

**Speech of the Tánaiste and
Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Leo Varadkar TD
Irish Universities Association - Future of Ireland Event**

Wednesday 9 February 2022

Good afternoon.

It is great to join you today. And, thank you to the IUA and your Director General, Jim Miley for inviting me to take part in your event.

I want to start by thanking Professor Andrew Deeks, for his exemplary commitment and dedication as the President of UCD. I'm sure I speak for all on this call, in wishing him well on his departure after many years in Ireland's Higher Education Sector, to the next chapter of his career back home in Australia.

On Friday 21st January, following public health advice, Government agreed that most of the public health restrictions currently in place could be removed.

The efforts of the Irish people, and in particular young people, over recent weeks to reduce social contacts, and take care when they met others, combined with the high uptake of vaccines, has made a huge difference. It has been a very long two years and this pandemic has brought tragedy to our nation. Over 9,000 lives lost on the island of Ireland, north and south.

Millions of lives disrupted. But for the students attending your Universities crucial rites of passage like graduation ceremonies had to be done on line, or in some cases not at all. Isolation, anxiety, fear and loneliness, as well as hope, solidarity and resilience, have been hallmarks of this pandemic.

But that Friday was a day of hope, a good day, and a day to look forward cautiously to a spring and summer of freedom, knowing that there will be bumps in the road ahead, but confident that if this is not the end, it is certainly the beginning of the end.

Throughout the last two years you have managed by and large to maintain first class higher education provision for students despite huge challenges, particularly in the early and most unsettling stages of the pandemic.

Covid-19 Response

The pandemic required you to change the way you worked. It required you to adapt to new ways of teaching your students remotely. I know from what Minister Harris has told me, that he and his Department have been engaging with stakeholders, including the IUA and THEA throughout the pandemic.

I know you want a full safe return to on campus teaching and learning, so do we.

Thank you all for the successful provision of higher education around the country. It has not been an easy road, and there has been challenges along the way. It has required additional effort, innovation and dedication to navigate these challenges, but you have done it.

I am appreciative of the other roles that Higher Education Institutions have played. University campuses continue to host vaccination centres, which has made an enormous impact on our ability to protect our citizens. Of course, we borrowed, some of the sector's finest such as Professor Brian MacCraith, former President of DCU, to oversee this effort and have been guided by Professor Philip Nolan, formerly President of Maynooth University.

HE Funding Reform

All this has helped to once again highlight what we already knew; higher education is crucial to the wellbeing of the country's societal and economic progress. Our people, particularly our young people, remain the cornerstone on which our continued success and prosperity as a progressive nation relies.

Your role in readying talented and skilled graduates, well-rounded engaged individuals with good skills who can work in teams, problem solve and add value to society in every corner of the country has never been more important. The opening of Technological Universities will level the playing field when it comes to access to education, especially in regions that did not have a university up until now.

The quality of higher education provision in Ireland is recognised as essential to our attractiveness to foreign direct investment. This came up strongly on my recent trade mission to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Therefore, it is vital that we put in place a sustainable funding model for higher education. The Cassells Report on Future Funding for Higher Education was a wakeup call.

However, we have not stood still. Following the publication of the Cassells Report there was significant investment in higher education. This was following some very lean years in the wake of the global economic and financial crash of 2008-2009. Annual current expenditure allocated to higher education has increased by more than 40% in the intervening years and in 2022 this allocation will be in excess of €2 billion.

This significant allocation is a demonstration of the Government's commitment to meeting the funding needs of the higher education sector.

However, it is clear that we want to put in place a long-term sustainable funding model for tertiary education. We will do that. There will not be higher student contributions or a student system. Student fees are already high by EU standards and I do not want students graduating with large debts the way American students do. So, we will have to grasp the other options.

Research

Successful societies and economies will be those that invest in and embrace talent, scientific research and knowledge creation. This has never been clearer than in dealing with the challenges we face with Covid-19.

Never before has the benefit of a robust scientific research community and international research co-operation been so important.

The importance of increased collaboration within industry and between industry and academia is clear. Accessing the skills and expertise, technologies and knowledge developed in the publicly funded research sector will enable businesses to develop faster and work smarter, set new standards, grow jobs and sales and stay ahead of the competition.

During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government's main research and innovation agencies developed a coordinated Rapid Response Research and Innovation programme to help mitigate and manage the COVID-19 pandemic.

Funding of €47million has been provided to contract researchers and research students whose work has been seriously disrupted by the pandemic.

Ireland has a well-deserved world-class reputation for excellence and impact in numerous fields of research and innovation. As a result of our commitment to R&I in past years, we have successfully built up research capacity and a significant reputation for research excellence.

Skills – Higher Education

Our higher education institutions play a role in educating the graduates we require for the provision of essential public services. We must ensure that we step up to the mark and align provision to the significant workforce planning needs of the range of health and social care professions.

Higher Education Institutions need to continue to assess how to best equip learners with the skills to navigate an increasingly digital world and in a broader context to make informed and responsible choices about their use of technology and social media.

Technological innovations have the potential to enhance and transform the education experience for students, and provide opportunities for pioneering approaches to teaching and learning.

Building the digital capacity of the higher education sector facilitates the up-skilling and re-skilling of the workforce which is imperative if we are to respond to the changing skills needs in employment.

Following the success of the 2020 July Stimulus programme over 4,120 additional places were made available on Modular Skills Provision courses in 2021.

Under Springboard+ 2021 and the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 1, almost 13,500 places in over 400 courses are available to people seeking to upskill or reskill in the current academic year.

The changes in ways of working brought about as a result of the pandemic underline the importance of the availability of high-level ICT skills. In this context Technology Skills 2022 aims to ensure that more than 12,450 people will graduate in high-level ICT Skills areas in 2022.

HEA Governance Reform

On the legislative agenda, the Higher Education Authority Bill 2022 will see a major reform in the tertiary education sector, repealing as it does the current 1971 Act and replacing it with a legislative framework enabling improved policy development and planning within the sector.

There will be a focus on the needs of the learner and improved oversight and regulation of higher education institutions. It also provides for crucial links to the wider tertiary education system. We want to improve innovation and enable you to adapt to the needs of the learner, advance equality, diversity and inclusion.

A comprehensive consultation process has been undertaken stretching back to 2018 under which there has been ongoing engagement with key stakeholders, including the IUA, throughout the legislative development process.

The constructive and co-operative approach by the IUA and other stakeholders has been very helpful and is much appreciated. The legislation when enacted will have been greatly improved as a result of those inputs.

We understand that universities, technological universities and Institutes of Technology are independent corporate entities established under statute. However, they are in receipt of substantial funding from the State. As part of its core legal function, the HEA is responsible for allocating recurrent funding to HEIs of €1.5bn in 2022. Therefore, we have to bring a clear and specific definition to the relationship between HEIs and the State.

Autonomy and independence are important characteristics of HEIs but must be matched with transparent governance at the institutional level which discharges accountability to students, stakeholders and the public. The proper legislative framework needs to be in place to support the introduction of the new sustainable funding model.

Autonomous institutions are best placed to provide the education which will ensure talented, successful, innovative and excellent graduates continue to emerge.

Conclusion

While we keep our eyes firmly on the future, we also need to take stock of the recent past and the lessons we have learned during Covid-19. There is no doubt the pandemic has shone a light on many areas of higher education and research, that are in need of improvement and development.

Overall, however, I am very proud of the spirit of collaboration and sharing of best practice among Higher Education Institutions, both nationally and internationally and such collaboration should continue and expand.

In conclusion, thank you for your support, expertise and dedication during a most difficult and challenging time.

Our challenge is not to return to 'normal' but rather to make our higher education and research sector better than ever before – we are aiming for the disruptive in the most positive sense, for agility and the ability to grasp opportunity.

Higher Education Institutions must continue to be inclusive, diverse, innovative and engaging environments where students of all ages, backgrounds and abilities are encouraged to reach their full potential.

We will prioritise making Ireland a leading global player in the area of Research and Knowledge Economy by investing in sustainable funding models into the future.

Thank you to the IUA for hosting this event and giving me with the opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to the panel discussion.

Thank you.

ENDS

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) plays a key role in implementing the Government's policies of stimulating the productive capacity of the economy and creating an environment which supports job creation and maintenance. The Department has lead responsibility for Irish policy on global trade and inward investment and a remit to promote fair competition in the marketplace, protect consumers and safeguard workers.

For further information please contact Press Office, D/Enterprise, Trade and Employment, press.office@enterprise.gov.ie or (01) 631-2200

If you no longer wish to receive emails from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment Press Office, please notify us by email to press.office@enterprise.gov.ie

Email Disclaimer / Séanadh Ríomhphoist:

<https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/Disclaimer/Email-Disclaimer.html>
