack of appropriate devices and broadband access, both for educators and students, presented and continue to present severe limitations on what is possible, as do the lack of training and technical support. Learning resources, lesson plans and teaching strategies must be replaced or rewritten creating massive workload issues. All educational interactions become more time-consuming and more likely to need repetition and reinforcement. Feedback and assessment take place in new settings and formats, many needing to be newly created and taking significantly more time and work by educators. ERTL proved to be particularly challenging for under-represented student groups.

Furthermore, from the perspective of our members, in advance of the pandemic the TUI issued a directive not to co-operate with blended or online models without an agreement on resources in place. The Union has engaged in agreements in some of the TUs which provide additional time and support for blended and online delivery. The TUI has been frustrated by the lack of progress in coming to a national agreement to apply to all TUs. The TUI has also written via the FET Stakeholders to seek a national agreement on resourcing for such delivery FET. Consequently, in the absence of tangible progress on such agreements, the TUI has grave concerns about reference in the Policy Platform to "blended and online learning".

Given the extent and pace of developments in technology, constant revision and renewal of the government's strategy, priorities and investment is critical to enabling teaching and learning for 21st century skills and competences. The digital divide for students and staff, and the poor standard of broadband in many rural areas was clearly exposed by COVID-related disruption to in-class teaching in HEIs. A quantum jump in investment is now needed.

All Irish society is acutely conscious of the impact of COVID and its attendant losses in life, health, and employment. We must guard against losses in the social and cultural fabric that binds our nation together. In which connection, the work of TUI members, both in education and as trade unionists, is vital. Indeed, the crisis highlights the centrality of public service and collective effort to any well-ordered society. The TUI earnestly hopes that those newly

awakened to this reality do not soon forget it. For our part, we pay tribute and thanks to fellow public servants, in healthcare, policing and education most particularly, and indeed to all workers engaged in the provision of essential services. TUI members have risen magnificently to the challenge of maintaining education of the highest standard. Education is our greatest equalising and unifying endeavour and in the face of enormous difficulties our members have continued to inspire curiosity and imagination, to release potential and to unfold opportunities and possibilities. The TUI will beware of any complacent, or indeed malign, assumption by managements or Government that the extraordinary efforts made by education staff in response to the emergency form a template for future work. We will ensure that our no-precedent stipulations, and the written assurances from Government, departments and managements to the same effect, will be honoured. Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) was indeed only an emergency measure. This was acknowledged by the Minister for Education in her address to TUI Congress in April 2021.

Lifelong Learning, Progression Pathways and Continuing Professional Development

A major objective of public policy is that a culture of life-long learning be fostered and facilitated. Central to this is the clear identification of, and proactive promotion of, multiple progression paths into and within further and higher education. However, Ireland continues to rely heavily on direct progression to third level from post-primary education to populate colleges and universities. This system serves a certain cohort of students but fails many. In this regard, a unified system must present tangible, well defined and well promoted alternative pathways. To date, insufficient progress has been made in relation to mapping and formalising alternative routes. In particular, the TUI believes the recognition of prior learning including experiential learning and routes from post-primary and the workplace, through further education to higher education need to be further developed.

Publicly funded HEIs and FE centres have an important role in regional economic and social development. Not only do they provide vitally important, and locally relevant, educational and economic benefits but they are also significant economic hubs in their own right and often serve catchment areas that have suffered rural depopulation. HEIs must serve the public, and this includes equality of access for all groups to higher education opportunities. It

also requires provision of multi-level programmes from NFQ 6 to 10, traditional under- and post-graduate programmes and short programmes for upskilling and reskilling. HEIs must have progression routes that are recognised across the systems to facilitate lifelong learning of citizens in Ireland and within the European Union and the United Kingdom. Our publicly funded higher education system should enhance citizens' opportunities, increase understanding and tolerance, support democracy and enable mobility. As a professional education trade union, we are committed to supporting quality publicly funded education and recognise the benefits of education for the individual and society. The TUI is actively seeking to engage in a consultation process exploring reform on behalf of our members and in consideration of the students, communities, enterprise, culture and sports, our members serve.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Supports

Guidance provision, including counselling supports, in the FET and HE sectors is under significant strain. Additional qualified staffing is essential if students are to be able to access education fully. Supports for students with disabilities are also essential.

Recommendations

The TUI would like to make the following recommendations to DFHERIS regarding the unified tertiary system policy platform:

- Staff/student ratios need to be reduced urgently.
- There should be pathways to employment and progression that are navigable with ease.
- More progression pathways should be recognised.
- There should be clearly delineated roles for each element of a unified system and clarity supplied through policy development at national level to ensure that there is no duplication.
- The HPAL conversion process must be concluded.
- Adult Education Tutors must be provided with satisfactory terms and conditions of service and an incremental salary scale.

- The FET Stakeholder Forum, POSITS, and other relevant fora which include staff unions, should be utilised for the development of a unified tertiary system.
- There should be parity of esteem for each element of the system with the roles of each educator, and provider, clearly defined within a unified system.
- Apprenticeships should have greater support and visibility.
- Funding models must take account of the unique roles the FET Sector and the IoT/TU sector play in both access to education and in progression to employment.
- The size of SUSI grants, and eligibility criteria for same, should be significantly expanded. The TUI welcomes the current ongoing review of SUSI.
- Exchequer funding of higher education must be dramatically increased. This could be partly funded by a one-percentage point increase in Corporation Tax with the proceeds ringfenced for funding HE.
- Greater recognition of, and visibility of, the FET sector is vital due to the essential role it plays in supporting under-represented groups to access levels 5 and 6 of the NFQ, preparing them to access levels 7 and 8 of the NFQ.
- Additional qualified staffing of guidance services in schools, FE colleges and centres, HE institutions and in the Adult Guidance Service is vital to supporting students in navigating the pathways to be developed within a unified system.
- The Points System needs to be reformed to take account of a unified system with multiple pathways rather than continuing solely to assess performance in the Leaving Certificate.
- Additional support in the form of funding and staffing is required for student mental health support services in FET and in HEIs, as well as for employee assistance programmes.
- Further funding is required to support access programmes and supports in FET and in HEIs.
- Strong consideration should be made to extending an appropriate funding model for disadvantage to the FET and HE sectors to ensure continuity of supports for those supported by the DEIS programme in primary and post-primary.
- AEN students need should have additional supports maintained if they attend FE or HE after leaving the post-primary system. Currently when they leave second level

support is effectively cut off and then needs to be re-established the relevant FE or HE institution. The NCSE has a role to play here as set out in the EPSEN Act, 2004, Section 20 (h) and (i), (roles as yet insufficiently developed by the council).

- All remaining IoTs should consult staff in relation to seeking a pathway to TU status.
- ERTL is, by definition, an emergency response to a crisis situation. It cannot be seen in any other context. The TUI has grave concerns about reference in the Policy Platform to "blended and online learning".

Ends

David Duffy (Education/Research Officer, TUI), dduffy@tui.ie, 01 4922588

Colm Kelly (Assistant General Secretary, TUI), <u>ckelly@tui.ie</u>, 01 4922588

Glossary

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DFHERIS Science	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and
ERTL	Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning
ЕТВ	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HPAL	Hourly Paid Assistant/Associate Lecturer
ют	Institute of Technology
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
THEA	Technological Higher Education Association
TU	Technological University
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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