



National Framework for Guidance

Submission to the Department of Education consultation by the Irish Universities Association (IUA)

1. Introduction

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Education consultation on a new National Framework for Guidance. We particularly welcome that this consultation is the result of a cross-departmental effort to address the need for lifelong guidance arising from the Indecon Review of Career Guidance in 2018. Progress towards an inclusive framework and targeted actions will support the work of the universities to engage with and support learners across their lifetime.

2. Context

The eight universities represented by the IUA have dedicated careers services that are continuously evolving to meet the needs of a diverse body of students, offering opportunities for personal and professional development. These services support a range of activities, including accessing and navigating relevant up-to-date information, providing diagnostic and digital tools, as well as one-to-one guidance, coaching, and employability advice.

Careers and guidance services in the Irish universities have developed a significant body of expertise on graduate attributes, employability skills, curriculum development, and enterprise engagement that supports the rapidly changing needs of individual learners, enterprise, the economy, and wider society. Through their expansive enterprise engagement across all sectors of the economy, university careers services have developed specialisms that support students in a range of settings, inform labour market needs analysis, and support employer recruitment efforts nationally and internationally. These services are uniquely placed at the interface of transitions from second to

third level, between third level institutions, and from third level to the workplace, as well as forming an integral part of the student journey during their time university.

3. Overall response to the consultation paper

The IUA welcomes the broad overview provided in the consultation paper published in January 2023. We would like to provide some relevant observations for the further development of the framework:

- The cross-sectoral effort to develop this framework is very welcome, providing an opportunity for better connection and coordination across the guidance profession in future.
- The shift in focus to guidance as a lifelong endeavour to support lifelong learning is a very positive development. There is now an opportunity to create an agreed and inclusive vision for lifelong learning cross-sectorally, recognising that many stakeholders have a part to play in making culture, policy and practice a reality.
- The five strategic objectives, guiding principles, and four pillars are a strong starting point for developing a more cohesive and coordinated approach to lifelong guidance.

4. Lifelong Guidance for Lifelong Learning

The IUA welcomes the focus on guidance as a lifelong endeavour and notes the potential opportunities to increase participation across the offering of full-time, part-time and flexible learning pathways, as well ensuring access and inclusion efforts are strategically supported by better guidance services for learners at all stages in their learning and development. The framework should be underpinned by guidance principles that support the capacity of the individual to make informed choices, matching their ambitions and interests to their personal and professional development, ensuring guidance provides avenues to satisfaction across their life and work.

5. Information and Guidance Provision

The IUA welcomes work by DFHERIS to conceive and develop a single portal for career guidance and information. The portal development should be clearly linked to the creation of the strategic framework and assist the cross-departmental approach. The single portal and the framework will need to reflect the diverse offering of the universities, including relevant information and links to the CAO and the full range of upskilling and reskilling opportunities, including micro-credentials. Assisting individuals and guidance professionals to more easily navigate and map potential pathways through learning, particularly between FET and HE, should be a core aim of the framework and the

portal. Enhancing access to higher education remains a central aim of the universities, DFHERIS and the HEA, so ensuring guidance can support better navigation of the range of potential choices is critical.

The IUA recognises that lifelong guidance should begin as early as practicable, including at primary level, however there are certain critical points on the life journey that require additional resourcing. In particular, the framework should support increased career guidance counselling at second level, reflecting the findings of the Indecon report that most young people begin to consider their options at Junior Cycle level. Robust early guidance should aim to foster a culture of returning to guidance services across an individual's lifetime. In turn, this may provide significant opportunities to collaborate with university careers services and to increase the capacity of these services to engage across sectors.

The Indecon report did not adequately reflect the uniquely placed role that university careers services play in supporting individuals to make informed choices that in turn supports their continued wellbeing through education and training, and into the workplace. The underinvestment in higher education over the last decade, as recognised by Government in 2022, means that these services are under significant strain to meet the ever-increasing needs of a diverse and growing body of students at various stages of their life journey. Delivery on Government's commitment of an additional €307 million annually to bring HE funding back up to an acceptable level will go a significant way towards ensuring that university guidance services can meet these needs. In addition, any targeted initiatives arising from the new framework should support university careers services to play a key role in the national effort to support lifelong guidance.

6. National Coordination and Evidence

It is crucial that guidance is resourced and staffed at the national level to ensure accessibility, continued relevance, and information exchange across sectors. Such a national service could provide professional development to key sectors in education, youth, and employment, bridging gaps in knowledge and resource. Furthermore, a robust national approach can support those who influence the learning and careers choices of others, such as parents and guardians, equipping them with the tools and information to support effective decision-making.

A new framework, underpinned by a possible single portal, creates an opportunity to produce a robust evidence-base on the careers and skills ambitions of potential and current learners. Such data could be used to better inform individual choice, education providers, guidance professionals, policymakers, as well as enterprise and could assist in addressing national skills needs in future.

Indeed, the cross-sectoral effort identified in the development of this framework is a real opportunity to collaborate with employment-based guidance services in developing an evidence-base for future initiatives in education and training. Evidence will also ensure that guidance provision is of high quality, effective and meeting individual needs to inform ongoing development.

Existing good practice and expertise across sectors should be reflected in the next phases of the framework development and implementation. University career services work directly with students across learning pathways, both undergraduate and postgraduate, full-time and part-time/flexible, international students, and students from across the diversity of under-represented access cohorts. These inclusive practices can support the wider national framework to achieve targeted actions.

7. Enterprise Engagement and Skills

Across the eight IUA universities there is a significant and growing base of enterprise and industry engagement, across all sectors, supporting the development of talent and skills. These efforts support learning for emerging and future skills needs, work-based learning and apprenticeships, to address skills gaps in key industries and public services, as well as in smaller sectors with often specific skills and CPD needs. A robust national approach to guidance should provide greater opportunities for enterprise and employers to identify and to address skills and competency needs, with tools and support for both employers and employees to identify relevant education and training opportunities. Emerging evidence from the IUA MicroCreds project has identified a significant decision-making lead-in time for individuals seeking upskilling or reskilling opportunities for their professional development, emphasising the importance of guidance for the workforce to achieve their individual ambitions. Furthermore, stronger guidance tools for use by enterprise can support early career graduate skills development, recognising that this cohort often requires guidance to navigate their early career choices.

Increasing awareness and accessibility of recognition of prior learning, building on the work of the national RPL project funded under HCI Pillar 3, should likewise be a key component of the framework.

8. Additional Opportunities

The framework must be inclusive of ambitions to drive participation in research and innovation, promoting postgraduate and continuous professional development pathways. It is acknowledged nationally and internationally that the majority of researchers trained in academia will ultimately continue their careers outside the university, in both private and public sectors. Engaging in

research-led education and employment could be more broadly promoted to potential students across their lifetimes.

The framework is also an opportunity to promote key national ambitions such as increased international mobility, volunteering, language skills, Erasmus + and internships. An international experience for example is explicitly linked to the development of skills that are transferrable to the workplace such as confidence, linguistic, communication skills and cultural awareness.

9. Key Recommendations

- The new framework for guidance must be inclusive of higher education careers services and professional practice to achieve the aim of providing guidance on a lifelong basis.
- To develop an ambitious lifelong guidance model across all sectors of education and employment, resources will be required. For Higher Education, this requires delivery of the Government commitment of an additional €307 million annually to make good the funding gap.
- Given the diversity of distinct, yet related practices across careers provision, consideration should be given to the constitution of an expert-led group on lifelong guidance that could support the development, implementation, and review of the new framework.
- The development of the framework should occur in tandem with the creation of the DFHERIS-led 'single portal' for career guidance and information. The IUA recommends that this national 'single portal' act as a catalyst to encourage further cross-sectoral collaboration.