

Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 28th September 2015

The HEA welcomed Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which the process operates. DIT was invited to provide an update on institutional progress.

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) reported that they were broadly happy to have met their targets despite some pressing issues on funding and maintaining their capital base. DIT noted that the research funding environment has also declined, in that the number of individual grants available has fallen off which challenges research targets. Other challenges, external to DIT, on the development of Grangegorman (such as exiting existing buildings) also remain and need to be resolved. Non-membership of the Irish Research eLibrary initiative (IREL) is also a challenge to DIT as the alternative comes with considerable costs and causes difficulties for the institute in terms of financial risk and cost in supporting the research agenda. In respect of the latter, correspondence has been submitted by DIT on a number of occasions and DIT reiterated the importance of having this matter resolved.

On the shared TU objective (TU4D), DIT is growing postgraduate numbers so as to meet targets, but there is a concern that RGAM funding won't sustain activities. This places DIT and their partners at a distinct disadvantage in pursuing their strategic goals, particularly around TU, as they consider the weighting of 1.8 per research student in the IoT sector to be inconsistent with the weighting of 3 applied in the university sector. In response to the need to reconcile the treatment of research students across both sectors, the HEA pointed to the fact that the unit cost data currently indicates that the current weightings are appropriate to the sector. In addition, a change in research weighting could affect funding for other elements of provision in the IoT sector. The HEA indicated that this area will be reviewed as part of a wider review of the funding of higher education during 2016.

The HEA invited DIT to set out performance benchmarking efforts. DIT responded that this is important in the context of the framework for the new TU4D and they set their strategic targets in the context of those it seeks to emulate. DIT looks at Ryerson or RMIT as comparators, Ryerson in particular as it is situated in the comparable city region of Toronto. They also seek to benchmark aspects of their business too; they benchmark their arts education provision in a Canadian context and their technological institute performance with Austrian comparators. Purdue in Indiana also provides a comparison on systems and policy approaches. DIT considered a benchmark for processes too, but see this as a bit rear view as it is a measure of past practice so not always helpful. DIT noted that their comparative performance also acts as a benchmark for others.

More generally on benchmarks, DIT noted the HEA's earlier comment that percentage-based compact targets might not be fully reflective of the breadth of access activity undertaken by

the institution, particularly targeting socio-economic target groups. They discussed the qualitative aspects of DIT's work and advised that the targets are reflective of objectives featured in the National Access Plan and future targets will be developed in the context of the National Strategy.

More generally and arising out of TU4D process, DIT has held in-depth conversations with their partners and every appointment now comes with a manpower plan to contextualise the appointment within the emergent TU4D as a benchmarking requirement.

The HEA noted challenges on meeting postgraduate research enrolment and research funding targets. DIT provided an overview of their Research Action Plan (RAP). DIT again noted the RGAM weighting for PhDs as a challenge to their delivery of research student numbers. While they are expanding their doctoral programme, seeking a significant increase in numbers will be challenging in that context. Constraints exist in accessing appropriate funding from IRC and SFI. While the RGAM model works well in some cases it doesn't favour all institutions equally. DIT continues to look for opportunities nationally and internationally, seeking to leverage existing research income to grow new initiatives, but as an institution they feel they are disadvantaged. DIT has come from PRTL funded environment and have seen end to IOT funding so again are challenged in achieving targets. The sources of funding that were there at start of the strategic plan are now gone.

More generally, the funding environment is imbalanced in DIT's view as weightings are not advantageous to their model where 60% of provision is in SET areas (the suggestion is that some SET areas don't attract an appropriate RGAM weighting). Increasing student numbers, reducing allocations for administration and enhanced research activities have created an increase in teaching load too. The knock-on effect is less time for preparation and submission of research funding applications. For some key staff, with heavy teaching loads, this mismatch is a real problem. Overall though, the real challenge is that there is less available to compete for. DIT emphasised the need for an appropriate funding model in the context of TU4D, supporting the differentiated mission of a technological university.

On internationalisation, in particular the strategic coherence and risk management, DIT notes carefully managed relationships, such as with Saudi Arabia and Brazil. This is a beneficial arrangement as there is a diversified student cohort and DIT continue to manage the individual and combined risks. DIT has also standardised their approach to internationalisation. The change is a move away from broad recruitment towards targeted growth in numbers from specific countries. This targeting is allied to a reorientation of the international office to support students on arrival. This strategy is based on identifying and working with specialist partnership bodies. More broadly, DIT wants to internationalise their curriculum but that will be a huge challenge so they have an internationalisation group looking at all aspects of this change. A working group is charged with this strategic move from broad actions to real progress. DIT has increased numbers through that approach and have 800 or so international students now. DIT is also trying to balance their Erasmus activities too, they have a significant emphasis on this and want to achieve a more favourable equilibrium between incoming and outgoing participants.

It was noted that DIT currently have set one institutional objective in the internationalisation domain. While the institute could be more ambitious in setting objectives under future rounds, it was accepted that the compact, as it stood, had been agreed and should be assessed on the basis of same.

On institutional consolidation, DIT provided an update regarding one missing target relating to institutional consolidation (structural and process change phases, section 7). It was agreed that the remainder of the institutional consolidation discussion should be held over to the second part of the meeting which would be joined by ITB and IT Tallaght.

The closing discussion was around stretch goals and targets. DIT agreed that while they were making significant and rapid progress towards their compact goals and might meet some of these sooner than anticipated it was still early stage and they had enough challenges elsewhere in the compact. On PhD numbers for example, they had arrested the decline in numbers and were back on a growth curve, this had taken some effort. Aligning the challenges of TU4D and curricular reform was another example, this would take significant efforts. Finally, on GradCam, DIT noted that they were committed to it and while they still see it as vibrant and worth progressing and have some serious research practitioners engaged with it, there is a lot happening with the partners that makes progress challenging.

The second session was jointly held with representatives from DIT, ITB and IT Tallaght all present.

On institutional consolidation, the HEIs noted that they have a steering group which meets regularly and also have operational groups progressing the TU agenda across the three institutions. The next logical step will be the full merger but this can't proceed until the appropriate legislation is in place. Their TU readiness is also dependent on the actual content of the legislation. They can meet the hard criteria as currently established and other than minor issues such as aligning accounting financial years, and other systems and data, the timeline from TU act and merger to application is about 6 months with everything in place within a year. All the common parts are in place and it can happen rapidly once the legislative environment is worked out.

Of the risks envisaged, the research student number criteria is the only possible hold on the application. Other aspects, such as acting as one, the alliance, are fine, and all are agreed that the merger comes next. A full 'virtual merger' is only slightly held up by legal conditions pertaining to some staff, and in that respect it is currently a coalition of the willing. However, this only goes so far and gaining the ability for the institutions to do things as one, in the absence of legislation, remains the practical challenge.

Other parts are certainly moving well though. The graduate research school is one example of good practice in place and operating as one across all three. Everything there is currently adopted across all three institutions and that the way to progress.

The partners are also getting towards a common HR approach, there is an agreement at senior levels (SL3 up) that all posts will come through the steering group. There remains a reserve power of appointment at governing body though, so there has to be a reliance and trust from the governance point of view. Again that is in place but will need underpinning legislation to progress.

The likely reality will be a proto structure at first and once the formal merger happens there will be a move to the new structure over time, the three existing structures melding into one. There will be a distributed leadership, with heads of school at different campuses and overall, their TU objective is that they are going to operate three full service campuses and have appropriate online delivery underpinning this. Where there is overlap they will look to organise in an integrated fashion (and retain expertise where it lies, such as horticulture in ITB, Architecture in DIT). The participants have therefore agreed a unitary approach, there is a bottom up organisation and design, all managers and academic have come together to progress the agenda. At present the structure looks like about 35 schools, but they may like to streamline this a bit in time (perhaps down to 25). DIT moved from six colleges to four in the past, so there is experience of such an exercise. They have all managed growth in senior staff positions in preparation for this to date.

Beyond this structural work, there is a two year lead to CAO and indeed students in the system now who will be there for the next four years and will need to be looked after carefully. There is also an informal side to the merger and there are working groups in place progressing these ideas. There isn't any day where there isn't some group or other moving various aspects of the project forward.

In the HR environment the safe space initiative has, with help from the LRC, put in place various groups to progress these issues. These groups (two union, two management) look at challenges and this has been a useful engagement. It is in a TUI/IOT environment and so there are understandable concerns but it is still progressing (such as on defining 'an appropriate academic culture for a technological university environment').

Of course there is a challenge for all management to bring staff with them and in doing this they need support or statements from HEA and others to promote this. TU status is and has to be the target for them all, that's the reward. This needs more than words too though as it is a huge policy shift for Ireland and the State needs to be seen to support the endeavour. This is a big project, perhaps one of the biggest education projects in Europe and it needs time management, more modern HR practices and all that requires practical supports and advocacy. So the State needs to not just invest but invest properly. For example, in the absence of legislation the partners are using the cluster as a vehicle to progress matters, but there is a risk that any suggestion that a merger would not be required (as in a policy change) would be seriously damaging to all efforts.

On access, teaching and learning, there is an expectation of common strength and currently the only limitation is one of resources. DIT, for example, has always had strong tradition in this space, such as Ballymun Music with Pobal support but there is a significant funding gap there now. The partners are looking at how they continue to implement this agenda and how

they resource it at the various institutional working groups. As TU4D they intend to maintain what they have and are committed to offering a full range of services to all learners. They consider universal design in all programmes (pace and place) and want their access agenda at the heart of that too.

One advantage of the TU4D is that they traditionally have an interest in this area. But the State needs to have an understanding that there is a cost attached to this if it is to be done properly. All three, at their core see access as changing people's lives, but the levels of support they can provide is a challenge (such as through provision of childcare, for example).

On the Transitions Agenda, this can be seen to limit students' choices when they are making career choices. There is a market that is less concerned about entry points but more concerned about addressing skills need. There is also an undercurrent around the genuine recognition of parity of esteem for practice-led education.

On research and innovation the approach is shared jointly across all three. The targets are disaggregated but all work up to meet TU objectives for TU4D. In that way each institution has a contribution to make, different in places, but all part of the whole.

There have identified four research pillars too and all contribute to these. For example Blanchardstown would have been traditionally strong on applied science but might not have had the scale required. Now they have that through the emerging TU4D.

The partners had some final comments on the language in the draft reflections reports, noting that the process and compact needs to be seen to be progressing matters from a TU4D perspective. This messaging is important as described above earlier and so the case for investment as made in the self-evaluation report needs to be formally made too.

Finally, the partners reiterated the importance of State support for the development of TUs to help to deliver on this large and challenging endeavour and with that comes a requirement for adequate investment.

Appendix

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with an External Advisor, met with the institutional representatives as set out below. The meeting was chaired by HEA Chief Executive, Tom Boland. A process auditor was also present at the meeting.

DIT representatives:

DIT representatives

Professor Brian Norton, President
Professor Brian O'Neill, Director of Research, Enterprise & Innovation Services
Dr Noel O'Connor, Director of Student Services
Ms Margaret Whelan, Head of Strategic Planning, Development & Corporate Relations

TU4D representatives:

Professor Brian Norton, President, DIT
Professor Brian O'Neill, Director of Research, Enterprise & Innovation Services, DIT
Dr Noel O'Connor, Director of Student Services, DIT
Ms Margaret Whelan, Head of Strategic Planning, Development & Corporate Relations, DIT
Mr Thomas Stone, President, IT Tallaght
Mr John Vickery, Registrar, IT Tallaght
Mr Pat Coman, Head of Development, IT Tallaght
Ms Mary Meaney, President, ITB
Denis Murphy, Secretary/ Financial Controller, ITB
Richard Gallery, Registrar, ITB