

Minutes of the High Level Group Meeting on International Education

Friday, 9th October 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.

Impact of COVID-19 – ongoing efforts to deal with pandemic in international education

The Chair invited members to provide an update in relation to the return of international students to Ireland and the processes around that. Members were also asked to detail any particular problems they may be experiencing and any issues with specific markets or countries.

The IUA advised that the meet and greet service and supports provided were of great benefit and extended their thanks. A number of institutions are receiving regular emails regarding mental health and wellbeing of students who are no longer studying on campus, but remotely. IUA queried what a student's visa status would be if they decided to return home.

THEA also extended their thanks for the support of the meet and greet service. The feedback received is that the process was challenging and required support when resources were scarce. As a result, many of the institutions are now planning not to take any more students for semester 2. Issues presented include access to COVID tests for non-EEA students. In terms of countries where difficulties arose, some students have experienced difficulties with visa processing and this needs to be looked at. Finally, THEA requested an update in relation to English language testing for the coming academic year.

HECA thanked the department for their support thus far. An ongoing issue for HECA members is visa processing, and students moving from a stamp 2 to a graduate visa are experiencing delays. HECA asked for this to be prioritised and also queried whether semester 2 might be delivered online to give students more flexibility if they are not in a position to travel.

MEI advised over 80% of their members have opened for face-to-face learning, which presents a challenge. MEI are working with the department to update documentation and are hoping to establish a reopening protocol similar that that followed by schools. MEI also mentioned that embassies in some parts of the world are not processing any new visa applications for English language students at present.

USI advised that the main issue for students is clarity around the delivery of courses for remainder of the academic year, and that international students are paying for accommodation despite courses being delivered remotely. USI advised there needs to be recognition of this and the significant impact COVID-19 has had on students, and supports need to be put in place to assist with this impact.

The Chair requested that members send their issues into the department in writing so these can be followed up by the relevant departments and agencies. A number of the issues mentioned are currently being worked on and efforts are being made to resolve them.

New Department FHERIS – Update on developments

The department is currently awaiting government sign off on the transfer of functions and then the legislation can start to move through, making it officially a department, in legal terms. The budgets are also currently being negotiated.

The programme for government in the new department will incorporate research, innovation and science, as well as the higher and further education portfolios. It is envisaged that a more ambitious role around Higher Education, Research and Innovation on the international stage will be taken and government is very keen for the plans around this to succeed. At the heart of this is the concept that research and higher education should be delivered much more collaboratively.

A request will issue to stakeholders shortly around input into the new Statement of Strategy for DFHERIS.

The management board of the department and the Minister are actively engaged in the first part of an action plan which will set the high level strategic direction and priorities, to include targets and dates.

Update on International Education Strategy planning

Due to current circumstances, there won't be a new strategy in place by the end of 2020 as originally planned. Reflection was needed to ensure that the department could create a meaningful strategic plan, taking into consideration the issues presented due to COVID-19 and the innovation and research aspects of the new department.

Within the strategic plan, it will be important to factor in the learnings from the past number of months to ensure a meaningful plan is created. The plan should focus on actions and targets. Stakeholders should consider the impact that Brexit will have on our HEIs, keeping in mind the Government's All Island approach around education and research.

The HEA discussed the importance of the Erasmus programme and the progress that has been made, although the programme for the next 7 years has yet to be finalised. The HEA will delay their strategy until they have greater clarity around the Erasmus Programme.

The HEA have addressed the imbalance in those accessing the programme and in the last 5 years have increased the number of SUSI grant recipients engaged in the programme from 6% to 17%. They sought support from the EU to assist in retaining funding received for projected numbers, which did not materialise due to the pandemic. It is expected that these numbers will be realised when the situation normalises.

The Chair advised that Ireland is very ambitious when it comes to Erasmus for the next period. Government is actively working on a number of areas which the department hopes will increase funding and opportunities for Irish students wishing to engage in Erasmus and students wishing to study here as part of the programme.

The Chair advised that the final draft report of the review of the International Education Strategy should be received shortly. The review, which on the whole is very positive, will be published and will be used as the basis for the creation of the new strategy.

HECA noted that the UK have seen an increase in their international student numbers and we should look at what they are doing, as globally the numbers are reducing due to the pandemic. The Chair advised that, as part of the review, there will be a focus on the UK as one of our competitors.

Marketing and Promotion for HE sector

IUA are advising students that Ireland is still open, albeit online for the moment. IUA are training staff in relation to digital marketing to prepare them for the next round of recruitment. IUA directors have had initial discussions with EI around this. It is proposed that Ireland should be actively working on promotion and communication, and a working group be established comprising members of the HLG. Each stakeholder should put forward a director and a marketing and communications person to represent their institution.

EI outlined that in recent months, given the circumstances, much care has been taken in relation to communication and promotional activity. There has been significant involvement from the HEIs and the wider Team Ireland, and the level of collaboration and cooperation has been immense.

As we move into the recruitment cycle for 2021/22, EI have developed regional plans which have been reviewed and created with the sector. Budgets have been reviewed in order to assist HEIs and further funding has been secured.

EI expressed the need to establish an operations group around the proposed 2 year strategy to assist the sector in agreeing what needs to be done, in the short term, in terms of recovery to establish Ireland's position worldwide. Ireland is coming from a very strong position and this needs to be built on.

The Chair welcomed the comments from both the IUA and EI and advised that, if further funding is required from the department, the need must be expressed in the coming days. The department is open to participation in the working group.

CHOICE commended the work already carried out by EI and the department. They acknowledged the need to protect our reputation and stressed the importance of communication and of managing expectations.

AOB

Stamp 1G Visas

DFHERIS advised correspondence was received from the IUA in relation to this issue and have raised this with colleagues in D/Justice, where discussions have begun in order to try and reach a resolution.

Access to GP services and COVID testing

DFHERIS have contacted D/Health who advised that this is not a policy issue but an administrative one, and every person in the country who needs access to a GP for a COVID test is entitled to one free of charge.

International Student Health Insurance

THEA, along with HECA and the IUA, met with some insurance providers in relation to this issue. THEA advised that there is still a significant increase in the cost of health insurance for international students and in the interests of promotion, this needs to be pursued to see if there is another solution available.

DFHERIS welcomed the meetings that have taken place with health insurance providers. The department's preference is that the insurance market would react to the court ruling and provide affordable rates and suitable policies for international students.

THEA advised they are continuing to work on the issue and there will be webinars and presentations with some of the insurance providers next week.

The Chair encouraged the sector to proceed with the work on the health insurance issue and to provide the department with updates from the upcoming scheduled meetings.

Annex 1

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisation</i>
<i>Vincent Landers</i>	DFHERIS
<i>Alan O'Callaghan</i>	DFHERIS
<i>Padraig Hennigan</i>	DFHERIS
<i>Roseann Gilligan</i>	DFHERIS
<i>Meadhbh Devilly</i>	DFHERIS
<i>Daniel Liddy</i>	D/Justice
<i>Niall Brady</i>	DFA
<i>Sean O'Connor</i>	D/Transport
<i>Jennifer Cleary</i>	IUA
<i>Thomas Stone</i>	TUD
<i>Robert Flood</i>	TUD
<i>Miriam Ryan</i>	THEA
<i>Aileen Marron</i>	HEA
<i>Gerry O'Sullivan</i>	HEA
<i>Liliana O'Reilly</i>	QQI
<i>Patricia O'Sullivan</i>	HECA
<i>Holly Cowman</i>	Mary I
<i>Maria Nash</i>	SFI
<i>Colm O'Byrne</i>	MEI
<i>David O'Grady</i>	MEI
<i>Adrian Devitt</i>	RCSI
<i>Giles O'Neill</i>	EI
<i>Darragh O'Briain</i>	ASAPI
<i>Lorna Fitzpatrick</i>	USI

Apologies

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisation</i>
<i>Keith Moynes</i>	DFHERIS
<i>Maev Nic Lochlainn</i>	DFHERIS
<i>Tom Doyle</i>	D/Justice
<i>Maria Melia</i>	D/Transport
<i>Bryan Maguire</i>	QQI
<i>Philip Curtis</i>	RCSI
<i>Maria Nash</i>	ASAPI
<i>Jim Murray</i>	THEA
<i>Tim Conlon</i>	HEA
<i>Lewis Purser</i>	IUA