

Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) submitted a self-evaluation report (SER) providing an update on all interim 2015 targets. The published compact objectives are matched in the SER which is completed in full and colour-coded. The HEA particularly notes the following positive features:

- ITB had set itself a total of 37 targets under 16 objectives. Of the 37 targets, 29 have been colour-coded green, 7 amber and 1 red. Good progress has been made by ITB in achieving the targets set; some have been missed but the SER provides an honest appraisal of the context for the issues arising.
- ITB has maintained progress with partners towards TU status, subject to the constraints caused by the uncertainty surrounding the enactment of legislation, and some targets being revised in the light of this.
- ITB has developed a very coherent retention strategy which has played an important role in achieving their retention targets, a stated priority area.

The self-evaluation does raise the following issues for further discussion:

- It is clear that all three TU4D institutions have made progress towards amalgamation and designation as a TU – for example, joint research school, merger planning groups, etc. Each institution also appears to be performing reasonably well on an individual level. However, as a consortium that intends to move ultimately towards TU designation, it would be better if the three reports showed greater cohesion and evidence of cooperation as well as more critical reflection, particularly in the context of the risks and barriers they face in moving towards amalgamation and TU designation.
- The management of risk does not feature strongly in the review. For example, the target number of students for 2015 has not been met (3,355 against a target of 3,821). The target for 2016 has been reduced from 4,144 to 3,600. The Institute has explained the reasons for the change, but arguably these were risk factors that it might have been considered before setting the initial targets.
- ITB is currently setting out targets in relation to access, an area in which it has been successful in to date. ITB suggests that in the future, because of funding restrictions, the number of entrants from target groups might be reduced. Given that up to now this has been a central part of ITB's mission, the HEA would welcome further discussion on this issue.
- While ITB have been successful in developing partnerships with a wide range of organisations, the ability to sustain this level of engagement with external partners may need to be reassessed. The depth of the engagement or partnership also needs more explanation (target 14, outcome 110). On research, there is little reference to the common graduate school.
- For internationalisation there are a number of agreements cited but no discussion on results, or the institute's strategic focus. .

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

Like DIT and ITTD, ITB has identified one main objective under this heading – to be an active participant in the Dublin Leinster II pillar cluster in order to enhance its contribution to Dublin’s regional development. As noted in the compact, the priority for ITB (and also for DIT and ITTD) is the Dublin Technological University (DTU) project. Nevertheless, ITB provides some very informative examples of its involvement in regional initiatives in the Fingal region – for example, Fingal Age-Friendly Alliance, Local Community Development Committee, and the Dublin 15 Enterprise Zone Committee. ITB has a close working relationship with Fingal County Council. However, the material provided does not give a sense of how the institute measures its progress on collaboration,

More generally, given the scale and importance of the DTU consolidation project and given that the HEA has previously recognised that this activity can be regarded as part of the cluster agenda, ITB might, for the purpose of its compact, consider focusing more exclusively on the DTU project.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

ITB has confirmed that it has exceeded its target of having at least one Moodle-supported module in all programmes. In 2014/15 it recorded a 4 per cent growth in the number of modules on Moodle. While this is welcome it would be helpful for the institutions to move to a more focused outcome-related objective – for example, what has the impact been on student learning, progression, etc.? (Note this objective also appears in Section 3 in relation to teaching and learning).

Although ITB has increased its student numbers, it acknowledges that it has not met the target set out in its compact (3,355 against a target of 3,821). It attributes this to the lack of funding for new teaching facilities, ECF restrictions, etc. ITB has therefore proposed to adjust its target to 3,600 WTE as opposed to the original 2016 target of 4,144.

In relation to access, ITB states that it is exceeding national targets and certainly appears to be performing better than other HEIs. ITB states in its report that it is developing access targets in line with the national access policy and these targets may involve a reduction in line with funding limits in due course. It would be helpful if ITB could further set out its assumptions and approach to this issue. HEA would expect institutions to take into account the likely funding allocations, ECF requirements, and capital allocations when they are planning future enrolments.

In its report ITB emphasises that retention is a priority. An overall retention rate of 71 per cent was achieved in 2014/15. ITB is proposing an adjusted target, to increase its first-year retention year-on-year by 3 per cent. ITB’s report highlights the importance of its peer mentoring programme, which is being rolled out to cover all first-year students by 2016/17. In 2014/15 retention in Business improved from 42 per cent to 49 per cent. ITB has provided a very detailed and informative description of this mentoring programme – it appears to be very well organised – for example, small groups, scheduled meetings between first-years and senior students, Students’ Union participation, and mentor training. The success of the programme is shown in outcomes such as 12 per cent of participating first-year students who stated that they had considered dropping out but support from the mentor programme changed their mind and the 89 per cent of students who reported that the programme helped them settle into ITB. In 2014/15 ITB undertook a programmatic review of all programmes, with each department tasked with suggesting and implementing retention initiatives on all programmes.

In relation to transitions, ITB has common entry programmes in place at Level 8 in Business Studies and Engineering. As part of the recent programmatic review all course boards were asked to consider the first-year experience – i.e. a learner support model that enables personalised support and advice. The mentoring programmes play a key role in this regard. ITB should be asked to confirm its plans to roll out common entry programmes across all programmes.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

Five objectives are outlined under this heading; the first three objectives are marked in green, the fourth red, and the fifth amber. Further discussion on each objective follows below.

The first objective seeks to incorporate multiple modes of delivery into programme design, with an end-2015 target of at least one module in 70 per cent of programmes being supported by Moodle. ITB notes that it has exceeded its target. (The note in respect of this objective in section 2 is also relevant).

Secondly, ITB aimed to develop an effective student feedback online mechanism. Following on from the 2014 target, ITB intended to select an additional three programmes for systematic analysis and change implementation, guided by ISSE data, in 2015. ITB's self-evaluation report notes that it has significantly exceeded the target, with ISSE data now being used by academic departments to guide changes in the majority of programmes. The report outlines a number of improvements that were implemented across all programmes in response to the ISSE report – these vary from reducing class size, to improving class timetabling, to adding student clinics in software programming and maths. Specific courses that underwent improvements in the departments of Business, Humanities and Engineering are listed. This is very positive and welcome. The findings to date are, understandably, process descriptions; over time it would be helpful to correlate recommendations, with actions taken, with impact on student satisfaction.

In seeking to contribute to the development of teaching by disseminating good practice and by giving visibility to innovative individuals, ITB continued to publicise relevant material in its Teaching and Learning Innovations Report, as envisaged in the compact. In this regard, a number of conferences and other initiatives are mentioned in the self-evaluation report – these include the Higher Education in Transformation international conference (in partnership with HEIs in Canada) and the Universal Design in Education Conference, (in partnership with the National Disability Authority). Further details on these and other related activities are provided in an Appendix. While the activity cited is very commendable, the Institute should consider how it will move to a more structured basis for further development. The objective here is relatively vague; there is no underlying baseline, nor is there any indication of a method to capture good practice.

ITB signals that it has not succeeded in meeting its fourth objective: in 2015, it sought full participation in the U-Map project, as part of its aim to benchmark itself against relevant peers internationally. It is reported that ITB management instead decided to focus on TU4Dublin initiatives; so, ITB has instead focused on a benchmarking exercise with ITT and DIT. However, ITB appears to have retained its 2016 objective of full participation in the U-Multirank project by end-2016. It would have been useful to have received clarification on whether or not ITB regarded this target as achievable, given the

Institute's shift in focus towards TU4Dublin priorities. Also, it is unclear whether participation in U-Map has been abandoned definitively.¹

The final objective in this heading seeks to train staff professionally, aiming to achieve three development days per staff member per year by end-2015. The self-evaluation report indicates that ITB narrowly missed this target, with a shortfall of 0.1 training days per staff member. ITB plans to meet or exceed the target for 2016, and this appears to be achievable, given the narrow shortfall. The Institute could helpfully reflect on further developing this target; days training per staff member might usefully be more focused to align with issues arising from the ISSE feedback, or quality assurance reviews, or specific institutional goals for capacity enhancement.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

One objective is listed under this heading. This has five quantifiable targets, of which three are marked green, and two amber. While ITB has failed to reach some targets, others have been exceeded considerably, painting an overall favourable picture of ITB's performance in this sphere. There is further discussion of these results below, including some revised target figures.

- ITB has exceeded its target number of research students for 2015 and proposes an increased target figure of 26 for 2016 (19 at end-2015), which appears to be an achievable aim. As with DIT's report, further information in this regard would have been useful, particularly given the partner institutions' stated difficulties in this regard.
- ITB has failed to achieve the proposed number of innovation vouchers for 2015, having delivered just 5 against a target of 12. A revised figure of 8 vouchers is proposed for 2016. Increased staff teaching hours are cited as a barrier to achieving success in this area, though this does not appear to have impacted on other metrics.
- Likewise, ITB has not obtained the proposed number of invention disclosures in 2015, having achieved just 1 against a target 4. The revised figure of 2 is proposed for 2016.
- The 2015 target number of companies supported through New Frontiers (Enterprise Ireland's national entrepreneur development programme) was exceeded, with 69 companies being supported, partnership with ITT being cited as delivering high results. While this exceeds the 2016 target figure, ITB seeks to maintain its performance rather than improve upon it.
- The 2015 target number of companies supported through LINC (ITB's Learning and Innovation Centre) was also exceeded, with 104 companies being supported. Given that this greatly exceeds the 2016 target of 75 companies, it would be appropriate for ITB to consider revising its target upwards.

Relatively little explanatory information is supplied in the Appendix in relation to research and innovation, though the outcomes noted above indicate that ITB has had success in its interaction with enterprise. However, it would be helpful for the Institute to consider further refining its objectives and the manner in which they are measured. For example, the references to support for LINC companies includes 'general enquiries and meetings' which is not a useful metric for understanding impact.

¹ U-Map and U-Multirank make use of indicators relating to individual higher education institutions (HEIs). U-Map shows what a HEI is doing and how it compares to other institutions worldwide. U-Multirank visualises how well HEIs are performing relative to others.

5. Enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange

Three objectives were listed under this heading, with four targets, of which three are rated green.

The first objective related to the development of a diverse range of civic engagement community partners, for which ITB achieved 110 partnerships, against a target of 20. ITB also exceeded its target to develop community-based research initiatives considerably, with 228 modules delivered (against a target of 55), with 33 staff members involved (against a target of 3). ITB has stated that it will aim to maintain this level of engagement across these two areas for 2016, but new targets have not been set. The information provided on activity in this space (in Appendix 5) shows the wide range of organisations that ITB are engaged with, and illustrates the important role they play in the area. It is very helpful to get this sense of the activity and engagement. The Institute might wish to reflect whether there are high level priorities and follow on objectives that they might wish to set at a more strategic level, or whether the initiative should remain at the level of individual academics.

The third objective relates to responding to feedback from employers; and while ITB has made progress in this area, it has not reached the target of responding to two of the most important findings in the National Employer Survey. ITB has provided the information requested in Cycle 2 Reflections on Performance Report, detailing the proposed actions to be taken in response to the points raised by the National Employer Survey. ITB accepts that it has more work to do in this area.

6. Enhanced internationalisation

ITB has one objective listed under this heading – this is coded green, but it is noted that the target was ‘just’ met. The performance indicator set is a measure the number of students living outside Ireland who register to study at ITB as a percentage of full-time students.

It is proposed that this target be changed from a percentage of full-time students (currently at 4 per cent) to a percentage year-on-year increase, which will reduce the target number of international students to be registered in 2016. Given that the original target is more than twice the projected number of international students for 2016/17 included in the institutional profile, this new target seems more realistic.

It would have been useful if ITB had included details of the number of students who have registered from each of the international institutions with which ITB has an MoU (as outlined in Appendix 6), as this would have made it possible to assess how successful these investments has been. ITB has invested time and resources into developing a market in Brazil for the Science Without Borders programme, but with the programme currently on hold and with just 13 Brazilian students currently enrolled on it, it is not clear if this investment will continue to deliver income.

Given the level of information included in the commentary under this objective in the self-evaluation report, it might be useful for ITB to consider setting itself additional objectives to report on other activities in this area in the future – on Erasmus, for example, which is noted as a key part of ITB’s activities.

The information included in Appendix 6 focuses on recruitment and delivery of services to international students. ITB should perhaps be asked to provide more information on the review of programmes and to include a more global perspective, as outlined in the compact.

7. Institutional consolidation

Unsurprisingly ITB's main objective under this heading refers to the goal of TU designation. Progress was maintained in 2015 subject to the constraints placed by the uncertainty surrounding the enactment of legislation. ITB refers to revised targets that are linked to the passing of legislation. There is evident coherence between ITB and its partner institutions in this section.

Additional notes

Participation, equal access and lifelong Learning

Objective 2 – the student intake target for 2015 has not been met and the target for 2016 has been reduced.

High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

Objective 1.1 – ITB has exceeded its target number of research students in 2015 and has increased its target for 2016.

Objectives 1.2 and 1.3 – ITB has failed to achieve the proposed number of innovation vouchers and invention disclosures in 2015 and therefore has revised its targets downwards in both categories for 2016.

Enhanced internationalisation

Objective 1 – it is proposed that this target be changed from a percentage of full-time students to a percentage year-on-year increase, which will reduce the target number of international students to be registered in 2016.

Institutional consolidation

Objective 1 – revised targets have been set linked to the passing of legislation.

Financial situation

ITB reported a surplus position of €1,801,000 in its 2014/15 draft accounts and is projecting a surplus budget of €572,000 for 2016.

Capital developments

Refurbishment works on Blocks C and D were completed in 2015 and work is nearly completed on the sports complex. The next priority is a project that includes teaching accommodation, refurbishment of apprenticeship teaching space and sports teaching.