

Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown (ITB)

Cycle 3 Outcome

Performance funding in full will be released in respect of the 2017 budget allocation.

In assessing performance, we have relied upon the self-evaluation report submitted by your institute, the reflections on performance document prepared by the HEA, and the discussion at our recent strategic dialogue meetings. Consideration was also given to any points of clarification as provided by your institute at our meetings or in related correspondence.

The self-evaluation report, and subsequent discussion at the bilateral meeting, have shown that progress can be demonstrated across all compact domains. There are areas of significant progress, including developments towards amalgamation and meeting the metrics for technological university designation, the introduction of a strategy to improve retention rates, and increased civic and industry engagement.

The HEA recognises the progress made by the institute towards achieving TU designation. For the next set of compact reports, the HEA would expect the reporting to demonstrate greater evidence of integration within the TU4Dublin consortium. ITB's commitment to its region is also very evident. It will be important that the institute continues to reflect on the positive impacts the TU project may have this region but ITB should also take care to manage risk. ITB views itself as an access provider that performed well against its access targets.

The HEA notes that the institute is revising its targets for student numbers and internationalisation, to ensure that they are more realistic. While the HEA appreciates the desire of the institute to set stretch targets to drive performance, it is important that, in future planning, the institute, in setting its targets, has due regard for the feasibility of achievement. It will also be important to complement student number projections with an assessment of related issues, such as student experience and retention.

In summary therefore, while there are certain issues of concern as identified by the HEA above, overall ITB has demonstrated good progress against mission-coherent objectives through a reasonably analytical and probing self-evaluation report and use of other data sources. The institute needs to continue to improve its approach to and use of benchmarking as a means to set priorities and undertake self-evaluation. The institute is requested to address areas of concern as a priority. ITB should have regard to the specific institutional feedback provided in this document and in the reflections on performance document in order to continue to improve its overall performance in future cycles of strategic dialogue.

Minutes of Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3 bilateral meeting, 5 September 2016

In attendance

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with two external advisers (Mr George P. Pernsteiner and Mr John Randall), met with the institutional representatives as set out below. The meeting was chaired by HEA Interim Chief Executive, Dr Anne Looney. A process auditor was also present at the meeting.

ITB representatives

- Dr Diarmuid O'Callaghan, President
- Mr Denis Murphy, Secretary/ Financial Controller
- Dr Pat O'Connor, Head of School of Business & Humanities
- Dr Larry McNutt, Head of School of Informatics and Engineering

The HEA welcomed the Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown (ITB) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which it operates. ITB was commended on its progress and for its self-evaluation report that provides evidence of reflection on performance and identification of issues arising. The HEA is aware that all higher education institutions are operating in a challenging financial environment, while continuing to respond to increasing student demand. The system has demonstrated that it continues to provide high-quality higher education and to respond to national priorities. While the institute's performance continues to progress, and the HEA expects that trajectory to continue, some concerns remain. These concerns should be addressed by the institute's leadership to ensure that the institute meets its full potential. The HEA's observations are set out as follows:

- The HEA notes that ITB has not met the targets for growth in student numbers as presented in the compact. The HEA acknowledges that ITB had set itself very ambitious stretch targets for student numbers, as a means of driving performance, rather than necessarily aiming to deliver the precise targets. The HEA considers that in the future, as well as growth in student numbers, such planning should give greater weight to the associated issues of student retention and student experience.
- The HEA notes the considerable work undertaken by ITB with DIT and IT Tallaght in pursuing the TU4D objective, and looks forward to seeing increasing evidence of the institutions working even more coherently in their planning and operation.
- HEA notes the evident commitment of the institute to serving its local community and region and recognises ITB's commitment to maintain this in the context of the new TU4D. This is particularly important given the need for the new integrated institution to consider a wide range of priorities. The HEA looks forward to seeing more information and planning on how this distinct role will be preserved in the further development of the TU4D.
- The HEA notes that ITB has revised downwards its ambitions in the international space by reducing the planned number of international students to enter the institute. The HEA considers that this is a more realistic objective, given the constraints the institute faces. The HEA also acknowledges that ITB has a diverse internationalised campus which is reflective of the changing demographic the institute serves, and in particular the significant inward migration of recent years.

ITB opening remarks

The institute stated that it was new to the strategic dialogue process, but found it easy to complete their self-evaluation process, as it was aligned to the drafting of their strategic plan. Their next self-evaluation report will be produced in the context of their new strategic plan.

Management of risk

As the institute has adopted a strategy of merging with others to become a TU, the HEA queried the process of risk management that has been put in place. ITB clarified that the institute has in place a risk register which is updated regularly and is intrinsically linked to its governance systems. ITB outsources its internal audit function, and this recently highlighted that one of the issues for the institute is the lack of formal procedures for identifying risk. The institute is taking steps to address this.

On the issue of how the institute monitors the quality of the student experience, ITB stated that it is conscious of the diversity of its campus and evaluates the quality of the student experience using a number of measures, such as retention rates. Where applicable, the institute provides students with relevant supports. Although the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) is one of the main ways of measuring the quality of the student experience, ITB finds there are too many questions in the survey and it is very much a numbers-based exercise. The institute prefers to engage with students through monthly class reports and one-to-one feedback sessions, and the findings from these are used to inform decisions relating to student support.

The main institutional risks flagged by ITB are the current delay in legislation for TUs and ITB's position in terms of its future growth and engagement with the region. The progression of the TU project is underpinned by the buy-in and engagement of staff. The delay in the TU legislation has contributed to a 'stop-start' roll-out of the project, and this has in turn contributed to staff members' concerns and a reduced level of engagement. To address this, the consortium took the decision that the former ITB President would operate as the TU4Dublin Programme Leader, to continue to drive the strategy and maintain the momentum.

The institute stated it had introduced stretch targets to encourage greater engagement of staff, but it realised the original targets were not achievable; the institute has thus revised its targets downwards. The institute is now projecting to expand by 250 students a year and it considers that it is important to meet this target to maintain sustainable levels of funding. The HEA noted the need to ensure that student growth targets are balanced by consideration of the student experience, quality of provision, and support for student completion. While recognising the positive approach taken by the institute to try and drive performance with stretch targets, there is also a need to have regard to the available funding and the additional support requirements these projected additional students would require.

Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

One of the objectives listed under this domain was to 'Train staff professionally', and the related performance indicator is the number of development days per staff member. The HEA commends the institute for providing staff with the opportunity to undertake professional development, but noted the need to undertake an analysis of the institute's skill requirements, and to tailor the staff training to meet these requirements.

TU4Dublin

The HEA queried the institute's view on how ITB will continue to deliver on its distinct regional role after the transformation into a technological university. The institute stated that it recognises the challenge, but that it is absolutely committed to continuing to serve the region and that this is a key part of their planning for this transformation. ITB is particularly conscious of the programmes it provides to students undertaking studies at Levels 6-8.

ITB stated that the TU project has progressed to a point where success is in sight; however, there is a need for external support, particularly in relation to the needed new legislation. ITB, by its own admission, is a small institution, and with the unsure landscape for the future of higher education in Ireland, the TU project provides the institute with more opportunities than it would have as a standalone institution. For example, with the completion of the transformation into a technological university, ITB will be a member of a larger research community and be able to leverage more resources than it would as a stand-alone entity.

Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

Since ITB's establishment, the institute has viewed itself as an access provider whose function is to improve the participation rates of the students in its region. ITB's student population is diverse, and ITB has developed a universal approach to access – if a student requires additional supports, the institute will try to meet them. It can be challenging for the institute to apply a metric to this approach, as access includes a qualitative element, which is not easily measurable.

Enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community, and embedded knowledge exchange

The HEA acknowledges that ITB's mission is to engage actively with industry and the community in its region, and that it has been successful in developing partnerships with a wide range of organisations. But the HEA has some concerns around the institute's engagement strategy. For example, ITB had a 2015 target of engagement with 20 external partners, but the outcome was 110. A further review of how the institute defines an engagement with an external partner would provide the institute with a consistent measurement. This issue will be developed further in the next iteration of ITB's compact.

Enhanced internationalisation

On the issue of internationalisation, the institute is scaling back on its operations in order to invest additional resources to meet the demands from its undergraduate student cohort. As the institute has only one objective under this domain – to grow its international student numbers – the HEA has concerns around the institute's international strategy, as internationalisation covers a broader set of elements, such as the internationalisation of the curriculum and supports for students. However, the institute has revised this objective and significantly lowered its ambition, mainly in recognition of the resources required to deliver such growth, which are not readily available given the other demands on the institute. It is also acknowledged that ITB has a very diverse campus; however, this is not adequately reflected in the institute's compact, nor in the supports the institute provides to these students.

AOB

The institute expressed concerns that the new delegated sanction agreement will be fixed on historical staffing figures, and that this will negatively impact on the institute due to its stronger than average growth in student numbers.