

## Dublin Leinster II cluster (DCU, SPD, MDI, DKIT, NUIM, AIT)

**The following issues are taken from the Strategic Dialogue Meeting held on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2014. It is recognised that this does not represent a full minute of the meeting but focuses on issues of particular importance.**

1. HEA outlined the rationale for, and the importance of, regional clusters, both as an essential and a required part of the Landscape. Clusters will work in the first instance to the two priority objectives of shared, coordinated academic planning and a regionally coordinated approach to transfer and progression pathways. In the case of the latter national objective, the range of pathways spans progression from further education to higher education; entry routes for mature students; reduced points entry routes (eg DARE and HEAR); processes for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL); advanced entry; Transitions reform work; part-time/flexible/credit-based pathways as well as pathways for transfer and progression within higher education.
2. Clusters will work to enhance quality student outcomes and capacity through a more coherent co-ordinated approach, thereby enhancing outcomes from the entire education system as a whole. In addition, they provide key support to regional enterprise and the communities they serve. Since they are a primary objective and key pillar in national policy, HEA will use the mechanisms available to support cluster activity, including funding in this regard.
3. HEA does not want to be prescriptive about cluster governance but does have an interest in an effective governance model emerging, capable of delivering on the agreed objectives, which would be reflected in the compacts. . In line with institutional autonomy, the HEA does not wish or expect to become involved in the operation of the cluster but will engage in appropriate monitoring and review of performance. The latter will be conducted annually through the strategic dialogue process with each institution, and the former on a more informal basis to supplement the strategic dialogue process. It was noted that Mr Pat Harvey will act as the liaison between the HEA and the clusters.
4. The HEA expressed appreciation for the evident work which underpinned the cohesive and integrated approach to the cluster evident in the compact submissions made by the four institutions.
5. The institutions noted that this cluster predated the formal cluster identification by the Minister, which is a real expression of the intent of the partners to make this work effectively. They consider that the cluster is located in a region likely to experience the

fastest growth in demand for higher education into the foreseeable future. They also noted that their plans for the cluster are based upon a common view of shared opportunities for institutional development, which will strengthen the operation of the cluster.

6. The cluster set out their own governance arrangements of a Cluster Steering Board made up of representatives of the institutions and a rotating chair drawn from the Presidents. Individual working groups would form beneath this structure. In discussion the cluster also agreed to consider procedures for dispute resolution. HEA noted the arrangements.
7. The institutions explained that they are in process of shaping an overall cluster plan. They noted that this would include, but go beyond, the priority objectives set out by the Minister. They outlined the foundation for their plans in terms of the existing collaborations in 3U, between DCU and Dundalk and NUIM and Athlone. However, the institutions also noted that much of this was new territory and in some cases there will need to be assessment as to how students will react to services offered on a cluster basis.
8. HEA queried the potential of the cluster to engage in shared services, such as specialisation in respect of specialist preparation of online modules. The institutions noted that this was a potential approach that hadn't as yet, but would be considered into the future.
9. HEA thanked the institutions for the presentation and the work to date. In view of the good progress to date HEA asked for views of the institutions on key success factors. The institutions noted a range of important considerations locally which have supported their work. From a national perspective they suggested that it was important that national policy should set clear expectations in terms of objectives and should hold institutions to account for their delivery.
10. Both SPD and Mater Dei noted that while they were now embarked on a different process as part of consolidation, their experience of close co-operation with DCU provided some evidence of the sorts of benefits that could be delivered through clustering. They also expressed confidence that both institutions would benefit from and would contribute to the future of the cluster.
11. HEA queried the proposals in respect of pathways from further education and noted that there is a wider group of underrepresented students, such as mature and HEAR students. The institutions noted the concerns and affirmed their commitment, but

also considered that there was a particular priority in terms of developing pathways from further education.

12. The cluster also raised the fact that a proposal was made under SIDF for a digital platform which they see as underpinning a number of elements of the cluster plans. The HEA explained the position in respect of the national approach to e-learning being supported via the Forum and expressed the hope that the Forum will be able to work with the clusters in this regard.
13. HEA queried the connection with the alternative sub-cluster of DIT ITB and IT Tallaght. The institutions advised that in their view the cluster configuration was not appropriate and suggested that the focus should be on the Dublin region as a whole rather than sections of the Dublin areas. HEA indicated that current policy has been set out and provides for the subsets of the clusters to develop in parallel. A major consideration is the need for the clusters to establish traction. As the development of the clusters proceeds HEA will be open to proposals for further development of the current arrangements if this can better improve outcomes.
14. Finally, HEA thanked the institutions again for their work. No amendments are necessary to the compact given the common approaches taken by the institutions. HEA suggested a similar meeting in about 6 months time to review progress while Mr. Harvey will carry out a liaison role with the Chair and Board on a more ongoing basis.