

Submission by

**The Conference of Heads of Irish Universities
[C.H.I.U.]**

**To The OECD Review of
Higher Education in Ireland**

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C.H.I.U. Submission to the OECD Review Team

CONTENTS

Heading	Page No.
1. National Objective and Priorities	3.
2. Universities and Strategic Review	3.
3. The Role of Higher Education	5.
4. Strategic Management and Structure	7.
5. Teaching and Learning	9.
6. Research and Development	11.
7. Investment and Financing	13.
8. International Competitiveness	15.
Appendix A	17.

C.H.I.U. Submission to the OECD Review Team

1. National Objective and Priorities

- C.H.I.U. supports the Irish government's national objective and priorities as stated in terms of reference for the Review Team,
- As a knowledge economy and one of the most open economies in the world, Ireland needs to have a leading competitive edge in knowledge generation and dissemination,
- C.H.I.U. agrees with HEA position that the target for benchmarking our higher education system internationally should be the top decile of OECD countries,
- There is a need to build social consensus around the policies, actions and investments necessary if higher education is to contribute to its full potential to the knowledge economy and society,
- A coherent and cohesive national framework of integrated policies and strategies is required to maximise the contributions of higher education and research to developing the knowledge society,
- The national framework must be underpinned by a comprehensive explanation and acknowledgement by government of the full range of benefits higher education delivers to democracy, the economy, society and individuals including health benefits, lower crime rates, increased productivity, higher salaries, higher tax revenue,
- The basic principle that informs this submission and should underlie all higher education policies programmes and actions is that autonomy of the university system and of the institutions creates the capacity to be innovative, flexible, cost effective and academically excellent,
- C.H.I.U. strongly advocates that the conclusion of the OECD¹ that "*the art of policy-making will in future involve ensuring that public goals are met in higher education through influence rather than direction*" should inform the Government's approach to the development of the Irish Higher Education system.

2. Universities and Strategic Review

Universities at a C.H.I.U. level been actively engaged in ongoing strategic review of the university sector through -

- a consultation process on the Universities Act 1997 which was framed by reference to developing international trends,
- publication with the HEA of "*The University Challenged: A Review of International Trends and Issues with Particular Reference to Ireland*" (2001) and "*The Financial Governance of Irish Universities*" (2001),
- a strategic planning process to address the issues and the challenges identified in the Skilbeck Report.

¹ OECD 200, *Education Policy Analysis*

- The latter process is ongoing and has informed institutional planning and management of change and reform. The need for sectoral action in a range of areas including the following has been agreed to support development at institutional level and a number of initiatives have been taken:-
 - Internationalisation social inclusion/cohesion
 - The Teaching and Learning Environment
 - Quality Assessment/Quality Improvement
 - Future Funding
 - Coherence in Irish Higher Education
 - Building Organisational Capability

3. The Role of Higher Education

Issues

- The role of Irish universities is set out in the form of a comprehensive list of objects and functions in the Universities Act. These are underpinned in the legislation by the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy which are counter balanced by accountability provisions.
- The priority given by universities to various objects and the balance achieved between them are largely dictated by the source and quantity of funding/income and the constraints/conditions attaching,
- The OECD has already noted that universities in Ireland “*have high levels of autonomy over most areas of their operation*”¹. However, creeping bureaucratisation in the system is making excessive demands on universities in terms of resources and in terms of compromised autonomy. It is essential that the right balance between accountability and autonomy is achieved if universities are to have the freedom required to continue to fulfil their transcending roles of developing students to their full potential and pursuing knowledge for its own sake,
- The inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the extensive lists of statutory objects and functions is that universities cannot be regarded as just educational institutions but also have to be seen as cultural, economic and social institutions, and facilitators of regional and national development,
- Response to modern demands on universities requires constant review and adaptation by them of their organisation, structures, procedures, programmes and services,
- Annual allocation of core state funding, frequently late, undermines the multi-annual strategic approach to planning and management required of universities,
- The existing rigid core funding model combined with the recent massive expansion of school leaver entrants has inhibited the flexibility required to respond to lifelong learning needs, e-learning demands, expansion of researcher training, etc.,
- Universities have responded well to skills needs and other government priorities such as software skills, health sciences, but the financing has been below international norms and imposed strains on core resources,
- The ability of the higher education sector to fulfil its role requires a continuum of excellence from primary through secondary and onto higher levels of education that is informed by the broader context within which it serves,
- The varied economic, social, personal and cultural demands on higher education argue strongly for diversity of institutions and diversity in their programmes and services which must be viewed as complementary elements of a co-ordinated and cohesive higher education system and of a national qualifications framework,

Initiatives

- C.H.I.U and the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology (CODIT) have drawn up and agreed a joint statement which proposes a set of principles to underpin development of the higher education system with a view to maximising the combined impact of the university and institute of technology sectors in the interests of national development [**Appendix A**],

Recommendations

- Because of their extensive role universities should be partners in the national policy formulation process,
- The role of higher education should be consistently articulated in a coherent way by government and the higher education sector in order to provide more explicitly a shared values context within which policy is framed and resources allocated,
- University sector and the Institute of Technology sector have different but complementary roles. The overall state policy and investment structures should support the diversity of institutions in the higher education system and distinctiveness in their missions, roles, functions and promote partnerships and co-operation between institutions across the full range of their activities,
- Universities should be adequately resourced to develop articulated pathways and flexible arrangements for access, progression and transfer between the further and higher education sectors and within the higher education system,
- The government must give full effect to the legislation guarantee of institutional and sectoral autonomy for the universities to encourage enterprise and dynamism in developing new markets. The guarantee must not be compromised in the pursuit of national objectives,

4. Strategic Management and Structure

Issues

- Current arrangements for the overall planning and management of the higher education system do not provide for the consistent partnership approach between government and the universities and the other institutions and key interests that is essential to the achievement of national economic, social and cultural objectives,
- The absence of strategies, policies and structures within government in the education sector and with the key interdependent sectors, to support sectoral development in the broadest sense seriously puts at risk the achievement of shared objectives and is making less that optional use of resources already deployed,
- Responding to the growing number and diversity of uncoordinated and unplanned demands on universities has placed enormous strains on their strategic planning and management capacities,
- Universities are treated as ‘public bodies’ in many legislative contexts yet are increasingly expected to be ‘nimble’, ‘decisive’, ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘competitive’,
- Universities recognise that the development of training for senior university staff holding leadership or management position in line with international best practice needs to be treated as a sectoral priority,
- A dynamic approach to the overall strategic planning of the system requires a constructive balance between :

Sector and individual institution positions on policy developments

Collaboration and competition between institutions

Collaboration and competition between sectors

Institutional autonomy and accountability

National and institutional objectives and strategies

Interests and concerns of the providers and those of the stakeholders

Initiatives

- Universities are committed through C.H.I.U. to maximising collaboration in planning and acting strategically to promote excellence, effectiveness and efficiency in the university sector and to enhance their contribution to economic and social development,
- Universities have developed a wide range of partnerships and strategic alliances with other universities, other higher education institutions both nationally and internationally and with industry and other sectors in pursuit of their objectives,

Recommendations

- Government should establish a high status national planning council to formulate a 5 year national higher and further education development strategy for adoption by government and to coordinate, promote and monitor its consistent implementation across all higher and further education institutions and relevant departments, agencies and services,

- The National Planning Council for HE and FE should provide for high level representation from business/industry, social partners, cultural/arts and other key interests, relevant government departments and agencies e.g. IDA, EI, SFI and nominees from C.H.I.U. and CODIT. The membership should reflect the interconnectedness of higher and further education with economic, social and cultural activities. The Chair should be from outside the education sector. The Council should have its own executive and the capacity to carry out or commission research to inform policy development,
- A separate agency should have responsibility for state financing of core-teaching and research in universities, institutes of technology and other higher education institutions in line with the provisions of the national strategic plan,
- The funding agency should have a small Board with an independent chair (external to the education sector) and high level membership from the business, public, community voluntary and higher education sectors. Representatives from higher education institutions to be appointed to the Agency's Board should have substantial experience in management or governance positions in their institutions. The Chief Executive of the Planning Council should be a member of the Board,
- The governance of the higher education institutions should be structured to reflect best practice,
- University academic and managerial structures and practices should be more closely aligned so as to ensure more effective and efficient decision making and to support a self-motivated academic community,
- State allocation of core funding should be aligned more closely with universities' strategic plans,
- To facilitate the infusion of new blood and maintain the vitality of staffing, universities need to be able to address performance and underperformance of staff through greater flexibility in the pay, promotion and pensions structures and not be bound by public service norms,
- The installation of the most modern systems for the timely and efficient production of data required for effective strategic planning and management of universities and the sector should be given priority.

5. Teaching and Learning

Issues

- The Universities Act 1997 [Sections 35, 41 and 49] sets out the legislative basis for Quality Assurance/Quality improvement procedures in universities. These provide for direct student involvement. The implementation of quality review recommendations has been hindered by inadequate financial resources,
- While the rate of course completion is an ongoing issue of concern, according to OECD data Irish university students have the third highest course completion rate of university students in 20 OECD countries,
- Universities should review existing programmes and courses on a more regular basis,
- With very welcome large investments by the State in R&D, universities have been moving from teaching led to research and teaching led institutions. Within the university sector institutions have continued to emphasise the complementary and mutually reinforcing roles of both teaching and research,
- The challenges to be overcome, increasing participation from lower socio-economic groups, are deep rooted and multifaceted and have to be addressed in a co-ordinated way within a national framework to be formulated by the National Office for Access to Higher Education acknowledging that the most effective interventions in the long term must be made at the early stages of education,
- Universities recognise there is a need to embed the goal of increased access and progression of students from disadvantaged groups in the culture, values, ethos and practices of their institutions.

Initiatives

- Universities have been expanding their initiatives in developing teaching and learning to take advantage of modern pedagogical models and tools,
- C.H.I.U. prepared a detailed proposal for a consortium comprising the seven universities and three Institutes of Technology with the support of the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology and major infrastructure/technology partners to develop an e-learning service for higher and further education,
- The Universities have established quality assurance procedures aimed at improving the quality of their programmes and services as provided for under the Universities Act. The Irish Universities Quality Board, founded by the universities to ensure a system-wide, best-practice approach to quality assurance, will detail these developments in a separate submission to the Review Team,
- Universities are co-ordinating their policies and programmes on retention/completion and the Inter-Universities Retention Network is making a separate submission to the Review Team,
- Universities are cooperating fully with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in the development of the national qualifications framework and of guidelines for access progression and transfer which are informed and driven by a lifelong learner centred approach,

- The university sector has been fully engaged with other higher education interests in progressing developments to meet the Bologna process targets including making the Diploma Supplement available to all students by 2005 and the widespread adoption of ECTS,
- Universities have been actively engaged in a range of initiatives and innovative programmes aimed at widening access and supporting students entering on access programmes in co-operation with primary and postprimary schools.

Recommendations

- Universities to be supported in developing multiple modes of access and the accelerated development of flexible degree structures at primary and post graduate award levels in order to improve programme participation, attractiveness and relevance against rigorous quality standards,
- The restructuring of university courses for flexibility, expressed in modular units and denominated in credits should be further developed into a system more responsive to the increasingly diverse needs and circumstances of students as lifelong learners,
- National targets should be set for increasing access from under-represented groups in society to higher education and realistic financial incentives must be provided for initiatives and mechanism to achieve targets including affirmative action,
- State funding should be restored for a sectoral approach to the development of e-learning for higher education,
- Government should address, as a priority, the perceived inequities in the means assessment testing arrangements for the allocation of student supports as highlighted in Chapter 5 of the report to the Minister for Education and Science *Supporting Equity in Higher Education*, May 2003.

6. Research and Development

Issues

- The welcome major policy and funding emphasis being placed by government on research, and in particular science and technology research, is creating strains in maintaining an acceptable balance between research and teaching, and between the sciences and humanities within the universities,
- The pause of PRTLTI funding by Government caused serious problems for universities in mounting research projects and in recruiting and retaining top quality researchers,
- There are 14 distinct agencies funding research and while there is some co-ordination (through the Merrion Group) there is no forum for the development of national policies,
- Research has shown that with the current levels of investment in research there will be, by 2010, a deficit in the number of postgraduates from the universities to meet the demands of Irish society,
- The development of Ireland as a location for world class research is a marathon and not a sprint. The current level of investment must be sustained and increased if we are to achieve the Barcelona (3%) Target by 2010,
- Currently there is no co-ordinated postgraduate/postdoctoral research training programme,
- The existing system based on the universities as teaching institutions does not facilitate a research career,
- Universities fully support the research funding agencies' use of international peer review for the evaluation of research proposals which benchmarks Irish research internationally,
- The universities have been chosen by the State as the principal locations for public R&D. The institutions are mindful of the associated responsibilities to deliver high quality research output in terms of high quality scientific research, specialised MSc and PhD graduates and facilitating technology transfer to bring about direct economic benefits to Ireland,
- There is the need for universities to extract greater value from research investments by growing academic/industry partnerships.

Initiatives

- The Universities are considering a proposal to create an inter-university school for the training of advanced researchers to professionalise training,
- A career structure for researchers should be developed to provide the conditions, remuneration and incentives needed to attract and retain first class research staff,
- Through C.H.I.U., the universities at a sectoral level have developed initiatives to provide greater academic/industry collaboration such as National Contact office for *Marie Curie Programme, ExpertiseIreland, Researcher Mobility Centre*,
- Universities have developed major and extensive university/industry partnership initiatives and these can be elaborated on during the Review Team's visits to universities.

- Universities and state agencies are working in partnership to create a better environment for technology transfer. Recent initiatives with Enterprise Ireland include development of a patent fund and resourcing technology transfer offices,

Recommendations

- Government should formulate a national policy on R&D that involves all of the stakeholders and responds to the recommendations of the ICSTI Commission for an Overarching Framework on RDI by establishing coherent structures that represent the full spectrum of stakeholders and service providers,
- The partnership between the Universities, government and research funding agencies on national/EU policy and their implementation should be further developed,
- There must be a long-term commitment of government to supporting research involving a joined-up government policy on research. Stop-go financing is damaging to the development of a competitive research infrastructure,
- There must be planned and complementary programmes to fund both research infrastructure and researchers; SFI and PRTLTI programmes must be continued and funding increased if the 3% Barcelona Target is to be met,
- Government should ensure a balanced spread of research investment across disciplines while universities should focus on some areas in order to develop first class research. Investment in a broad base in many areas from Engineering to Humanities must be retained to keep options open for the future. The Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences [IRCHSS] should be established on a more robust basis,
- The full costs of research must be funded; as a first step it is imperative that the recommendations of the Report on Research Overheads are fully implemented immediately,
- Government must lower the administrative barriers to the entry of researchers from abroad, especially from outside the European Union,
- Further initiatives in technology transfer should be developed and financed,
- State agencies should continue to develop programmes such as SFI Centres for Science, Engineering and Technology [CSET] that can bring together universities and industry in strategic research partnerships for their mutual benefit,
- As in the case for the whole of higher education, the benefits of R & D, many of them expressly valued in economic terms, must be coherently stated by government, the higher education sector and the other major stakeholders,
- Government as well as the higher education sector should provide a new impetus for helping the public to understand not only the conventional economic importance of research, but also the importance of the breadth of research that needs to be undertaken.

7. Investment and Financing

Issues

- Because of its rapidly expanding role and ever-rising costs, higher education has increasingly been portrayed as being in direct competition with other education sectors and public services for state funding and has resulted in significant reductions in levels of state funding for higher education and in particular for universities,
- “*The Future Funding of the Irish University Sector*” [C.H.I.U. November 2003] revealed a reduction of €1,240 over 5 years in state funding. Allocations for 2004 represent a shortfall of €800 per student on required state financial levels agreed with the HEA,
- The state capital budget for universities has been reduced drastically over the last three years and no funding has been made available for equipment and maintenance works for 2003 and 2004 thus repeating the errors made in the late 1980s and early 1990s of running down infrastructure,
- Universities, over the last 10 years, have relied heavily for the capital investment on a private donor who has withdrawn from this area of activity,
- There is no provision made in state financing of universities for depreciation of capital stock,
- Financial sustainability, whereby an institution can recover costs and adequately invest in resources at a rate to meet future requirements of students and customers in line with a strategic plan, represents a significant challenge to universities under the current funding regime. One key element of an institution’s financial sustainability is its ability to generate income on operations and to recover costs. Currently, universities are required to operate on a breakeven basis. Recognition by government of the need for financial management of income and resources as distinct from financial administration is required,
- The Economic and Social Research Institute has recently forecast that, based on current projections, the outflow from the Irish higher education system will not meet employment demands for the year 2010,
- The government is failing to take account of the challenges that the significant growth in student enrolments, reported as now being projected, presents for overstretched higher education infrastructure.
- The current practice and philosophy of annual budgets are the antithesis of good planning and damaging to the achievement of all stated and shared objectives,
- To be in the top decile of OECD countries Irish universities’ expenditure per student in 2001 terms would need to be increased by around 60%,
- How universities are to be resourced to meet national objectives is a public policy issue. Over-dependency on state funding limits the university autonomy and its ability to act strategically, flexibly and responsively,
- To become more dynamic and enterprising universities need to diversify their income sources,
- The higher education sector needs to help make clear the benefits of the investment in higher education to each of the stakeholders, and not just in VFM terms,
- The deficiency in the availability of robust costing information at activity level within institutions needs to be tackled on a sector-wide basis to improve decision-making.

Recommendations

- Government must acknowledge the required level of increased investment in universities and if unable to provide it must facilitate greater diversity in income sources including additional income from those benefiting from their services,
- It is essential that additional income is “additional”, and is not a substitute for reduced state investment,
- The financing of universities must support universities as a public good, as an economic investment and as a private good and the state, must provide for investment on a multi-annual basis consistent with the objectives of national higher education policy and aligned to the strategic plans of the universities,
- A flexible and strategic financing model is needed. It should specify outcomes expected, incorporate incentives for national priorities [to replace targeted funding], provide the means for effective macro-management of the system and provide for the balance between autonomy and accountability that empowers institutions and their staffs to take the initiatives necessary to develop and sustain excellence in higher education,
- The funding model should reward universities that diversify income sources,
- The government must recognise the need for universities to adopt a policy of financial sustainability, through a targeted surplus to be attained in addition to meeting costs. In the UK for example 3% of income has been identified as an appropriate target level of reserves which would provide financial flexibility to respond to opportunities or to provide for contingencies,
- A rolling 5 year sectoral plan of €500m is the absolute minimum required for essential development, maintenance and replacement of university infrastructure and equipment to complement required increased investment in the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions [PRTLII] as an integrated part of a national strategic plan for higher education,
- To the extent that commitments to new national priorities represent material changes from current positions, financing approaches must be agreed and incorporate the principle that newly additional undertakings be financed from existing activities.

8. International Competitiveness

Issues

- The overall context must be informed by the unprecedented level and trend of competition, national and international for students and staff,
- The ability of the sector to excel in terms of its international competitiveness is a critical success factor,
- The FGS Paper “*The Future Funding of the Irish University Sector*”, [C.H.I.U. November, 2003] sets out some key international comparators in relation to the financing and performance of higher education. The paper concluded that unless Ireland’s higher education sector improves, its relative international funding position, the consequences for the sector and the country are very serious,
- The IUQB through its activities, nationally and internationally, is promoting the international credibility and standing of the universities quality assurance system,
- the quality of Irish universities’ undergraduates and post graduates is affirmed by the many large multinational companies who employ them, leading to constantly rising expectations, and by their ready acceptance for further studies, research or staff appointments in foreign universities,
- in response to strategically designed and competitive funding universities have shown a readiness to collaborate in order to create the critical mass required to develop excellence,
- increasing importance is being given to international students as a proportion of university enrolment as a benchmark of international standing. The pressure of domestic demand and the scarcity of capital investment have impeded the internationalisation of Irish universities,
- In the internationally competitive market for top class staff the attractiveness of Irish Universities is undermined by inadequate and inconsistent state financing for core activities and facilities,
- The “best” institutions abroad have more investment, more autonomy and operate to best practices standards,
- Irish universities are in direct competition for the best students from first-class overseas universities who are recruiting aggressively in Irish schools.

Recommendations

- International competitiveness should be the benchmark for the sector,
- Policy setting in government and the higher education sector should be done with reference to relevant (upper decile) OECD international benchmarks,
- Government, in partnership with the key interests in the higher education system, must set out and commit to the policies, programmes and related investment strategies required to deliver on the internationally benchmarked targets,
- Attainment of internationally competitive targets will be necessary to retain best students and academic staff in Ireland,

- A holistic approach to increasing the numbers of international students must be taken by government which acknowledges the educational, social, cultural, economic and trade benefits to the country of such a development and facilitates initiatives by universities,
- The development of quality and excellence can be further promoted through strategic funding that provides for peer reviewed competition for funds and promotes inter-disciplinarity and inter-institutional collaboration,
- Government policy, programmes and action in relation to higher education must be informed by the understanding that autonomy underpins the international excellence and competitiveness of the best universities.

Joint Statement by the Irish Universities and Institutes of Technology

The European Commission acknowledges that because they “*are situated at the crossroads of research, education and innovation*” higher education institutions “*in many aspects hold the key to the knowledge economy and society*”.

This new reality of the centrally strategic importance of higher education and research has prompted a world wide re-evaluation of national higher education policies, as acknowledged by the Taoiseach when stating

“Nearly every education system in the developed world is in the middle of an active debate about Third Level policy ... If Ireland were to opt out of this debate it will be selling short the future of the Third Level system and everybody who goes through it.”

The country’s future prosperity and quality of life will clearly increasingly depend on the performance of its higher education system. A critical factor in achieving the high level of performance required is that the Institutions within the system act within a coherent framework and in harmony with each other to serve the economic, social and cultural needs of the country. Key to this is a complementarity, diversity and flexibility of provision responsive to the different and various skills and research needs required for future economic and social development.

The two main sectors in the higher education system the institutes of technology and the universities have proposed a set of principles to underpin development of the system with a view to maximising the combined impact of the sectors in the interests of national development.

National

- The higher education sector must provide a balance of opportunity and provision through consultation among all higher education institutions which includes a maintenance of the diversity of levels, types and varieties of programmes,
- Institutions must be funded to the levels required to meet the Government’s “national strategic objective that Ireland would be in the top rank of the OECD for qualifications in terms of both quality and of participation”,
- Universities and institutes to continue to define, articulate and demonstrate their complementary roles in the context of the development of NQAI procedures for access, progression and transfer,
- The Institutes and universities must facilitate balanced regional development through maintaining and enhancing the potential of higher education institutions, located in the regions, as important hubs and gateways of knowledge and engines of new economic activity within the communities they serve.

Institutional

- Institutions must have management and financial autonomy within agreed budgets,
- Institutions must be fully accountable for the cost effective use of resources in accordance with best practice for management and financial governance,
- Institutions must assiduously implement quality assurance and improvement procedures provided for under legislation to demonstrate the quality of the Irish higher education system nationally and internationally,
- Institutions, as part of the social compact which affords them autonomy and their staff academic freedom, must encourage and facilitate their staffs engagement in research dialogue and debate and develop among their students the skills for, and commitment to, civic participation.

Higher Education Sector

- Institutes and universities to systematically examine and articulate, on a programme by programme basis, arrangements for transfer and progression between respective courses,
- Universities and institutes, in developing proposals for new courses, to take full account of existing courses in both sectors in the relevant subject areas and to maximise opportunities for cooperation and avoid duplication. Funding to be available for joint development and delivery of courses,
- Networks of academics in related disciplines across the sectors to be systematically promoted in the interest of developing excellence and critical mass of expertise,
- Institutes and universities in the same region to cooperate in addressing the question of access,
- Universities and institutes in the same region to actively engage in dialogue with the primary, post-primary and further education sectors in developing a cohesive and integrated education sector in the region,
- With a view to developing a critical mass of research excellence in niche areas and to maximising its impact on regional development, universities and institutes of technology to explore all possibilities for collaboration in preparing proposals for research funding,
- Institutes and universities to develop linkages with business and industry which would combine their complementary teaching, research and consultancy expertise and skills in the interests of maximising social and economic development,
- Universities and institutes to cooperate at a national level in developing e-learning service for higher and further education,
- Institutes and universities to develop jointly staff training programmes and exchange and mobility arrangements for staff,
- Universities and Institutes to explore all possibilities for shared use of physical facilities, including equipment, for mounting courses and research projects.