

Mr Richard Bruton, T.D.,  
Minister for Education and Skills,  
Department of Education and Skills,  
Marlborough Street,  
Dublin 1.

29<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Dear Minister,

I refer to your letter of 16<sup>th</sup> May 2018, inviting the Higher Education Authority to convene an advisory panel to consider a technological university application under Section 32 of the 2018 Act. I am happy to report that the advisory panel met in late May and their report was considered by the HEA Board earlier this week.

As you will know, Section 32 of the 2018 Act sets out that the advisory panel, having assessed the application, shall furnish a report to An tÚdarás with a recommendation whether to make an order for technological university designation or not. The Act (section 33) requires that An tÚdarás, having had regard to the eligibility criteria and the report, shall furnish the following to the Minister:

- (a) the report,
- (b) the views of An tÚdarás regarding the report, and
- (c) any other information that An tÚdarás considers relevant.

The report and recommendations of the advisory panel are attached. The views of An tÚdarás regarding the report, and other information that An tÚdarás considers relevant, are as follows:

- An tÚdarás welcomes the report of the advisory panel as a thorough analysis in terms of the legislative requirements as set out in the 2018 Act;
- An tÚdarás thanks the advisory panel and Deloitte (who carried out a metrics analysis) for their work in support of this process;
- An tÚdarás notes and echoes the advisory panel's positive findings in respect of the application, in particular:
  - the efforts of the three applicant institutions over a long time, their enthusiasm for the project, and their resilience in bringing the proposal to this point;
  - the excellent collaboration that currently exists across the three institutes;

- the understanding among those involved of the importance of, and the opportunities presented by, this project as well as the challenges to be faced in bringing a new university structure into full operational effect;
- the quality and commitment of staff members who are part of the Programme and Communication Team;
- the considerable enthusiasm from students, staff and stakeholders, for this initiative.

In this context, the consensus view of An tÚdarás, at its meeting on the 26<sup>th</sup> June, was to support the advisory panel's general findings and recommendations:

- *With respect to the threshold criteria, preparedness and capacity to function as a new technological university the panel is satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements set out in the Technological Universities Act, 2018.*
- *It is the consensus view of the panel members to recommend approval of the consortium application to become a new technological university under the provisions of the enabling legislation, enacted in March 2018.*

This positive recommendation from An tÚdarás is based primarily on the advisory panel's review of performance against the threshold levels in certain metrics established in the Technological Universities Act 2018, supported by an independent data audit undertaken by Deloitte on behalf of the HEA. It also comes in the context of an overall government policy in favour of the creation of technological universities.

At its meeting, An tÚdarás discussed the challenges and concerns expressed by the advisory panel, which are expanded below, but noted that the establishment of a new University should be viewed in the long term.

- An tÚdarás notes and highlights the advisory panel's recommendations in respect of the future of the project, the challenges that might arise, and the need for clear, careful and inclusive planning:
  - *the 'development, approval and implementation of the new strategic plan is as critical for institutional development as it is for setting an academic, student-centric, research-active and community engagement agenda for the next decade';*
  - An tÚdarás is of the view that this recommendation highlights the need for a clear set of agreed and well-defined future institutional structures; the need for the new technological university to grow internationalisation and research capability; and all while maintaining a focus on broader provision.
  - An tÚdarás shares the advisory panel's view that it will be critical to manage all these tensions effectively.
- An tÚdarás notes and highlights the advisory panel's recommendations in respect of the need for external and system level supports. These include the need to consider:
  - financial and other resource challenges;

- an appropriate technological university funding model;
- an appropriate technological university borrowing framework;
- flexibility to develop appropriate organisational structures and internal resource allocation models;
- support to build capacity in research and internationalisation.

An tÚdarás discussed three major challenges in depth and wanted to share their concerns with you, as you make your decision. These concerns are set out in some detail as follows:

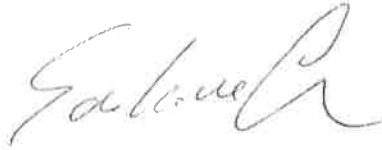
- **Funding** - In the advisory panel report and in subsequent discussion between An tÚdarás and the panel Chair, the question of funding was raised repeatedly. The report states that *“it is yet to be determined precisely what the resource ramifications of a new technological university will be”* and suggests that *“unexpected expenditures may be necessary”* over an unstable post-merger phase lasting at least five years. In the advisory panel’s judgement, *“economies of scale will not necessarily be realised by merger, at least at the beginning”*. International experience shows that adequate funding is a key factor in the success of complex mergers in higher education. Given the widely-publicised gaps in current funding of Irish higher education, and the backlog of calls on any additional funding that might be made available, it will be important to ensure that the funding of any technological university project does not come at the expense of the wider higher education and research system.
- **Staff** - While the advisory panel report notes the considerable enthusiasm for the project among all groups encountered by the advisory panel, it also refers to the existence of dissenting voices. In a conversation on how to improve the process, for any future consideration of technological university designation applications, the advisory panel Chair noted that the visit schedule did not include a drop-in session that would have enabled the advisory panel to hear and understand these voices. The advisory panel report also refers to potential changes in staff contracts that may be required. The complexity associated with contract changes and other staffing matters in the transition to a technological university should not be underestimated.
- **Research and reputation** - The advisory panel reports the *“differences in the levels of research activity and the depth and maturity of research cultures”* between the three merging institutions, which are very stark. The merger will lead to an immediate drop in the research metrics per academic staff member, as used in the international rankings, from the level currently seen at DIT. There is a reputational danger in this, both institutional and sectoral, and strong leadership with a commitment to research excellence will be needed to develop an overall research profile consistent with technological university status. To achieve this *“while not losing the focus on access, the student-centred approach, flexible learning paths, the scope of qualifications from levels 6 to 10, and the links with the community and economic and social partners”* will be a very significant leadership challenge.

An tÚdarás would propose an initial follow up review (circa 12 months) to examine progress on implementation and development of the proposed technological university, and to look at

how the new institution has begun to address the comments and advice set out in the independent advisory panel's report as well as the issues set out here.

I trust the attached advisory panel report and the comments above will assist you in making your decision on this application for designation as a technological university under the 2018 Act. We look forward to engaging with you further on this process if required and remain happy to assist in any way.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Graham Love', written in black ink. The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with a large initial 'G' and 'L'. Below the signature is a solid horizontal line.

Dr Graham Love,  
Chief Executive.