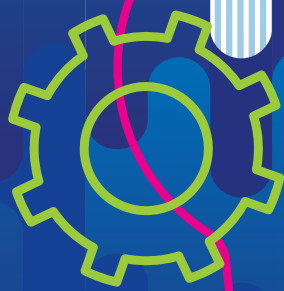




Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann  
Royal Irish Academy

# Higher Education Futures Taskforce

## Executive Summary



## FOREWORD

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The Royal Irish Academy Higher Education Futures Taskforce has produced a series of papers which are a timely and valuable exploration of higher education (HE) across the island of Ireland. The series presents a comprehensive and forward-looking vision of higher education that demonstrates the priorities needed in the face of unprecedented global trends and rapidly changing societies.

In establishing the HE Futures Taskforce in September 2020, I could not have imagined the commitment and extraordinary insight of Taskforce members in developing a viable vision for higher education on the island of Ireland up to 2035.

The Taskforce began as a reaction to the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and by Brexit. Challenges and opportunities quickly became apparent: new delivery modalities; the development of the technological universities; regional pressures, access and inclusion issues, the necessity for a strong research base, and the assessment of Ireland and Northern Ireland collaborative opportunities.

Ireland and Northern Ireland face both similar and diverse challenges in higher education from teaching and learning, research and resource allocation, to access and equality of educational opportunities, all of which have an enormous impact on educational outcomes and on a country's ability to attract and retain qualified individuals to meet the demanding, changing and ever-expanding needs in higher education across the island.

By launching this series of discussion papers on HE, the Taskforce has demonstrated clarity and an extensive breadth and depth of knowledge across the educational ecosystem. The papers provide clear discussion points on the centrality of research and innovation for the entire island, address regional disparity and inequality concerns in a holistic manner and provide a nuanced approach to the challenges ahead for the higher education sector. It is evident that expectations must meet outcomes where Higher Education Institutions have the power to transform lives and play an instrumental role in the growth and development of the island.

Indeed, the obligation and responsibility to address higher education on the island of Ireland was met with the highest standards of scholarly rigour. Finally, I would like to pay special tribute to each and every member of the Taskforce (named in the Appendix) and to the Chair of the Taskforce, Gerry McKenna MRIA, Senior Vice-President of the Royal Irish Academy, for their unwavering dedication to this project.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dr. Mary Canning".

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**Dr Mary Canning**

President, Royal Irish Academy

Dublin, October 2021

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Exploring, analysing and re-examining higher education in a fundamental way requires an enormous amount of time and effort. The work has delved copiously into the collective wisdom and experience of many individuals.

None of this would have been possible to achieve without the tireless focus and enthusiasm of HE Futures Taskforce members. I would therefore like to express my sincere gratitude to all members of the Taskforce, subgroup chairs and co-chairs and the staff of the Royal Irish Academy, Policy and International Relations Unit, for their commitment, attention to detail and steadfastness to the project.

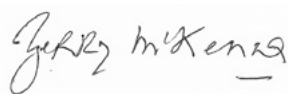
I would also like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of the stakeholders, policymakers, interested parties and individuals involved in this process, from government levels to the entire higher education sector in Ireland and Northern Ireland, economic and business industries and funding bodies, and sister academies in the United Kingdom and Europe, including the responses to the Call for Input consultation in the early Spring of 2021.

A large number of meetings, seminars, roundtables and workshops were conducted throughout the past twelve months, which all played a pivotal role in the formation of this series of discussion papers on higher education.

Furthermore, this endeavour has demonstrated the unique resilience of the sector and a future for higher education that is vibrant, agile and collaborative, in all its aspects.

Inevitably, given the range of themes deliberated on and investigated in these papers, the series will raise as well as answer questions.

I look forward to our further engagement on higher education, highlighting the significant issues fostered in the HE Futures Taskforce five paper series and continuing the important work on the future of the sector across the island of Ireland.



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**Gerry McKenna MRIA**

Senior Vice-President, Royal Irish Academy  
Chair, Higher Education Futures Taskforce

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In an era of rapidly changing and unprecedented global challenges, the landscape of higher education continues to evolve. The benefits of higher education are many, for the individual, for society and for the economy: from advancing knowledge and critical-thinking skills and improving health and life expectancy, to enhancing social cohesion and diversity and increasing the quality of civic life. However, the intensifying climate crisis and extreme environmental disruption; the displacement of millions of people and mass migration; demographic change and geopolitical instability; economic and social inequality and cyber-attacks on democracy, pose unprecedented global challenges requiring holistic and creative responses. Mastering these challenges will also galvanise the modernisation of the landscape of higher education on the island of Ireland, in Europe and globally.

The Royal Irish Academy Higher Education Futures Taskforce was established in September 2020 to debate, identify and present a bold but viable vision for the higher education sector on the island of Ireland in the years ahead. The Taskforce paid special attention to the development of the higher education ecosystem over the longer term and how its development may affect and change the policy and structural framework for higher education on the island of Ireland. How must we reshape higher education to meet changing societal needs and urgent global challenges?

Existing higher education policies date from 2009 (in Northern Ireland) and 2011 (in Ireland) but the landscape has changed substantially since that time. Recent drivers of change include: the development of technological universities; enhanced emphasis on linkages with the further education sector; commitment to greater north–south collaboration in higher education provision and research; the UK’s departure from the European Union; new modes of delivery in the higher education sector, accelerated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; and a growing awareness of the value of a strong science–policy dialogue.

The establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in Ireland offers an exciting opportunity to refresh strategic priorities for higher education and research, and to develop further the immense reservoir of expertise and talent housed and nurtured within higher education on the island. These ambitions are bolstered by the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland)’s long-term vision of a higher education sector that is vibrant and of international calibre; pursues excellence in teaching and research; plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable knowledge-based economy; supports a confident, shared society; and recognises and values diversity.

Informed by recommendations and analysis provided by over 100 organisations, stakeholders, interested parties and individuals in response to an extensive consultation exercise, the Taskforce has produced five papers on the future of higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The titles of the five papers are:

- 1 Higher education on the island of Ireland in 2035: a values-based vision of institutions advancing society, culture and the economy
2. The future landscape of higher education
- 3 The role of regions and place in higher education across the island of Ireland
- 4 Equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education
- 5 Re-imagining research and innovation in higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland

## ***Higher education on the island of Ireland in 2035: a values-based vision of institutions advancing society, culture and the economy***



Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have enabled a thriving diverse economy, shaped public policy debate, and supported societal harmony and the peace dividend. HEIs, in Ireland and Northern Ireland, have shown remarkable resilience with constrained resources, evolving in nature and scale as circumstances demanded.

The Higher Education Futures Taskforce outlines ten core values to guide higher education on the island of Ireland in 2035. The respective values reflect a strong commitment: (i) to excellence across the core missions of higher education; (ii) to equality, diversity and inclusion, (iii) to delivering value for society, (iv) to educational opportunity, (v) to sustainable and equitable development, (vi) to engagement and partnership, (vii) to furthering the all-island dimensions of tertiary education, (viii), to the global dimension of higher education, (ix) to academic freedom and research integrity and (x) to institutional autonomy.

Building on this framework of intersecting values, the vision for higher education on this island in 2035 relies upon a diversity of institutional missions. Realisation of this vision will result in a significant advancement of our society and economy with particular benefits for individual citizens in terms of prosperity and quality of life. The core elements of this vision for 2035 are as follows:

- HE on the island of Ireland will be renowned for its development of talent, the excellence of its research across the full spectrum of inquiry, the fostering of creativity and innovative mindsets, the active engagement of HEIs with society and industry, its culture of inclusivity and its global outlook.
- HE on the island of Ireland will provide an excellent development and learning experience for all students with a focus on personalisation of learning that adapts to the needs and potential of each individual student. HEIs will develop lifelong learning relationships with their student community and their local and regional communities to extend widely the benefits of HE.
- HE will develop a citizenry with the knowledge, skills and attributes to ensure a vibrant, prosperous and peaceful society and to enable a living and working environment that encourages and rewards innovation and creativity. It will integrate sustainable development issues into all aspects of teaching, learning and research.
- HE will build on the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and develop an effective hybrid campus model that accommodates the needs of a diverse student and staff community, and which recognises the role played by the physical campus in delivering a positive student experience.
- Leveraging the affordances of digital technology, HEIs will develop and offer flexible and personalised learning pathways, including an unbundling of conventional academic qualifications to accommodate learners at all phases of their working life and beyond.
- Contingent on appropriate levels of resourcing, north and south, HEIs will deliver on their full potential as centres of learning, knowledge creation and creativity, and as locations where the development of individual talent is a priority.

## The future landscape of higher education

HEIs evolve primarily in response to societal challenges; economic drivers and market forces; demographic changes; and developments in knowledge, always guided by evolving transnational, national and regional policy priorities. As a result, the future landscape of HE on the island of Ireland will see growth in:



- Learning and teaching.** Future learners in HEIs will be very different, their needs more complex and diverse, and learning itself will be transformed. Learners will be diverse in terms of socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender and age. Greater access for currently disadvantaged student cohorts will ensure that participants in HE mirror the diversity of our society. By providing an environment that mirrors our pluralist society and that is conducive to open and evidence-based debate, HEIs will foster creativity, social inclusion, fairness, entrepreneurial spirit and critical-thinking skills.
- Research.** Addressing increasingly complex issues, research in Irish HEIs as in international counterparts will be ever more cross- and interdisciplinary, while the global Open Science agenda demands that research outputs will be published through open access platforms. To bolster society's trust in evidence and expertise, Irish HEIs will take three steps: (i) to promote high ethical standards and integrity in research; (ii) to foster it at all levels and in the education and training of early career researchers and (iii) to promote more citizen participation in research, its governance and conduct. These will enhance the perceived relevance of HEI missions and grow popular support for investment.
- A system of distributed excellence.** In the research domain, distributed excellence will be a strength of Europe and Ireland, a hallmark of societal solidarity. Distributed excellence is not about levelling down but about promoting excellence based on a broad foundation of basic and frontier research. Local access to a HEI that is excellent in research is the sine qua non for competitive regional economic innovation and success in an increasingly knowledge-based society.
- Societal engagement.** HEI communities will engage more with society, co-leading regional innovation ecosystems that encompass businesses, non-profit organisations, start-ups, the creative sector and public bodies. Their research skills and expertise will be made available to support regional responses to local challenges. As exemplars of sustainable practices themselves, HEIs will engage with their local communities to grow societal awareness of and commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- A more integrated system of institutions.** In institutional composition, the HEI system will be similar to 2021; in practices and inter-relationships it will have evolved dramatically. All HEIs will have become hybrid institutions: learning and research conducted on traditional campuses in modernised learning settings, online in virtual spaces but also – in support of experiential learning – in the workplace, in cultural spaces and in civic society settings.
- Spectrum of HEIs.** The publicly funded HEI landscape will continue to consist of a spectrum of institutions, ranging from large comprehensive and research-intensive universities, through large or medium sized technological universities focused on applied research, to institutes of technology training for practical roles, colleges of the arts and colleges of further education. Co-existing with publicly funded institutions will be a spectrum of private institutions ranging from medium sized specialised universities (e.g. the Royal College of

Surgeons Ireland) to medium and small sized teaching colleges specialising in a limited number of disciplines. Large businesses (particularly in the multinational sector) are likely to deliver specialised bespoke programmes in collaboration with HEIs.

- **Networked institutions.** HEIs will be deeply networked, collaborating in teaching and research, with joint degrees across multiple institutions on offer to each university's registered students. This development will extend the existing European collaboration frameworks. Evolution will also derive from experience in the ongoing 'European University Initiative', already piloting models among 280+ universities grouped into 41 individual alliance networks. In 2035, some domestic networks will be wholly Irish; many will include partners from elsewhere in the EU and beyond.
- **HE system spatial configuration.** With the emergence of HEIs as premier enablers of regional success, calls for the creation of additional institutions have multiplied. Submissions to the Taskforce during the consultation phase confirmed the need for enhanced north–south collaboration.

## *The role of regions and place in higher education on the island of Ireland*

Despite notable improvements in the HE landscape in recent years in Ireland and Northern Ireland, there is a clear need to reduce the regional disparities that still exist in tertiary education. HEIs and Further Education Institutions (FEIs) must be encouraged and incentivised to collaborate more widely and to share resources in order to reduce the economic and social disadvantages that exist to varying degrees in different regions. As such, the Taskforce proposes the following:



- **A co-ordinated and independent planning body** supported by funds from PEACE PLUS, the Shared Island Unit and a major joint UK-EU-Ireland-NI initiative involving sustained commitment should be established to plan future tertiary education and research provision, including cross-border provision, in the north-west of the island of Ireland.
- There should be a step change in the university funding landscape which requires a long-term approach to planning and resourcing if the potential for the regional impact of institutions is to be successful.
- HEIs need to **plan and implement agile systems** for greater flexibility in curriculum design, delivery models and programme content. The increase in the availability of online learning can have a positive impact on lifelong learning for all of society and this should become a core objective of all HEIs.
- **Joint collaborative programmes** between the Further Education (FE) sectors in the border regions of Ireland and Northern Ireland should be actively developed to meet local needs and reduce the disadvantages associated with peripherality.
- **A 'Smart' focus** should be applied to lead regional HEIs and FEIs working in concert to specialise and provide a more comprehensive offering that reflects the strengths and needs of the region.

## Equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland



The upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic offers the opportunity to move away from an approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in Ireland which has been based on small incremental changes, with the possibility now existing to build forward better; taking bold and ambitious steps.

### Main recommendation:

- EDI in HE in Ireland and Northern Ireland has been to varying degrees fragmented and reactive rather than proactive. To address these issues in each jurisdiction, there is an urgent need for an overarching EDI strategy in HE (and FE). The Taskforce recognises that for political and legislative reasons developments may not proceed at the same pace in both jurisdictions. This group recommends that an EDI strategy should ideally be framed as an all-island charter (combining current targets and initiatives – gender plans, Consent Framework, Athena SWAN, University of Sanctuary etc.) which all HEIs (and FEIs) would wish to subscribe to. It is also recommended that an EDI Advisory Council (or councils; one for each jurisdiction) be established to set targets, make recommendations and to monitor progress. The proposed EDI council (or councils) would be advisory to the Irish government and the Northern Ireland Executive as well as to the HEIs. A co-ordinated EDI strategy would eliminate discrepancies in the relative focus on gender, religion, race, language, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ issues etc. This strategy would empower HEIs to move away from reactive initiatives and would allow planning for the short, medium and long term. A harmonised approach would also enable a holistic approach to EDI, which considers the entire educational journey of the individual, rather than merely the segmented phases.

### Other recommendations:

- **A centralised and standardised approach to data collection is necessary to allow for intersectionality, benchmarking and longitudinal approaches.** A uniform system would enable joined-up analysis of educational pathways and outcomes. Despite having multiple datasets, they are not linked up and the lack of a co-ordinated joined-up approach to data hinders efforts at improving equality, diversity and inclusion across the HE sector. Areas where data is not currently gathered, especially, for example, linguistic data should be included in future EDI data collection, monitoring and policy development.
- **STUDENTS: Multiple pathways and flexibility of provision.** There are an increasing number of access and transition pathways available for HE students, north and south. These pathways should have long-term strategies with implementation or action plans on how to achieve them at a national and institutional level. A credit recognition and accumulation system facilitated through hybrid, blended and on-campus learning, with greater availability of joint qualifications across learning environments and between north and south is the way forward. There should be pathways through apprenticeships and employment with lifelong opportunities for updating and reskilling. Such pathways should include a system of mutual recognition of educational qualifications and credits from other jurisdictions, recognising that HE can be accessed at all stages of life and career, not just directly after second level education. Learners will have multiple access and exit points.
- **STAFF:** Even with a more equitable employment and promotions system, it will take years to adjust to the historical exclusion of certain groups in the HE sector. There is therefore a need for intervention, affirmative action, minimum numbers and targeted initiatives to ensure that diversity is achieved in the next 15 years and not in the next 50. Structured opportunities are needed to help the diversification of staff and to address areas where under-representation occurs. Interventions and initiatives should include academic, administrative, managerial and support staff and early career researchers.



## Re-imagining research and innovation in Ireland and Northern Ireland



The HE research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem on the island of Ireland has huge potential to make a significant impact on the world stage, and to bring mutual benefit to both parts of the island. In a healthy ecosystem, individual HEIs have distinct strengths and excellence in research, and these can be used to complement and support that broad ecosystem. To further cultivate the potential of R&I in Ireland, Northern Ireland and/or on the island as a whole, the HE Futures Taskforce proposes five overarching areas of opportunity:

- Attracting, sustaining and retaining talent:** The global competition for talent has intensified. Both Ireland and Northern Ireland require a strong portfolio of research funding instruments to retain top talent across all disciplines and to attract new talent from elsewhere. Central to this are strong individual funding opportunities for mid-career and senior faculty to maintain their research momentum through open competition, as well as increased hiring opportunities and competitive funding streams for early career researchers and academics. Furthermore, doctoral training is vital for the future success of R&I in both jurisdictions and is a potential area for greater co-operation on an all-island basis. Diverse, secure and sustainable career paths based on equality, diversity and inclusion in HE are required. Consideration should be given to an all-island HE and research area which would have the key objective of retaining talent on the island.
- Playing to our strengths:** Frameworks for knowledge creation, sharing and impact. To build agility and preparedness for research across all disciplines so as to be prepared for current and future challenges, seed funding to build multi and transdisciplinary research networks and the co-design of initiatives is required. The full integration of the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) and creative arts in research funding calls would enhance a holistic response to societal challenges. There is potential in the public R&I system in Northern Ireland, Ireland and on the island as a whole for leadership in the area of interdisciplinary research, and in particular in optimising the embedding of AHSS research for local societal and/or global goals. There is also the potential for leadership in enabling co-creation of knowledge through research partnerships outside academia. As an island, there is ample room for an innovative testing ground on inter-sectoral and cross-border collaborative partnerships.
- Leveraging the distributed excellence model and boosting regional development and innovation.** Over the past two decades, the development of the HE and research performing systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland has been characterised by investment in interinstitutional centres and collaborative initiatives, including with the private sector, whether regionally or nationally. This policy is grounded in a distributed excellence model for R&I. Based on specialisms and excellence, HEIs secured funding in their own right and for research clusters. Going forward, the traditional research-intensive universities, the newly established technical universities (TUs) and other HEIs will be key, individually and collectively, to delivering further regional development. Institutions should declare their priorities and their hubs of research expertise so as to enable clarity. An increase in overall government investment in R&I will have to be considered in order to 'make room' for the growth in R&I capacity in TUs.
- Prioritising funding and investment to ensure sustainable and resilient public R&I systems for the future.** As small, open, export-driven economies, Ireland and Northern Ireland must be ahead of the curve in terms of investment in R&I. In Ireland, an increase in public investment in research is needed to achieve the

national objective of moving from being a Strong Innovator to an Innovation Leader. Annual research funding would need to be increased by an additional €350 million/year to reach the EU average of 1.3% for Government Budget Allocations for Research and Development (GBARD) as a percentage of total government expenditure. In Northern Ireland, research and development investment sits at 1.6% of GDP, compared to the UK average of 1.7%. In Ireland, research funding structures also require consideration. A diversity of funding sources which have clear roles and mandates, and which fulfil different policy objectives, strengthens a system. On an all-island basis, in addition to enhancing infrastructure, increased infrastructure sharing would have benefits for researchers and also for governments by increasing the return on investment.

- **Strategic collaboration to leverage benefits for Northern Ireland and Ireland, enhanced partnerships and all-Island collaboration for mutual benefit.** There is now a timely opportunity to draw on respective strengths, enhance collaboration and work towards mutually beneficial common objectives in R&I at an all-island level. Significantly, this would create a foundation for enhanced engagements with, and leveraging of funds from, the UK (for Northern Ireland), Europe (for Ireland and Northern Ireland) and other countries such as the USA (both jurisdictions). The Taskforce recommends the establishment of an all-island Research and Innovation Advisory Council. This would provide a continuously updated source of expert, independent policy advice and evaluation to both jurisdictions and governments and their agencies on the various aspects of research and innovation policy.

## APPENDIX

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### Members of the Royal Irish Academy Higher Education Futures Taskforce

**Clare Austick**, Union of Students in Ireland (July 2021-)

**Mark Bailey**, MRIA, Emeritus Director, Armagh Observatory

**Vani Kant Borooah**, Professor of Applied Economics, Ulster University

**Dr Jennifer Brennan**, Director of Research, Development and Innovation, Technological Higher Education Association

**Dr Mikey Creane**, Research Fellow, National University Ireland Galway

**Marie Cowan**, MRIA, Science Director with the British Geological Survey, Director at the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland, Department for the Economy (DfE) in Northern Ireland

**Roger Downer**, MRIA, President Emeritus, University of Limerick

**Professor Maureen Edmondson**, OBE, Independent

**Lorna Fitzpatrick**, Union of Students in Ireland (July 2019- June 2021)

**Professor Emma Flynn**, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research and Enterprise, Queen's University Belfast

**Anne Fuchs**, FBA, MRIA, Director of Humanities Institute, University College Dublin

**Dr Tony Gaynor**, Executive Director, Royal Irish Academy

**Áine Hyland**, MRIA, Emeritus Professor of Education, University College Cork

**Dr Ebon Joseph**, Race relations and Career Consultant

**Dr Lisa Keating**, Director of Research and Innovation, Irish Universities Association

**Jennifer Kenneally**, Senior Programme Manager, Royal Irish Academy

**Professor Karl Leydecker**, FRSE, Senior Vice-Principal, University of Aberdeen

**Brian MacCraith**, MRIA Former President Dublin City University

**Martin Mansergh**, MRIA, Governing Board Member, Carlow College, St. Patricks.

**Professor Hannah McGee**, Royal College Surgeons Ireland

**Gerry McKenna**, MRIA, HE Futures Taskforce Chair, Senior Vice-President, Royal Irish Academy

**Helene McNulty**, MRIA, Director of the Nutrition Innovation Centre for Food and Health, University of Ulster

**Dr Claire McGing**, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Manager, Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology

**Eucharía Meehan**, MRIA, Registrar and CEO, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

**Jim Miley**, Director General, Irish Universities Association

**Professor Michael Murphy**, President, European University Association

**Brian Norton**, MRIA, RIA Secretary for Policy and International Relations, TU Dublin

**Professor Anne O'Connor**, National University of Ireland, Galway

**Dr Lynn Ramsey**, Programme Lead Multi-Campus Micro-credentials project, Irish Universities Association

**Sinéad Riordan**, Head of Policy and International Relations, Royal Irish Academy

**Professor Simon Swain**, FBA, Vice-President Research, British Academy, Vice-President Engagement, University of Warwick.

**Jennifer Reilly**, Programmes and Administration, Royal Irish Academy

**Dr Joseph Ryan**, CEO, Technological Higher Education Association

**Craig Skerritt**, Programme Manager, Policy and International Relations, Royal Irish Academy

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**Owen Patrick Ward**, Traveller Education Officer, Access Centre, National University of Ireland Galway



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