



**Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) response to the invitation of the  
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)  
to make a submission on the topic of a unified “*tertiary education system*”.  
(September 2025)**

**Section One - 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.

The TUI continues to support the Department’s initiative to develop a more unified tertiary education system, integrating further education, higher education, and research. We support the vision of a learner-centred, inclusive, and collaborative system that meets the evolving needs of individuals, society, and the economy.

It must be noted that this submission is being made at a time of extraordinary change in the tertiary education system. For that reason it is necessary for the TUI to make clear that the views expressed in this document may well change depending on possible future changes in the overall tertiary education system.

## **Section Two - 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 unified system must be carefully and centrally managed through national fora involving the key stakeholders in the FET and HE sectors. A crucial aspect of ensuring a unified system 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 where appropriate.

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 place for private provision in an education system, unified or otherwise, that aims to be

equitable, inclusive, and learner-centred. Public institutions must be supported to deliver high-quality education without reliance on private or commercial interests.

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. It is our view that employees should be employed on pro-rata Assistant Lecturer contracts and not on precarious hourly paid contracts. A conversion process for Hourly Paid Assistant Lecturers/Associate Lecturers was agreed under the Haddington Road Agreement, however the third phase of that agreement had not yet been agreed. This third phase must be agreed, finalised and implemented asap.

It is also necessary to recognise that our student to staff ratios are amongst the largest in Europe (OECD, 2021, OECD, 2024, OECD, 2025b) and a quality education system will need to address this by increasing staffing to reduce class sizes.

## **Section Three - Strategy Objectives**

### **3.1 - Demographics**

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020; DCEDIY, 2024; Conroy, 2025) despite some declines in younger age groups recently (CSO, 2024a). DCEDIY (2024: 19) noted that

*“In 2023, Ireland had the highest estimated proportion of children in the European Union (23.4%). The EU-27 average was 18.0%.”*

The previously high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019) and ongoing rate of natural increase (CSO, 2022c; CSO, 2022d) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future, especially after factoring in recent increases in inward migration (CSO, 2024b). The Department of Education (2021) has estimated that the student population in post- primary will rise by approximately seven thousand students per year until reaching a peak enrolment of c.408k in 2024/25. This will clearly have a knock-on effect in the tertiary sector as time progresses. Student numbers in higher education are projected to rise substantially (DES, 2018d). PBO (2019) estimated a rise of 20% in under-graduate student numbers by 2030. In this context, it is not credible to suggest that a world-class learner-centred public education system can be achieved with inadequate resources of time or personnel. Population growth generally is very significant, and this has implications for the entire lifelong learning agenda. CSO data has shown that the overall population rose 97,600 in the year to April 2023, and one-fifth of the rise was natural increase (Irish Times, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023). CSO (2024b) found another increase in population of almost 100,000 people in the year to April 2024. Recent EU data also indicates that the population growth in Ireland is continuing apace with the population rising by 98,700 between April 2024 and April 2025 (Irish Times, August 18<sup>th</sup> 2025).

### **3.2 - Funding**

Funding of the tertiary education system has been woefully inadequate for many years. In those years student numbers have grown dramatically and the Irish economy has expanded

hugely. There is no excuse for ongoing under-funding. As noted by Gilmore and Singleton (2024: 36):

*“As a percentage of GDP, Ireland’s expenditure on education is lower than that of nearly all other advanced economies.”*

Recent OECD reports, including Education at a Glance (2024), have placed Ireland at the bottom of the international league in terms of investment in education. Ireland spends just 2.8% of GDP on education from early childhood to third level, compared to the OECD average of 5.7%. At second level, Ireland’s expenditure is 0.9% of GDP, less than half the OECD average of 1.9%, and at third level, the situation is even more dire, with spending at just 50% of the OECD average.

At the time of writing Education at a Glance (2025b) had just been published and again showed that investment in all sectors of the Irish education system, and student-staff ratios in Ireland, were shockingly poor compared to the OECD average. For example, OECD (2025b) found that Ireland spent 0.4% of GDP on upper and lower secondary education compared to an OECD average of 0.9%. This was the equal lowest in the OECD. Ireland spent 0.8% of GDP on upper and lower secondary education compared to an OECD average of 1.8%. This was the lowest in the OECD. The staff/student ratio in Ireland was 27% above the OECD average.

This underinvestment has real and damaging consequences. Schools and colleges are struggling to maintain basic infrastructure, modernise facilities, and support students with diverse needs. The lack of funding has also led to a failure to restore essential middle-management structures, which are critical for student support and institutional leadership.

The Department’s policy platform for a unified tertiary system rightly identifies the need for joined-up learning opportunities, regional collaboration, and inclusive access. However, these goals cannot be achieved without substantial and sustained investment. A unified system

must be built on strong foundations, and currently, those foundations are being eroded by financial neglect and the continued failure to address the sector's funding crisis in any meaningful way.

### **3.3 - Institutional Structure**

#### **Distinctive Features of the IoT/TU Sector**

According to Erskine, S. & Harmon, D. (2020: 11), "Institutes of Technology appear to be more willing to recognise competences and experiences outside of education than Universities in admitting students to their programmes." Erskine, S. & Harmon, D. (2020: 55) also notes that "students in Institutes of Technology appear to get along better with their teaching staff than students in Universities. Similar patterns emerge for part-time students over full-time students, and for postgraduates over undergraduates".

According to Liston et. al. (2018), IoTs have more male entrants than female (in contrast to the situation in the universities). This may be at least partly due to traditional craft apprenticeships being male dominated, as are many STEM/Agriculture programmes. It should be noted however that our members are reporting that this gender imbalance is slowly changing. It is important to note that the resource requirement for labs /equipment/consumables on STEM/Apprenticeship type programmes are far higher than in other disciplines and require far greater funding. The current student funding regime, even with current weightings, does not meet these requirements particularly in the TU/IOT sector where there are far more practical classes with smaller numbers (typically 16 for labs) than trad universities where larger lecture hall classes are more common.

Guidance education is important before and during all stages of education. On average 14% of students do not progress from one year of their course to the next. The rates are especially high in Level 6 and Level 7, and in the IoTs. However, there is no statistical difference in non-progression in the IoTs vis-à-vis the universities when you adjust for the more diverse student population in the IoTs. The strongest predictor of non-progression is prior educational

attainment. Access to comprehensive guidance support, in school/FE/HE and community settings, can reduce the levels of non-completion of HE courses by students.

HEA (2019a) has found that 15% of graduates from IoTs attended DEIS schools compared to just 8% of university graduates. 7% of IoT graduates attended fee paying schools compared to 13% of university graduates.

According to Thorn (2018), the IoTs have 22% of their students registered as flexible learners (part-time, distance and e-learning) compared to 17% for the universities. The distinction comes in terms of socio-economic class: 31% of students in the institutes come from the non-manual, semi-skilled or unskilled group compared to 21% in the universities (Thorn, 2018).

As noted in Walsh et al. (2017: 164):

*“Compared to universities, IoTs offer more part-time and flexible courses, with a larger proportion of mature and disadvantaged students.”*

As stated in Phulphagar & Kane (2020: 2)

*“Over half of students enrolled in Institutes of Technology receive a SUSI grant...while between 35% and 45% of students in universities receive a SUSI grant.”*

HEA (2019b) has found that 100% of universities have many more ‘affluent’ students than ‘disadvantaged’ students. In the case of the IoTs the same figure is just 29%.

Collins et al. (2020: 16) stated that

*“Academics in the non-university sector do more teaching than their counterparts in the university sector. While academics in the non-university sector in Ireland spend less time on research than their counterparts in the universities, they outperform the European average for their sector in this regard.”*

This means that staff in the technological sector have less time to provide one-to-one support to students.

The traditional/legacy Universities had 1.73 times the staff of the Technological sector despite having only 1.33 times the number of students. The technological sector must be given its fair share of funding, so that it can truly meet its role both nationally and regionally.

It is important that DFHERIS and the HEA take into account, when determining funding streams, that the more diverse student population in the Technological sector be factored in.

### **3.4 - 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.

The strategic positioning and adequate funding of Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) and the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT) within the Technological University (TU) sector are essential to the success of a unified tertiary education system in Ireland. Both institutions play a critical role in regional development, innovation, and access to education. DkIT has demonstrated best practice in cross-sector collaboration through its leadership of the Northeast Further and Higher Education Alliance (NEFHEA). Established in 2007, NEFHEA brings together five regional Further Education colleges and DkIT to create seamless progression pathways for learners. This model has enabled students who complete their FE programmes to gain advanced entry into the second year of selected DkIT programmes, significantly enhancing access and retention in higher education.

Such initiatives exemplify how integrated planning, and cooperation can support national goals for widening participation and regional skills development. Similarly, IADT's recent €3.6 million award under the TU RISE scheme underscores its potential to drive innovation in the creative industries and strengthen research capacity. Ensuring both institutions are fully resourced and recognised within the TU framework is vital to sustaining and scaling these contributions to a cohesive and inclusive tertiary education landscape.

The TUI welcomes the additional capital funding available recently though the Tui also notes that the additionality is well behind the original schedule. Day to day recurrent grant funding is still woefully inadequate and some of the new TUs are struggling financially. It is also worth noting that the TU sector is still, at the time of writing, unable to borrow for capital purposes and hence unable to build student accommodation for example.

The TUI has concerns around the current senior leadership re-organisation and the implementation of new roles such as senior academic leadership level where these new roles have not been nationally agreed e.g. Executive Deans / Faculty Deans. This has implications for our member's terms and conditions. The TUI insists on a coherent and aligned TU/Tech Higher Ed sector.

In relation to the introduction of Professor grades, the TUI isn't opposed to the concept but wants nationally agreed contracts with detailed T&Cs. The TUI can see the opportunity for such professorships in the introduction of new disciplines such as medicine, pharmacy and dentistry. This needs to be seen as one step on the pathway to a proper career structure, as in the legacy universities. In addition, all staff who are sufficiently qualified should be able to compete for Professorships.

### **3.5 - Ongoing Expansion of Apprenticeships**

The TUI strongly welcomes the greater focus on the value of apprenticeships recently and particularly welcomes the 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 TU/IoT technological 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 TU/IOT 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 TUs/IOTs.

### **3.6 - Access for under-represented groups**

There is a need to develop an increased funding model for TUs/IOTs, and for FET provision, based on the deprivation indices of the 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 socio-economic 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/TUs/IOTs 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/TU/IOT staff in the sector, in employing innovative teaching and learning methodologies, arranging work placements, mentoring activities, and finding employment for graduates.

As noted by Indecon (2021), target group higher education attainment in Ireland has changed between 2011 and 2016. The proportion of disadvantaged area students with higher education rather than lower levels of educational attainment went from 11% to 16%. Students with a disability went from 16% with HE to 20%. Lone parents went from 14% with HE to 18%.

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.”*

As noted by Gilmore & Singleton (2024: 36):

*“While Ireland’s educational outcomes are impressive across various metrics, significant inequality persists within the educational system. If we consider education a key driver of social mobility, it is essential to examine education within the context of broader societal structure”.*

### **3.7 – National Tertiary Office**

There is a significant lack of information available on how NTO initiatives are working out. Given that we are in the final year of the pilot it is deeply concerning to the TUI that we seem to have no evidence as to whether the pilot has worked or not. It is imperative that research is done to assess the success or otherwise of the pilot.

## **Section Four - Outputs and Indicators**

### **4.1 – High Performing Already**

It is important to note that the Irish tertiary education system is already performing exceptionally well despite historic underfunding. For example, Gilmore and Singleton (2024: 38) states that

*“Ireland boasts an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and consistently ranks highly in international education assessments, with students performing well above the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science. This success is achieved despite spending relatively little on education and historic underinvestment.”*

Gilmore and Singleton (2024: 39) goes on to state that:

*“Another significant achievement of the Irish education system is the high level of third-level qualifications among its young adults. In 2022, 62.3% of persons aged 25-34 in Ireland had attained a third-level qualification, the highest rate within the EU27. This reflects Ireland’s success in promoting higher education and ensuring that a large proportion of its population has access to advanced educational opportunities.”*

Johnson and Cagney (2023: 5) found that

*“Over a ten year timeframe, data from the cohort of 2010 graduates suggests that NFQ level 10 graduates’ median yearly earnings for each year in the ten years following graduation are on average €13,015 higher than graduates from NFQ level 9 qualifications. Thus in the ten years following graduation, NFQ level 10 graduates have earned an additional €130,146. Analysis of the highest earners (those in the 75th percentile, rather than the median) shows that this difference increases to €177,814. At an international level, the most recent data from OECD indicates that those holding doctoral or equivalent degrees have the highest employment rate of any educational attainment level in almost all OECD countries.”*

Averill (2021: 6) cited multiple benefits from higher education:

*“Respondents report many intangible benefits of university. Stakeholders express the view that university enables connections and promotes understanding of the world, which they value on a par with gaining qualifications. The University Cohort describe the purpose as fostering global citizenship and empowerment, expanding horizons, developing cognitive rationality and forming good citizens. In turn, having articulate citizens with highly developed independent thinking and personal efficacy, contributes to society on a wider level. Respondents report a belief that university provides a forum for discussions which is not replicable elsewhere.”*

Workload remains an ongoing issue for TUI members. Lecturers/Assistant lecturers are still working 16/18 contact hours. This is far higher than international norms and has clear implications for staff but also for students who may be in difficulty and seeking staff support.

#### **4.2 - Benefits of Higher Education**

As noted in section 4.1, there are many benefits to Ireland both societally and economically from investing in further and higher education. Stanley et al. (2021: 10) noted that:

*“It is worth remembering that there are many benefits of participating in higher education which extends beyond the narrow outcome of earnings in the labour market. For example, there are many personal, social, and cultural benefits of participating in higher education which are not measured here, such as participating in the Erasmus+ programme, volunteering opportunities and involvement in sports and societies.”*

According to the CSO (2018), Ireland has higher than average rates of third level attainment, and they have increased significantly between 2005 and 2015. In 2015, 52% of Irish 25–34-year-olds had completed third level education, compared with the OECD average of 42%. Overall, levels of third level attainment for Irish 25–64-year-olds have increased from 29% in 2005 to 43% in 2015 (OECD figures are 27% to 35% respectively). Entry rates (the proportion of people who are expected to enter third level during their lifetime) are also significantly higher in Ireland than across the OECD as a whole (81% vs 59% OECD for a Bachelor’s Degree).

In a study in Ireland, Indecon (2019) found that the estimated net graduate premium (to the individual) of an undergraduate degree is €106,000 (€118k male and €96k female). The additional net graduate premium (over and above degree) for a taught Masters is €40k (Male €36k, female €44k) and €116k for a Ph.D. (€118k for a male and €115k for a female). For a representative student completing a full-time undergraduate degree the net Exchequer benefit is estimated at €62,000 (male €75k, female €51k), on average per graduate.

Declercq, K. & Ooghe, E. (2021: 2) noted that:

*“There is clear empirical evidence that subsidizing higher education increases both participation and graduation (see, e.g., Dynarski, 2003 and Falch and Oosterbeek, 2011). This increase in graduation increases in turn wages and employment (see, e.g., Card, 1999 and Harmon et al., 2003). As a consequence, tax revenues increase and welfare expenditures decrease, and thus, in the end, the net fiscal revenues increase. The effect of higher education subsidies on net fiscal revenues is called a fiscal externality.”*

Indecon (2021: 2) found that:

*“Overall, 40% of the Irish population in 2019 aged 15-64 years have achieved a third-level qualification, an increase of 5% since 2011. Over the last 10 years, participation levels in higher education increased across all age cohorts and the percentage within the 25-44 years old age cohort has surpassed 50%.”*

In a study in Ireland, Indecon (2019) found that the estimated net graduate premium (to the individual) of an undergraduate degree is €106,000 (€118k male and €96k female). The additional net graduate premium (over and above degree) for a taught Masters is €40k (Male €36k, female €44k) and €116k for a Ph.D. (€118k for a male and €115k for a female). For a representative student completing a full-time undergraduate degree the net Exchequer benefit is estimated at €62,000 (male €75k, female €51k), on average per graduate.

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).”*

#### **4.3 - Value for Money Societally and Economically**

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 16<sup>th</sup>, 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). The authors estimate, based on data in Cronin (2025), that at time of writing the proceeds would now be close to, or even higher than, two billion euro annually even excluding recent once-off Corporation Tax payments arising from legal judgements.

## **Section Five - Barriers and Enablers**

### **5.1 - Precarity**

Oireachtas (2022) is a searing cross party indictment of the outrageous level of precarity in the tertiary education system in Ireland. For example it noted that:

*“The ICTU noted ‘a 2019 study from the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) concluded that: “Across all Higher Education Authority (HEA) funded institutions, the PBO estimates that funding per undergraduate student (full-time, part-time, remote and FETAC) enrolled in 2019 was 50% lower than in 2008.” In addition, the funding shortfall has contributed to a worsening of employment conditions and a rise in precarious work. According to the CSO, one in eight workers in the education sector were on temporary contracts in 1998, increasing to one in seven in 2017. Research by TASC (Think Tank for Action on Social Change) and NERI (the Nevin Economic Research Institute) also strongly suggests that the problem of precarious employment is at its most acute in the higher education sector.”* (Oireachtas, 2022: 20)

IFUT (2023), is also a key report in the context of the damaging impact of precarity. For example, IFUT (2023: 7-8) notes that:

*“There are a significant number of people contributing to research and teaching who are doing so in some of the most precarious employment conditions in the Irish economy, particularly in the Irish public sector: workers on fixed-term contracts for years whose only long-term realistic option is to leave the sector if they want a permanent job; workers who contribute to courses year after year but are only paid for the term time, leaving them to find alternative temporary work or get social welfare for significant periods every year; workers who have spent years delivering teaching, providing support to students, developing courses and who are regarded as casual staff for whom no commitment to regular, ongoing, transparent or reliable work is made; workers who are hourly paid who are excluded from the community to which they make such a valuable, though not valued, contribution with no pathways to better employment, no support or professional development, and quite often no access to basic statutory entitlements.*

*The issue of precarious employment is not only about doing the right thing for the workers impacted. Precarious employment also damages the work of the institutions themselves and the quality of the student experience. Teaching in higher education is research-informed, yet a large cohort of university teaching only positions have no provision to undertake research or*

*develop knowledge of their subject. Researchers on fixed-term contracts engage in short-term thinking curtailed by the length of their contract.”*

As IFUT (2023: 20-21) goes on to note:

*“As this report will testify and as is increasingly reported in the mainstream media, many of these precariously employed staff rely on social welfare when colleges are closed and/or work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Some earn less than the minimum wage when all their work is accounted for, and many receive no holiday pay, sick pay, or entitlements to other paid leave, such as family related leave. Many work regularly for free. In fact one study (that relates to Northern Ireland but where conditions are similar) claimed that 40% of academic staff at Queens University are precariously employed, with one-third working second jobs to make ends meet and 15% forced to use food banks...As a participant in this research puts it, ‘precarious employment is not a rite of passage. It is unfair, it is exploitative, and it discriminates.’”*

Precarious employment also damages the quality of students’ experiences. It is also worrying that the prevalence of precarity appears to be a now almost permanent imposition on the system. For example, IFUT (2023: 39) notes that:

*“It is not the case that this increased reliance on insecure contracts has meant that students are being taught by inexperienced lecturers or teaching assistants. Rather, a long-term cycle of insecure contracts has become normalised in Irish academia – as reflected in the data collected by IFUT – and this has meant that experienced and accomplished academics are teaching in precarious conditions. A survey of ninety-five academics with PhDs in History and cognate disciplines similarly found that only twelve had secured a permanent position in a third-level institution within five years of the award of their PhD; about a fifth had spent more than five years in precarious academic employment. Students are thus being taught by experienced and accomplished academics but do not gain the full benefit of this experience as precarity forces academics to move institutions (and cities and countries) regularly or to work across multiple institutions.”*

## **5.2 - Under-funding**

In terms of overall expenditure on education Ireland has a history of chronic under-investment. 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). The DES (2018b) has itself acknowledged “historic underinvestment”. Conroy (2025) has also pointed to historic under-investment in the Irish education system especially when adjusted for the size of the youth population. Conroy (2025) also points to the high financial return achieved from investment in education in Ireland, especially in the higher education system.

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 situation was even worse in 2024 when Ireland spent 0.5% of GDP on tertiary education compared to 1.0% in the OECD as a whole (OECD, 2024). This was against a backdrop of student numbers in higher education rising by 26% in the decade to 2024 (CSO, 2025b). CSO Measuring Irelands Progress 2022 found that real expenditure per student at third level education decreased from €10,565 in 2009 to €7,486 in 2019, a drop of 29.1%. SOLAS states that there were over 400,000 Further Education and Training (FET) places were taken up in 2024 (SOLAS press release January 13<sup>th</sup> 2025).

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 rot has continued and in 2023 OECD Education at a Glance found that the student to staff ratio in tertiary education in Ireland was 23 compared to an OECD average of 17. This has continued since with OECD (2025b) showing that the student-staff ratio in Ireland was 27% above the OECD average.

Based on data in Cullinan and Flannery (2017), the Exchequer invested about €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.€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 23<sup>rd</sup>, 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 the then Minister Harris made in the form of approximately €300m in additional funding. However, we're now in 2025 and that funding is less than half what the Cassells report said was needed each year.

### **5.3 - Economic Growth**

The growing economy (ESRI, 2021; EU Commission, 2021; OECD, 2021b; IBEC, 2021; Central Bank, 2022; IMF, 2021; CSO, 2022b; ESRI, 2022a; ESRI, 2022b; CSO, 2023a; IBEC, 2023; Central Bank, 2023, EU Commission, 2024; Central Bank, 2024a; ESRI, 2024; Central Bank, 2024b; McQuinn et al., 2024; OECD, 2025a; CSO, 2025a; KPMG, 2025; Conroy, 2025), and healthy Government finances (CSO, 2023b) means that Government is in a good position to make a meaningful contribution to continued support for students from under-represented target groups and/or migrant and refugee communities. This positive economic outlook is projected to continue despite recent turmoil in international trade (Central Bank, 2025a; ESRI, 2025). GDP and unemployment data in Ireland continue to be encouraging (Eurostat, 2025). Conroy (2025) has noted that the current strong labour market demand in the economy generally requires ongoing inward migration.

### **5.4 - Parity of Esteem**

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.

There are a number of exemptions regarding who can study in FET as per ETBI regulations. Many FET learners have spouse/partners working in Ireland but they can't attend or learn in the FET sector. Furthermore, the weighted funding model which is part of the outcomes based approach means that staff in the FET sector have to check whether a potential learner is in work, further education or has gained certification and then apply a weighting accordingly. This doesn't appear to apply in the HE sector.

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.

#### **5.5 - 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 level of SUSI grant payments needs to continue to rise. 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.

In addition to students who enter higher education under access programmes, a significant number of entrants to third level colleges, particularly to the Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology, 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.

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 opportunities for a tangible pathway, but also influence programme

development in both institutions to ensure the smooth progress of a student through such a pathway.

### **5.6 - 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.

### **5.7 - 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. Students who have supports in post-primary schools should automatically be provided with those supports when they commence tertiary education.

## **Section Six - Recommendations**

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

- The remaining IoTs should be supported to progress along a pathway to TU status.
- Funding of both further and higher education needs to be urgently, and substantially, increased.
- Staff/student ratios need to be reduced urgently.
- Precarity must be addressed.
- There should be parity of esteem between the FET and HE sectors and between the Technological sector and the traditional university sector.
- There should be pathways to employment and progression that are navigable with ease.
- More progression pathways should be recognised.
- Continuation of supports for students with special needs from post primary to tertiary education.
- There should be greater recognition of prior learning.
- 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.
- Further research is required into the success or otherwise of the NTO pilot.
- Closer liaison between ETBs and TU/IOTs for level 6 provision and move to agreed QQI common level 6 provision delivered by ETBs and certified/approved by TU/IOTs with agreed advancement programmes.
- 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 TU/IOT 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).

**Ends**

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## **Glossary**

AEN	Additional Educational Need
C&C	Community and Comprehensive
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCDE	Department of Children, Disability and Equality
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (now DCDE)
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now DCDE)
DE	Department of Education (now DEY)
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills (now DEY)
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DkIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HPAL	Hourly Paid Assistant/Associate Lecturer

IADT	Institute of Art, Design and Technology
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
IFUT	Irish Federation of University Teachers
IoT	Institute of Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NEFHEA	Northeast Further and Higher Education Alliance
NERI	Nevin Economic Research Institute
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NTO	National Tertiary Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PBO	Parliamentary Budget Office
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TASC	Think-tank for Action on Social Change
TU	Technological University
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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