

Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITTD)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 28th September 2015

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

The Institute of Technology Dublin, Tallaght (ITTD) provided an introduction to their strategic direction and self-evaluation statement. In setting priorities they felt it important that the institute continue to perform as best it can as a stand-alone institute despite external challenges. In recent times they have taken possession of a new building to provide the accommodation they need for a growing student population. It is located some way off campus but the project is working well. The new location has delivered a 32% increase in teaching space. This was essential as there was room for 1,800 students but 3,000 were enrolled, excluding part-time numbers, so the situation couldn't continue as was. This project was realised 100% from internal resources.

Alongside this capital expansion they are spending much time and effort working towards TU status. While a merger is required as part of that, it is only ancillary; the TU status and opportunity associated with it is the real end game for IT Tallaght. The management of this process takes time and effort and meeting these demands alongside all else that happens in a modern higher education institution is a challenge, as the normal business of education delivery also needs to take place. In all this there has had to be a prioritisation of the academic side of operations over management resources and all this comes at a price. In such circumstances if resources were to become available they would like to invest in student services. Resources aside they are still working ahead and all these plans and activities are in place notwithstanding the work on TU developments. More generally the real stretch for IT Tallaght is on ICT infrastructure, there needs to be development of that locally and nationally in higher education.

They are therefore managing all these priorities and associated risks. They are committed to all the contents of their compact, they have a commitment to industry and equally to international students as set out. This has not been easy, they had small classes in certain areas so they sought to build numbers and took the decision to progress international recruitment directly, for example, rather than through an agent and have built strong relations and leveraged research links and so on through that. Even with the TU in prospect there don't see any inconsistency in their international strategy.

However, it is important to restate that the TU is positive too; for example in the graduate space they have the shared graduate school and a shared tech transfer process. There is a workload that goes with this but also a benefit. So all in all, from an applied university point of view, they feel that they bring real value to the TU proposal.

The HEA noted that for some of the targets in the compact the type and level of follow up information provided in the self-evaluation seemed incomplete or inconsistent. In other cases the original targets do not easily allow for comparison with international benchmarks. ITTD should therefore reflect on their plans for 'peer scanning' and a broader benchmarking of their performance in future. In the self-evaluation report, there also appeared to be a disjoint between what was reported under each category and what was described in the respective appendix. It would be helpful if the appendices were used to expand and provide further detail on progress achieved on all targets.

On performance to end of 2014 and benchmarking of performance, IT Tallaght see two aspects to this. In the first instance they find it hard to find a similar sized institution in a similar location with a similar socio economic cohort to benchmark against. Secondly, in terms of measuring stretch and given the resources issues in Ireland, finding a fair comparator is a challenge. IT Tallaght are in EU multi-rank so that's one measure (referencing data they tabled). But overall, this is difficult in finding comparators but also in the context of the managerial and analytic resources available to an institution in their situation as outlined.

On participation, equal access and lifelong learning IT Tallaght see themselves as one of three campuses in a TU and are certainly still committed to a ladder of provision from level 6 to 8. They are equally clear on a continued and enhanced regional remit. There are parts of south Dublin that still need attention from a higher education participation perspective. From industry there is a still a need for relevant regional (and indeed national) provision and they are quite well linked in and see an opportunity to make a better offer in a TU context.

On Capital infrastructure, they would like to see the campus continuing to develop in the way they want, but under the TU umbrella. All this so as to continue to serve regional needs but also to play their part in the provision of the best services across all three campuses.

Teaching and learning is important to Tallaght, and they are open to reconsidering the extent of stretch in the compact targets for 2015, 2016. There has been an improvement in the options available as a result of the engagement with TU4D, such as for staff upskilling and CPD. There is a broader set of offers on the table now and want to take advantage of that.

The HEA noted that ITTD also seek to insert three new targets in their compact.

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.

ITT representatives

Mr Thomas Stone, President
Mr John Vickery, Registrar
Mr Pat Coman, Head of Development

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