

## **Minutes of the High Level Group Meeting on International Education**

**Thursday, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020 at 2:30pm**

*Refer to Annex 1 for list of Attendees*

### **Introductions**

The Chair welcomed the members of the group and outlined the format of the meeting.

### **Minutes of the last meeting for approval**

The minutes of the last HLG meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2020 were circulated prior to the commencement of the meeting and it was requested that any observations be returned to DES by COB Friday, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2020.

### **Update on COVID-19 Working Group**

The Chair advised that a number of working groups have been established to help deal with the Covid pandemic issues that the tertiary education sector are facing. The International Education Working Group has been meeting weekly to deal specifically with issues arising in the international education sector due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A letter from the Minister, addressed to our international partners, was issued via our embassy network. This communication also included an infographic aimed at reassuring prospective international students, illustrating the measures that the Irish Government is taking to ensure international students' safety.

A separate group on English language education has also been established and common issues faced are around immigration and access to social protection measures health advice and accommodation. Both groups are working to address these issues.

THEA requested an update on the situation in relation to international students' health insurance.

The chair responded by thanking those who have sent in data in response to the Department's request for information on health insurance claims but noted that information is still missing and a gap analysis is currently underway.

The Chair referred to the recent outcome of the health insurance court case in which the Court of Appeal ruled in favour of the HIA (with the exception of a technical point on notice). HECA raised concerns that the health insurance issue will impact negatively on Ireland's positive international reputation and the good work being done in the sector.

MEI made some observations outlining the affect the current crisis is having on the English language sector and the issues being experienced by its members. A document outlining these observations will be circulated by MEI post meeting.

### **Update on evaluation of 2016-2020 Strategy**

The department recently met with Indecon, the consultancy firm tasked with reviewing the Strategy, and agreed to extend the delivery date for the report, due to the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Indecon informed the department that all members of the HLG have been contacted to input into the evaluation. However, not all members have been in a position to provide information up to this point and had requested an extension to the deadline date up to 30<sup>th</sup> May 2020. The department agreed to this extension but requested that those who can respond to the survey by 20<sup>th</sup> May would do so.

The department has requested that Indecon prioritise the Cost Benefit Analysis piece as up-to-date information and costings are necessary to enable the department and the sector to make informed decisions into the future.

### **Recruitment 2020/21 – intentions, challenges and scenario at this stage**

The department is currently working on submissions in relation to specific funding to respond to the crisis and also in relation to estimates for next year. A clear indication of the current situation and the proposed plans in relation to student recruitment are required from the sector.

THEA advised that the situation varies from institution to institution and that some members have queried if there is a national policy stance in relation to scenario planning?

IUA advised they are currently working on scenario planning and stressed that it would be beneficial to have the national position on Erasmus. IUA plan a start date for undergraduates between November and January and for post-graduates roughly the end of September. A January start date would, however, have implications on the start of the following academic year. Another issue they face is around visas; the uncertainty makes it difficult to plan and the message being received from international partners is that solely online learning is not attractive, in particular for the China and India markets. They are, however, still campaigning for new students and everything they had intended to do face to face is now being done online.

The chair asked the IUA to write to the Department to outline their concerns and advised that the Department would assist in whatever way possible.

D/Justice advised that they have been communicating with the IUA in relation to the Third Level Graduate scheme, and that a number of concerns have been discussed and resolved. D/Justice agreed that the best way to move forward would be for the IUA to outline, in writing, their concerns and this can be addressed by the relevant departments or organisations.

Similarly, HECA stated that recruitment varies from institute to institute. They advised there are still a lot of questions from students in relation to course delivery methods and there have been concerns expressed in relation to the courses being undertaken online or even blended. HECA also raised concerns in relation to border controls and visas.

MEI advised they have no roadmap until flights are running again, but stated that start dates for their courses are flexible. MEI are concerned about the 14 day self-quarantine policy for students wishing to come here to study short-term courses, as it means they will be spending a considerable amount of time in quarantine if they choose to go home at any point e.g. for Christmas.

QQI queried why students are against online or blended learning and asked if their concerns are around the quality and standard of an online course in comparison to being in the classroom, or that they are missing out on experience.

EI advised they held a live Q&A session with 18 institutions. Each institution had their own virtual room where students could ask questions in relation to the 2020/21 academic year. The session lasted roughly 1.5 hours and in that time 5122 students visited and asked 2200 questions. EI are sifting through the questions at present and they are providing great insight in relation to what the students are thinking. Some of the questions were around start dates, online delivery etc. Again, students expressed that they are not in favour of online learning.

EI and the institutions are exploring how recruitment and learning might look for 2021/22 and beyond. There is no desire from the institutions to pull back on recruitment.

TUD are focusing efforts on new entrants in order to give them the best experience they can. TUD's recruitment plans will be determined by travel restrictions. In relation to the online aspect, they have been receiving applications and again, it is clear that online learning is not favoured. Students have outlined that online learning where there would be more interaction with group projects etc. would be preferred over recorded lectures and downloading notes.

TUD students who can't travel due to restrictions, and who won't make the start date of their course, will be given the option to partake online until a time that they can travel. The option of blended learning will also be made available, in particular for laboratory subjects.

CHOICE usually travel as part of their recruitment process. This is not possible at present and so will now be focusing on relationships with agents and online recruitment.

RCSI advised that their recruitment is progressing well and aim to start their courses between September and November with staggered start times and will prioritise first year students. RCSI also noted that an isolation period could be problematic and that the 2 metre social distance rule will reduce capacity by over 80%.

### **Erasmus**

HEA do not anticipate suspension of the Erasmus programme and advised every effort is being made to keep in running. Numbers will be affected and blended learning is being considered for semester one, with a hope of greater mobility for semester two. HEA has provided institutions with information on financial implications of cancelled mobility's and have also offered the HEIs an extension of their contracts from 16 to 24 months. The EU Commission has given a lot of autonomy with the focus being on flexibility and ensuring students are dealt with in a positive manner. An impact on the budget for the new Erasmus Programme, due to start 2021, is to be expected.

D/Justice requested that they be given start dates, student numbers and details on course delivery methodology, for visa purposes.

The chair advised that, as it stands, medical costs incurred by international students who come to Ireland to study and contract Covid 19, will be covered.

### **Strategic planning for period ahead**

The department is planning to create an interim strategy, covering 18-24 months, to assist the sector in getting through the current crisis. The current evaluation will form the basis of the new strategy and stakeholder consultations will take place in due course.

HEA agrees with this interim approach. It will allow us to see what approach the rest of Europe will take as we start to come out of the pandemic and will give time to receive more clarity around the impact on the Leaving Cert and enrolments. HEA suggested exploring other ways of keeping international collaboration alive and to look at strategic partnerships that could be created.

The department advised that the strategy will take a holistic approach and will not just focus on recruitment. We will look at international cooperation at a government-to-government level and look at MOUs and other policies we can put in place to deepen relations. The chair requested ideas from the sector as to how we can continue to make Ireland an attractive place to study and how we can minimise the decrease in international student numbers for the next academic year.

## **AOB**

THEA requested a time frame for planned opening dates of visa offices in China and India. D/Justice will follow up with THEA on this.

## ***Annex 1***

### **Attendees**

Vincent Landers (Chair)	DES
Alan O'Callaghan	DES
Orla Dowling	DES
Roseann Gilligan	DES
Meadhbh Devilly	DES
Padraig Hennigan	DES
Chris Monahan	DES
Joe Gleeson	DES
Roma Osbourne	DES
Holly Cowman	CHOICE
Lilianna O'Reilly	QQI
Mary Simpson	THEA
Miriam Ryan	THEA
Aileen Marron	HEA
Robert Flood	TUD
Sarah Lennon	ICOS IRL
Micheál Rooney	D/Justice
Maria Nash	SFI
Adrian Devitt	RCSI
Maria Keane	ASAPI
Tom Doyle	D/Justice
David O'Grady	MEI
Michael McGarry	MEI

Daniel Liddy	D/Justice
Niall Brady	DFA
Thomas Stone	TUD
Bryan Maguire	QQI
Gerry O'Sullivan	HEA
Giles O'Neill	EI
Maria Melia	DTTAS
Patricia O'Sullivan	HECA
Megan Reilly	USI
Fedelma	IUA
Jennifer Cleary	IUA

### **Apologies**

Keith Moynes	DES
Angela Long	DES
Tim Conlon	HEA
Diarmuid Hegarty	HECA
Lewis Purser	IUA
Michael Lonergan	DFA
Jim Murray	THEA
Lorna Fitzpatrick	USI
Philip Curtis	RCSI