

# Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB)

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Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 28th September 2015

The HEA welcomed IT Blanchardstown to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which the process operates. ITB was invited to provide an update on institutional progress.

IT Blanchardstown outlined their institution's strategic context as a blend of location and a specific mission, in particular driven by the socio-economic demographics of their region. They noted that the related budgetary context for their programme provision is a challenge as providing regionally relevant education and training leaves them some €2M per annum below what normally be expected through the RGAM model. As an institution they are restricted in what they can offer given these constraints.

As with others, they have to continue to generate their own income and are funding circa 30 posts from such non-exchequer sources. A number of these privately funded staff are now teaching on the F/T programmes too. The resources come from the P/T programmes which are run on a full cost model with 30% delivered to overheads. Even on Springboard there is co-delivery of modules where possible, and where they can co-deliver or online will do too, but there is little if any efficiency stretch left in the system. Added to this, IT Blanchardstown have among the highest numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds. It is a challenge to meet the needs of this cohort, the resulting gap is shown through retention rate outcomes.

On institutional consolidation, the consolidation work locally has allowed ITB to invest in some of the upfront costs of TU developments but there is a resource gap there too. The shared aim is to have a multi-campus TU, the Blanchardstown campus in particular will continue to be multi-use delivering for Fingal. Some 25% of students are new-Irish and there is a broad range of students and languages on their campus. For part time, the mix is the same. There was some drop off in part time numbers in recent years but now people are back working and have resources to support their studies. Within 15km, there are 9 new 1,000 student second level schools so they are located in the middle of the fastest growing area in Europe, Blanchardstown.

The industry relationships ITB are building are also important, a number of US FDIs and others are growing in the location and ITB intend to grow alongside them. The strategy includes carving out niche areas such as working with IBM on pharma interface projects. They are also looking at social care training needs and are operating a full cost recovery model there.

Given the scale and complexity of their operations there are some challenges such as IR concerns around the pressures of delivery. As institutional managers they will have to continue to oversee that carefully.

In considering performance to the end of 2014 the HEA questioned the degree of benchmarking and the capacity for self-reflection behind the report, not just through EU

Multi-rank and similar, but in actions such as in the choice of external examiners. It seemed there was no specific structure or framework, rather a randomised process to identify experts to work with. Most come from within Ireland, though some are international externs too. The maximum term of appointment is six years.

More generally ITB look at RMIT and Ryerson as comparators in ways and use that to inform the considerations of their local and overall TU intentions. Nationally ITB use HEA statistical data on staff and student numbers, in particular staff-student ratios and what that says about them.

The HEA noted that ITB has no specific targets on increasing access by target groups, other than as a by-product of their increasing overall enrolments. ITB does, however, perform quite well in enrolling target groups and undertakes good outreach activity in its local area. This activity was not reflected in the compact and self-evaluation report to the extent that might have been expected.

It was also noted that the self-evaluation reported industry 'interfaces' going up but the number of Enterprise Ireland derived innovation vouchers going down. The HEA and ITB discussed the unit of measurement, the value or definition of an 'interfaces' and what the value or return to ITB was from such activity.

ITB suggested that this pattern was a feature of the broader economic climate. When things were tough the SMEs were more inclined to engage with innovation vouchers as the business climate has recovered there seems to be less interest. Beyond this, there can also be a mismatch in expectations as to what is realisable for a €5,000 innovation voucher. ITB have also decided to pull back a little. They are now having better conversations with industry and developing relationships before projects such as innovation vouchers are discussed and suitability is better assessed.

Overall, managing more than 150 relationships with industry is a challenge, although there are different levels of relationship. They currently have 40 or so partners in the innovation centre, all hot-desking or otherwise space sharing, they have 35 or so through industry part-time programmes and a further 35% or so are in direct relationships with academic departments.

In discussing teaching and learning, student experience and progress on issues such as transitions reform, there was some discussion on retention and student numbers. ITB noted their ambition to grow and to continue to serve their mission and region. They would seek to retain that aspiration until the resource issues became just too difficult, noting that for an expanding institution like theirs, the funding model is just not responsive enough.

On other challenges ITB noted a slight shift in Springboard applications creating a worry that the student supply of those capable of translating directly to technical areas may be exhausted. They believe that there is still a cohort that can be engaged with, but they will

need a softer introduction to college. Direct entry into technical programmes won't work for that cohort but perhaps a pathway can be developed to get them there.

In closing, ITB noted that their top issues or challenges are probably ECF restrictions, student numbers given the resources available to them and finally the need for capital programmes to maintain existing infrastructure and meet current and future student demand.

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.

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.

**ITB representatives**

Ms Mary Meaney, President  
Denis Murphy, Secretary/ Financial Controller  
Richard Gallery, Registrar

**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