

Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session
Wednesday 6th September 2017
9.30 – 12.00

ITB

Dr Diarmuid O’Callaghan, President
Dr Larry McNutt, Registrar
Ms Bronagh Elliott, Secretary Financial Controller
Dr Pat O’Connor, Head of School of Humanities
Ms Assumpta Harvey, Head of School of Business
Dr Anthony Keane, Head of School of Informatics and Engineering
Dr Philip Owende, TU4Dublin Academic Quality Manager

HEA

Dr Graham Love, CEO
Mr Fergal Costello, Head of System Development & Performance Management
Mr Tim Conlon, Senior Manager
Ms Valerie Harvey, Head of Performance Evaluation
Ms Sarah Fitzgerald, Higher Executive Officer

External

Professor Catherine Harper, Expert Panel member
Dr Richard Thorn, Expert Panel member
Dr Trish O’Brien, Process Auditor

Context

ITB revised its compact in February 2014 as it was aware that it would not achieve certain targets that had been set and further changes have been made in response to feedback from the Cycle 3 process. There are some issues with the compact itself, in the way in which the institute frames strategic objectives, and the way in which it sets its objectives. There is a lack of benchmarking applied throughout the compact. The HEA has discussed this with the institute in previous rounds. ITB is committed to improvement but also note the small size of the institution and restricted budgets as challenges.

Introduction

The HEA opened by welcoming the ITB delegation to the meeting and noted that it was the fourth strategic dialogue meeting to date. As their initial observation, the HEA remarked their view of how the sector has responded well to the challenges of providing quality education in an increasingly constrained environment, and it is important to sustain this in the future. An agenda had been prepared to inform the discussion. In terms of the strategic dialogue process as a whole, the HEA, for

its part, considers that this has overall become an essential part of the HEA – HEI relationship, and for wider system performance and accountability. Given that a new cycle will commence shortly, the HEA will consider how this might evolve, and will seek views from the sector on how the process can be improved.

ITB welcomes the opportunity for strategic dialogue, noting that were it to do it again, it might approach it differently. That said, 2016/17 has been an exciting year, with changes to the leadership and progress on the TU4D agenda so it has been an important year of transition. ITB discussed the importance of capturing the overall impact of strategic developments, as opposed to reporting on individual metrics and how to reflect more than just numbers/ data in future years.

The TU4D transition is an important project which was prioritised, albeit it has been delayed by virtue of circumstances, but has consumed a large volume of energy. As set out in the HEA comments on ITB's self-evaluation, ITB has not responded to the sectoral feedback on benchmarking, or the specific feedback in Cycle 2, asking for greater use of benchmarking to demonstrate that the level of institution ambition is appropriate in areas such as access and progression. ITB consider that as a small institute, it had to make decisions on what it could and couldn't take on. Benchmarking fell into the latter category and while the institute can see a value in it e.g. EU Multirank, capacity is constrained and ITB question whether the process is equally of value to all HEIs. There is a commitment to look at it again in the future. Energy has been directed to areas that are core to mission, such as supporting the current cohort of students and retaining them, having regard to the additional challenges that a wide access agenda presents and the lack of an appropriate funding model to support it.

The HEA recognises the essential role that ITB plays in its region, with particular reference to the broader context of falling funding and staffing levels, demographic and student number growth and the need for access opportunities for the local population. ITB's passion in regard to the latter is clearly demonstrated and the HEA congratulated the institute on addressing the retention challenge.

Access/ Participation

As per the HEA's commentary on the self-evaluation, the Institute has taken on board the suggestion to reconsider increasing its student numbers at the rate originally projected in the compact, given the challenges this presents when it has a strong track record of diversity within the student body.

On access, the HEA considered the report and introduction to be compelling. There is a clear sense of mission and distinctiveness. ITB meets the needs of people in a changing region, in a time of changing industry. An example is where the pharmaceutical industry has moved in and ITB has built its offerings around skills needs by providing flexible educational programmes. The TU will further enhance this, and ITB sees itself at the heart of TU, not on the periphery. The TU will add value and ITB can bring best practices to it as the newly formed TU embraces online and blended learning.

ITB discussed recent developments in course offerings including the development of a level 6 programme delivered for the Citizens Information Bureau. This is an example of a programme that combines online study with delivery in local centres for certain modules. In addition, the institute has developed a process instrumentation programme which is based on the apprenticeship model and incorporates an industry placement. The programme is agile, combining learning and working and is designed to meet precise industry skills needs. Data has shown that the programme has a 90% progression rate. The approval of new apprenticeships can be a slow and bureaucratic process and so, ITB felt that it could progress such a programme far quicker under its own brand.

Teaching and Learning

As set out in the HEA's commentary on the self-evaluation, progression rates continue to be a challenge for the institution as highlighted in the recent HEA report, *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education (2016)*, which shows that ITB has a non-progression rate of 29% across all levels. In promoting retention, the institute seeks to value initiatives equally whether they be in the engagement, teaching and learning or research space. All achievements are celebrated. The institute seeks to recognise the design, staff commitment and flexibility in delivery. Other institutions are competing for its students, and many students will, on parental advice, choose the level 8 in a traditional university instead, where students may be better served to enter at level 6 and progressing from there. Students facing the greatest retention challenges in the areas of maths, physics, engineering and software see additional dedicated resources in these areas.

There is also the need to consider the role of further education whereby fees for levels 6 and 7 are far less than those applicable to higher education institutions. Indeed, there is a fee differential across programmes offered within ITB for example, part-time versus full-time students; some students receive a subsidy via Springboard or Skillsnet; some students are wholly or partially funded by their employer; some students are in receipt of HEAR and DARE schemes while others are on the ITB access track. Notwithstanding such considerations, ITB is committed to lifelong learning and exploiting the national framework of qualifications, such that there are multiple entry and exit points.

The first-year experience is critical to ITB. Peer mentoring is offered in partnership with the National Learning Network to all first years, whereby peer mentors in years 3 and 4 mentor first years. All mentors are trained and get certification for their participation. ITB tracks attendance and engagement using, for example, moodle interactions. Support is targeted where engagement appears to be diminishing e.g. phonecalls, texts etc., recognising that individual situations differ and are, by nature, complex.

ITB has been proactive with a view to collecting feedback from students on their experience via the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE). The initiative was promoted heavily by student unions and the availability of laptops throughout the institute to drive up the response rate. As in the case of the IoT sector more generally, the data would benefit from analysis by a resource dedicated to looking at such data. Related to this, benchmarking is necessary and can reveal data such as the employability of students relative to other HEIs which in turn can feed into the marketing of the institute. ITB has embraced the student survey (ISSE) and is using that to inform its approach to change.

In terms of finance, ITB has expanded with the help of a major capital grant initially, but subsequently, has accumulated institutional surpluses and the institute continues to apply that to build capacity.

Internationalisation

On internationalisation, the target was for 100 international students, which is not large in comparison with other HEIs, but having regard to the fact that, as it stands, ITB has students presenting over 40 different passports at registration, so there's an inbuilt internationalisation on campus. In addition, staff are involved in international mobility programmes and it is worth noting the global classroom pilot too. ITB see the TU4D as the catalyst for any further expansion – otherwise, the capacity is a major challenge. If starting the compact again, ITB would approach the presentation of the internationalisation section differently, in order to capture the richness of the objective.

TU4Dublin

ITB is striving towards TU designation as soon as possible and it would have been helpful to have had legislation enacted at this point to maintain momentum and keep staff motivated. The consortium is aiming to attain designation by Sept 2018, with a view to submitting an application in April 2018, referencing the March 2018 student return. The institute is confident that it will meet the TU criteria and the CAO programme offerings have already been determined along with campus locations. The process of merger itself is tricky and a single decision-making body is welcome as soon as possible.

Next steps

The HEA intends to circulate a minute of the meeting in late October. HEIs will have the opportunity to respond on matters of factual accuracy or clarification prior to the publication of the full suite of documents. It is expected that the aggregated outcomes from the sessions will inform the publication of a system level performance report in 2018.

Summary/ Outcomes

The outcome presented below is based on the key inputs of this process i.e.:

- the institutional self-evaluation;
- the review by HEA, and external experts;
- the strategic dialogue meeting between HEI senior management, the HEA, and external experts.

ITB understands where it fits within the overall higher education landscape and regional context and there is a genuine comprehension of the mission on the part of senior leadership. ITB is invited to consider how it can further champion its contribution to the access agenda.

The peer mentoring initiative is excellent and ITB is invited to consider how participation could attract credits to formally recognise student participation.

Progress towards technological university status has come at a cost in terms of senior management time and resources. For future iterations of the compact, the institute could be more assertive in priority setting and delineating which activities are core and which are ancillary to mission e.g. international recruitment.

The HEA considers that benchmarking wasn't well addressed in this compact and this is something that will be required in future rounds.