

Submission on the draft National Planning Framework document on behalf of the Technological Higher Education Association, being the representative and advocacy body for the 14 institutes of technology in Ireland

09 November 2017

The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) welcomes this opportunity provided by the Minister and Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, to contribute to this most important national conversation. We compliment the work of the department and the many who have had input to the draft to date and trust that the commentary here will be received as being critically constructive.

Consistent with the foreword to the draft National Planning Framework, it is prudent to anticipate and plan in a proactive way for the changes our country is likely to experience over the next generation. Recent years have seen a shift from specific strategies to a series of interlocking action plans and the location of these within an overarching framework is advisable. By its nature, a framework sets out a broad landscape and, given its scope, is less specific than a sector-specific action plan. But the framework, if it is to be relevant, needs some degree of concrete focus and the criticism that one might respectfully offer of the current draft is that it is somewhat shy in this area. THEA would advocate that the framework be bolder and more focused in ambition.

Concerning the scope of the NPF, one of the early debates centred on whether this was exclusively a follow-on to the previous National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 (November 2002). The latter has attracted some bad press and the initial fear was that there would be reputational leakage into this iteration. That view is not shared here. The National Spatial Strategy and manner of its implementation attracted justified criticism but it also marked a significant milestone for the country. However, the debate on this occasion might be more about the scope of what one requires from a framework. The THEA position is that a framework, if it is to be inclusive, must be about more than just a spatial strategy. It of course comprehends the latter, but is not confined to it. We should be talking about the quality of life for all of citizens for the coming two decades and about the infrastructure and facilities that we require to realize that ambition. THEA acknowledges that this spirit informed the sessions in which this organization was privileged to partake.

Government must be acknowledged for the inclusive manner in which a suite of policy papers has been developed over recent years. We have a series of interlinking action plans and as a people we are improving at the implementation and impact assessment of same. However, speaking from a higher education perspective, one of the frustrations is an apparent lack of coherence between such policies at

certain junctures. One good example was focused upon at a recent consultation on the Action Plan for Jobs. In debating the skills requirements, a diverse group of stakeholders couldn't but focus on the barriers in respect of housing; no matter how pressing or worthy, some actions have prerequisites or interdependencies that often involve a number of departments. It is appreciated that all of these matters are dynamic and one objective of a framework might be in helping to align various policies. This coordination is also contingent on some agreed and consistent approach to geographical designation; aligning the Dublin and the wider Eastern and Midland area into a single entity should have implications for a whole range of plans and substructures. As example, in recent times within the higher education space, we had had a range of commendable endeavours but some of these are potentially in conflict: clusters, regional skills fora, and technological universities are all good things but the question is how might they best align; locating these within an overarching framework with a defined focus can assist.

In a recent and related letter to Minister Eoghan Murphy T.D., I commended the work that underpinned this draft plan. On behalf of the THEA community, I also stated that the discussions to which I was privileged to be a party as component of this process were compelling and robust. They were notable in their agreement on the centrality of education as a catalyst for both regional and national sustainability. There was also discussion around the manner in which the National Planning Framework is significant as a unifying spine for a suite of other national policy initiatives that can benefit from the integration within a more holistic policy context. At a specific level, the advance in the Technological Universities Bill was noted and, at the time of writing, there are four consortia currently electing to pursue this path. I mention this as prelude to the comment that education might better be represented in the final report. It would be unfair to claim that education does not feature currently; there are many mentions and Section 5.6 directly addresses Education and Life Long Learning. Within the latter, there is specific mention of the potential inherent in the development of technological universities. However, although the putative entities with ambition in this space are now known, they are not named. I can appreciate the sensitivities, but a plan that fails to engage with the detail is open to criticism. There is specific reference to the DIT campus at Grangegorman as a critical flagship infrastructural project but this is outside of any mention of the core drive to realize the Technological University for Dublin which has the potential to be a game-changer in respect of access and scope of provision and not alone in the greater metropolitan region. There is no mention at all of the potential that technological universities might have on the west and north-west, the south and south-west, or on the south-east. It is appreciated that what will result here is a framework but there is scope, I propose, to add a little more flesh to the education bone.

With a reach that extends right across the country, the institutes of technology are active in driving a research and innovation agenda that responds to the needs of regional development, promotion of indigenous SMEs, and they can help sustain and grow foreign direct investment. They were designed to meet the needs of the labour market and strengthen regional economies. Taken as a sector, the institutes of technology have played a pivotal role in the social and economic transformation in Ireland over the past five decades; some have a tradition of serving their community for far longer. The range of the technological sector's provision – through the upper reaches of the National Framework for Qualifications to PhD level, and including significant commitment to skills development and apprenticeship - together with its student-centred focus and emphasis on 'knowledge in use,' ensures that it is not only responsive to industry and enterprise, but also to meeting the public objectives of enhancing higher education participation and access for the most disadvantaged in society. This has

included their contribution in widening access and participation in higher education, in enabling a regional provision, in supporting economic development both through indigenous innovation and in responding to the needs of FDI and in advancing Ireland's reputation as an international education destination.

The broader role of our diversified higher education landscape, currently being extended in a most exciting manner through the creation of technological universities, should be more foregrounded in the NPF as a catalyst for balanced regional sustainability and development. This was an element of their original purpose and given that this is a core objective of the current discussion, the plan might be bolder in reflecting this. Similarly the skills agenda, a most important consideration in an economy that needs to be flexible and diversified, is not adequately reflected in the draft plan. Where skills are mentioned in the graphic on p.77, they are linked to various levels of the educational spectrum but with no mention of the institutes. The NPF should be comprehensive and should name the critical players inclusively; it should celebrate the advent of technological universities and equally leverage the additional potential within those institutes of technology that elect to maintain their current mission. Collectively and with the right supports and funding, the entities that comprise the technological sector have the ambition and capacity to drive, support, and sustain population growth by empowering communities to grow, access education of the highest standard, and achieve their economic independence in a location of choice. In order to achieve this aspiration, they must in turn be recognized, supported, and financed in such a way as to guarantee their sustainability, competitiveness, and future development. Moreover, and this is presumably the function of a national framework, they must be facilitated in their integration with their own communities and economy.

It is axiomatic that higher education institutions, whether universities or institutes of technology, will be at the heart of Ireland's social and economic life into the future. Developed societies around the world recognize the pivotal role of higher education, with its combination of research, scholarship, and graduate output, as the engine of their economies; as central to providing opportunity to their citizens; and in building more cohesive societies. The institutes have now carved out a distinctive, differentiated role within the overall Irish higher education landscape which sees them making an indispensable contribution to these goals.

The state has been strongly supportive of the technological sector; this we freely acknowledge and in turn the sector wishes to play its full part in the National Planning Framework under discussion. Following the privations of the downturn, the Government's recent announcement of €200m capital funding is the first such announcement of economic support for the sector in more than ten years and has been widely and unanimously welcomed and lauded as the beginning of a resumed expansion and support for the sector. This announcement comes at what should be the beginning of further growth in the sector if the aspirations of the National Planning Framework are to be realized. Investment in, and support for, the sector has the potential to return exponential benefits in terms of population support and industrial development and should be an explicit commitment enshrined in the National Planning Framework document itself.

One of the significant points of discussion at the outset of this process was the distinction between the concepts of equity and equivalence. The draft National Planning Framework acknowledges that *investment cannot effectively occur everywhere (Preface p16), it must be located where all of Ireland's people can best be served and spatial choices made on that basis.* THEA recognizes this position. It is

clearly correct that we cherish all our citizens equally but it is similarly clear that the state cannot provide exactly the same infrastructure or access throughout the land. The network of institutes of technology are perfectly placed to assist in regional sustainability, supporting not only the key urban centres, but also the towns identified as investment hubs and these should be signalled within the strategy as significant vehicles for achieving growth through investment and as seminal drivers for the sustainability of regions.

At the heart of the matter is page 69, section 4.6 of the draft plan which states: Facilitating the development of the enterprise and local economy to allow for the creation of a wider variety of employment opportunities will include building on the continued education of those living in rural areas. Capitalising on local assets, including human natural and cultural capital can raise the natural, social, cultural, economic and digital potential of rural areas and help foster policy coherence. Opportunities for upskilling through the presence of further education and training opportunists as well as the flexible delivery of higher education qualifications (including blended online, part-time or outreach) will be important to securing and accessing employment within the rural areas.

The Technological Higher Education Association compliments the work to date on the NPF. It advocates more focus and ambition in respect of education and skills given their key importance. As final example, the plan references the Action Plan for Rural Development but fails to recognize other plans such as the Action Plan for Education. It is the interrelationship between all of these worthy initiatives that is important. A framework needs to be inclusive and the opportunity to align a broad set of policies should not be lost.

You will have the fullest support of the THEA community as you bring this work to conclusion and we wish you well for it.

Dr Joseph Ryan

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