Report of the International Advisory Panel to An tÚdarás

On the CUA Application for Designation as a Technological University

Panel Assessment and Recommendations on CUA

PART I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

As one of its goals, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (January 2011) proposed a reform of the institute of technology sector to meet national strategic objectives. Specifically, it recommended a pathway for consortia of institutes of technology to evolve into technological universities upon demonstration that they have met a set of criteria and requirements to attain technological university status.

The Technological Universities Act, 2018 (the Act) came into effect in March 2018 to support this national goal. The Act provides for the dissolution of consortia of institutes seeking to attain the status of technological university (TU) and the transfer of their functions and financial and human resources to the new TU provided certain conditions are met. These conditions concern the functions, governance, academic oversight and operational requirements of technological universities. The Act further specifies the eligibility criteria and provides for an independent advisory panel to assess preparedness for a merger.

The Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA) – comprising Galway-Mayo, Letterkenny and Sligo Institutes of Technology – submitted an application in May 2021 to become a technological university. An international advisory panel was convened in June 2021 by An tÚdarás, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), to provide independent advice to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the merits of the CUA's application for technological university status.

1.2. Panel's Activities and Way of Working

The panel held online meetings with the CUA and its external stakeholders over six half-days (16-23 July 2021) to review the application of Galway-Mayo, Letterkenny and Sligo Institutes of Technology to merge into one technological university.

In addition to its review of the application and extensive supporting documentation provided by both the CUA and the HEA, the panel considered an independent audit of the metrics undertaken by Deloitte (15 February 2021), on behalf of the CUA, and an analysis of CVs that CUA had put forward in the doctoral equivalency category undertaken by BH Associates, on behalf of the CUA.

The panel met a large number of internal and external stakeholders of the CUA: senior staff, Board Chairs and members, academic and administrative staff and their union representatives, student representatives, and external stakeholders from the public and private sector. An email address was made available by the HEA for anonymous and confidential comments from the institutional constituencies; 26 emails were received and read carefully by the panel. The panel also met with representatives of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and

Science, the HEA, Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) for a broad ranging discussion on the national and regional context and the current state of the higher education policy developments in Ireland. The panel discussed with a Deloitte representative the methodology and the outcome of its study. An additional discussion with the HEA was requested to focus on the equivalency analysis provided by BH Associates.

In total, the meeting schedule provided for over 20 different discussions. In addition, the team met privately to debrief each session and prepare the next ones and during the report writing stage.

In examining the documentation and in the course of the virtual site visits, the panel assessed three aspects:

- the CUA's performance metrics benchmarked against the eligibility criteria as set out in Sections 28, 29 and 34 of the Act;

- the consortium's capacity and plan to reach the metrics required ten years after designation as a technological university; and

- the overall level of preparedness of the consortium institutions to transition to technological university status, including the comprehensiveness of the planning framework.

The virtual visits allowed the panel to verify the information received, request and analyse additional information, clarify aspects of the data provided, and obtain a range of perspectives on the issues.

Part 2 of the report presents the panel's assessment of whether the CUA meets the performance metrics and the eligibility criteria of the Act. Part 3 presents recommendations to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and to the CUA.

PART 2. SECTIONS 28, 29 AND 34 OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITIES ACT, 2018

Part 2 discusses Sections 28, 29 and 34 of the Act. It presents a relatively detailed discussion on the criteria ('stretched metrics') that will constitute a continuing focus for the future TU. Those that have already been met or do not require any further consideration by the CUA receive a comparatively cursory assessment. Two types of judgment conclude each section:

- with respect to the current situation, whether compliance has been met; and

- with respect to the future trajectory, whether based on the available evidence, the panel has reasonable confidence that the future technological university will meet the legal requirements and criteria within the next ten years.

2.1. Section 28

Section 28 of the Act sets out threshold levels for student and staff profiles, research student growth potential, potential to increase doctoral holders amongst the staff, the current scope of research and its future potential, academic breadth, quality compliance, internationalisation, and the innovation capacity commensurate with technological university status.

Current Student Profiles (Section 28 1(a)(b))

With respect to the current student profiles, Deloitte did not identify any major issues of concern under this heading, apart from identifying the Master programme in Applied Sports and Exercise Nutrition, a 90-ECTS programme, of which 30 ECTS are allocated to the research project and an additional 30 ECTS devoted to research methodology and practice-based research. Although this brought the total of research related ECTS to 60, only 30 were devoted to the thesis. The panel considered the characteristics of this Master to be in line with current international developments in practice-based disciplines.

The panel is satisfied that the CUA meets this criterion.

Reaching the Student Metrics Within Ten Years (Section 28 1 (b))

The Act requires applicants to demonstrate that they have a plan to increase the number of research degree students from 4 to 7 per cent within ten years. The CUA is confident to reach the target within four rather than seven years, based on national demographic projections, their recent enrolment growth trajectory at the Master level and their strengthened Master offer (both current and planned). The CUA has the supervisory capacity to accompany this change, provided the teaching workloads are redeployed. Further additional favourable factors include the following:

- The positive experience conveyed by the postgraduate research students that the panel met, including regarding their supervision and the international networking opportunities provided.
- The transformation into a TU should increase the visibility and attractiveness of the regional higher education offer.
- Further enrolment growth will be supported by enhanced research capacity thanks to a national commitment to support the TUs and the availability of several national and European funding streams (e.g., TUTF, EU Recovery Fund, EU Regional Development, SFI Frontiers for Partnership Awards programme, Irish Research Council). This gives confidence to the panel that the projected rate of conversation from Master to doctoral level is realistic.
- The innovation strategy of many companies in the region, which the CUA is committed to support, implies a growing need for high-level skills.

The panel is satisfied with the information provided on this criterion and is reasonably confident that the required metrics will be reached.

Current Staff Profiles (Section 28 1(c) - (f))

With respect to current staff profiles, Deloitte did not identify any major issues of concern under this heading. The CUA put forward 50 CVs in the doctoral equivalency category, which called for further expert analysis. This was undertaken by BH Associates, on the basis of the Act, the *HEA Guidance Note for Applicants*, the Deloitte report, the CUA doctoral equivalency framework, the CUA template application for level 10 equivalency and the CUA database of Level 10 equivalency applications. BH Associates concluded "that the CUA consortium has developed an appropriate Level 10 Equivalency Framework, and that they have applied the methodology appropriately to identify staff holding a doctoral equivalent degree." Two separate discussions held with QQI and the HEA confirmed that this conclusion was in compliance with the Act.

The panel is satisfied that the CUA meets this criterion.

Reaching the Staff Metrics Within Ten Years (Section 28 1(c) - (f))

There is a plan in place to increase the number of doctorate level qualified staff from 45 to 65 per cent, (or 55 per cent with 10 per cent equivalent) within 10 years as required by the Act. Achieving the set target, however, is dependent on more than a good plan for staff development. There is agreement amongst all the interlocuters interviewed by the panel that all the TUs will have trouble meeting this requirement if the staff contract is not changed. The current OECD review gives hope that this issue will be resolved soon. Moreover, the prospects for increased research funding flowing to the TUs should strengthen their research culture and capacity.

The panel is satisfied with the information provided on this criterion and is reasonably confident that the required metrics will be reached.

Research Capacity (Section 28 1(g) - (j))

The CUA demonstrated that it meets the research capacity eligibility criteria:

- The Act requires that a consortium applying for TU status provides research-based awards and research and innovation activities "in not less than 3 fields of education". The CUA exceeds this requirement (7 fields of education rather than 3). Their external stakeholders are unanimous in praising the positive impact on the region of the research and innovation activities of CUA.

- All doctoral programmes on offer comply with the HEA and the QQI regulations.

Beyond these formal requirements, the CUA has taken steps to promote research across the three institutes, for instance via networking opportunities and CUA bursaries, with joint supervision across institutions. They have created a staff researcher grade. They are aware of the need to strengthen their research strategy, including its European and international dimensions, and to re-examine the current research structures after designation.

The panel is satisfied that the CUA meets these criteria.

Capacity to Function as a TU (Section 28 1(k) – (l))

Section 28 1(k) – (l) of the Act requires the CUA to demonstrate its capacity to effectively perform the functions of a technological university in relation to five aspects as discussed below.

Governance (Section 28 1 (k)(i)

The Act requires that the applicants demonstrate that "they have integrated, coherent and effective governance structures in place concerning academic, administrative and management matters." Prior to designation, however, and for obvious legal reasons, it is impossible for CUA to currently meet the criteria for integration. The panel, therefore, examined governance (a) up to designation and (b) thereafter.

a) Governance up to designation: The panel received clear evidence of an inclusive and respectful dialogue with all stakeholders, internal and external, in working together as CUA and through many aspects of the future merger. Coupled with the lengthy process of preparation of this proposal, this has resulted in a widely shared and positive sense of the prospects for the new TU. There are already established (or in the pipeline) organisational arrangements and, in many areas, practices for working across the three,

including across the three student unions. Covid experience has further confirmed the scope for working effectively with partners at a distance. Furthermore, CUA has already agreed to establish a committee tasked for conducting an international search for the first president of the new TU.

b)   Regarding the design of the future governance and organisation, the panel appreciated:
- The description of the responsibilities of the future TU's Executive Board and its Governing Board and the plan to appoint governors against a competence matrix.
- The choice to create four faculties, with their own budget, responsible for all academic functions (teaching, research, international, etc.), and for developing and implementing a faculty strategy in line with the institutional strategy.
- The awareness of the need to define precisely the division of responsibilities (particularly budgetary) between the new TU and its component structures.
- The development of a risk register for both the amalgamation process and the future TU.

However, while the panel is convinced that the local campuses will remain important for certain aspects of local delivery and for gathering local intelligence about stakeholder requirements, it is not fully persuaded of the purpose of the proposed college structure. The panel recognises that the present organisational model is a transitional proposal, subject to change as the new TU evolves, but it considers that greater effort needs to be made to explain the precise functions of the new colleges, and how they differ from the existing IoTs. Otherwise, there is a risk that they could appear to be simply a continuation of the existing IoTs, which the panel does not believe is the intention.

Engagement (Section 28 1(k)(ii)(iv)(l)
The panel received abundant evidence that strong links already exist with business, enterprise, the professions, the community, local interests and other stakeholders in the region. It is evident that these partners are already deeply engaged with, and enthusiastic about, the CUA. They look forward to the new TU as a major driver of, and magnet for, investment, retention of local talent via opportunities at all Levels from 6-10, and support to all sorts of actors through collaborative research, research-based intelligence gathering, and new (including international) contacts.

The panel heard many examples of existing relationships, involving co-delivery of teaching, co-funding of, and collaboration in, research and innovation, operating at all levels in the organisations (individual and corporate contacts, depending on circumstances), and with a sense of very easy (and much appreciated) access to the CUA partners.

Quality Assurance (Section 28 1(k)(iii))
The panel received assurance from the external bodies and the CUA that all three IoTs currently operate within the QQI and THEA frameworks, with very little divergence across them. The meetings provided evidence of a collaborative working process across the institutions to achieve agreed quality assurance processes for the new TU and to maintain their strength in enhancing teaching and learning provision. A framework for Marks and Standard across the new TU, developed by a working group, was adopted. The consortium has agreed a new QA framework for the future TU, developed a more structured approach to regulating the doctorate in the past two years and is prepared to become an awarding body.

Responding to local and regional needs through programme development

One of the CUA's mains strengths has been in its response to local and regional needs through programme development. The panel received multiple confirmations that this engagement will continue. Examples of good practice include:

- The apprenticeships schemes and work-integrated learning; the virtual placements that offer students work experience and support employers in filling skills gaps.
- 'iNote', a key project on digitally enhanced learning, will ensure that the new TU will accommodate flexible learners from the diverse communities in the region.
- IT Sligo's considerable experience in online teaching and delivery will be shared across the new TU, indeed nationally, since IT Sligo is involved in the development of the national QA framework for blended learning.
- There is a very clear set of lifelong learning (LLL) and continuing professional development (CPD) activities; the three IoTs have built up good connections regionally – this could be considered an area of strength
- There are good links currently to local colleges to encourage and support learners from the region and provide good access to education. The student numbers suggest they are delivering to the National Plan to access to higher education 2015-2021 (currently under review): mature students 36% (target 16%); students with disabilities 25% (target 8%). The three IoTs have reached out to the disadvantaged groups. There appears to be a good model in linking with FE colleges – they are creative in engaging with these groups in the region.

Internationalisation (Section 28 1(k)(v)

The Act requires the TU to provide opportunities for staff and students to teach, research and learn internationally. The panel has received assurance that the current European and international activities of CUA will continue to grow and there is evidence of a shared sense that strengthening both would be a vector of quality and a constitutive dimension of a good research and learning environment. The potential of leveraging the CUA online experience to promote internationalisation and articulating regional and international engagements should be an integral part of the future strategy. A consultant will be hired to develop an international strategy (to be delivered by October 2021) based on identified principles that the CUA has adopted and the post of Vice President International will be created after designation.

The panel is satisfied with the information provided on this criterion and is reasonably confident that the TU will meet the expectations set down in Section 28 1(k) – (l)).

2.2.   Section 29 (1)

Section 29 (1) of the Act specifies that two or more institutions may jointly apply to the Minister for an order to be designated as a new technological university. The Connaught-Ulster Alliance is a consortium of three institutes planning to merge to form a new technological university.

The panel finds that the CUA meets this criterion.

2.3. Section 34

The panel is reasonably confident that the future TU will serve the needs of students, business, enterprise, the professions, the community, local interests and other stakeholders in the region. The panel heard that the new TU is already having an effect as some industries are choosing to locate in the region because of the perceived possibilities that the new TU will bring around skilled graduates and partnerships between the TU and local business. It is clear that the regional partners are fully willing to continue and deepen their existing working relationships with the new TU, with the aim of securing more efficient and effective service to themselves, as well as wider benefits to the region. The partners want to see all present support continue, but with the greater scale, increased delivery scope and efficiency, and elevation of performance levels, that the combined resources of the new TU should afford.

The financial projections in the Submission are conservative. They show an operating surplus based on current resources and make no budgetary assumption about future growth, for instance in student numbers, or developments in funding arrangements. CUA is also aware of the need to consider, in the short term, the costs associated to the merger as well as the financial implications, in the medium term, of renovating some buildings and extending the infrastructure, which will require borrowing (a national issue for the TUs).

The panel is satisfied with the information provided on this criterion and is reasonably confident that the TU will meet the expectations set down in Section 34.

PART 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking further ahead, the ambitions built into the Act for the expansion of research in the TUs, and for their capacity to deliver high quality teaching across often geographically challenging territories, present challenges for all TUs (including CUA), as was detailed in the TURN report. Given the progress to date with the TURN recommendations, the quality of all the interlocutors met by the panel, and their commitment to the project, there is every reason to expect good progress with the longer-term performance, and financial success, of the CUA.

The following sections provides recommendations (3.1) to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; (3.2) at national level and (3.3) at the level of CUA.

3.1. Recommendation to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

With respect to the threshold criteria, preparedness and capacity to function as a new technological university the panel finds that the CUA proposal meets the requirements set out in the Technological Universities Act, 2018.

The panel recommends that the CUA be confirmed as a technological university.

3.2. Recommendations at the national level

It will be important for the current momentum in implementing TURN to continue, thereby underpinning issues such as investment for digital infrastructure, increased research facilities and funding for research students, authority to borrow for capital investment, the reform of the funding

model to reflect the new reality of the higher education landscape, and the reform of the staff contract so as to give due weight to research.

Furthermore, the panel wishes to emphasise that the appointment of the Chair of the new Governing Body will be a pivotal moment, not least for the signal it will send about the expectations for the new TU.

3.3.   Recommendations to CUA

On the functioning of the future TU

1. The 'Organisational Model' in the Submission document is intended to be purely transitional. Accepting that position, the momentum of transformation must be kept up strongly, especially the elements that cut across all three predecessor bodies (the faculties, review of content and modes of provision, student and corporate services, equivalence of experience across campuses, …). This is where the most evident changes will be able to be seen, and demonstrated.

2. As already stated, the panel is not fully persuaded of the purpose of the proposed college structure, and thinks there is a risk that the colleges could appear to be simply a continuation of the existing IoTs, which the panel does not believe is the intention. It will therefore be important to take great care to explain the differences between the new colleges and the old IoTs, and to define clearly from the outset the division of responsibilities and competences at the levels of the TU centrally, the new colleges and the new faculties, and the links between them. This will be the task of the first president, with a deadline of 2023, and must be a major point of attention in the first months of the post-designation phase. As the TU evolves, other structures could then be considered, such as having campuses (instead of colleges) and a number of vice-presidents tasked with developing relations with the local and regional communities. A review of the organisational model should be planned a few years after designation.

3. The CUA leaders have worked in an admirably inclusive manner, engaging with staff and student unions very effectively. It will be important to continue in similar spirit. To that end, it may be worth considering continuing for a time the practice of supporting industrial relations (IR) facilitators under the two IR Fora.

On regional engagement

4. To succeed, the TU must continue to align closely with employer needs, and maintain its current levels of local responsiveness. To do this effectively, it must focus on its strengths, and avoid the risk of overstretch. To continue the area of strength in LLL and regional relationships and awareness, it is key that the local connections and networks are maintained and enhanced. It is important that the new TU continues to attract and encourage students from diverse backgrounds, mature students and those with a disability to have access to education in the region to continue its regional impact.

5. There are considerable opportunities to work in future on a different level with other universities in the region and across Ireland. It will be important, again, to play to the new TUs

distinctive strengths, including their capacity often to address different segments of the student and employer markets from other universities.

On research

6. While the CUA has some specific research strengths, it is also, because of its size, in a vulnerable position. Scaling up and consolidating research will be a challenge that the new TU can meet with increased funding. As mentioned already, support will be needed to boost the numbers of staff with PhDs, improve research facilities and the technical support staff capacity, and convert more students from Master to Doctoral level.

7. The research active staff are clearly committed to the prospect of the new TU. It will be important not to let a false hierarchy develop among staff, in which the research active sit above the others. It would be useful to design transitional arrangements for staff to ensure that they move from teaching intensive to research and teaching contracts and delivery. Appropriate career progression and reward and staff development with the existing staff as well as the new staff will encourage staff to stay and contribute to the region and the new TU. The "European Charter and Code for Researchers" can be a useful guide to managing researchers' careers.

8. Currently the approach to developing research capacity does not appear to be driven by a clear strategy, having emerged from a past in which research was not expected to be a central function of IoTs. While it is important to ensure emerging research fields and expand the research experience to a wider a set of staff, it will be also important to design a research strategy on the basis of the following considerations: build on current strengths; expand the definition of research beyond contract-based, applied research; take into account the Open Science movement and set up a repository to promote research internally and externally; ensure that new TU's arrangements for protecting and applying intellectual property are in line with best Irish and international practice; enhance the capacity to attract high-ranking researchers; and establish international partnerships.

On the learning environment

9. Any transitional arrangements for students on existing programmes at the point of designation should be communicated well in advance of their point of programme completion.

10. A clear strategy for student services across the new TU is needed; students from diverse backgrounds need a clear place to access information to support their studies. Will these services be centralised and how will they be managed? There are 'draft terms of reference for the development of a new strategy for student services'; however, more development is needed to understand how these services will work across the new TU. Funding opportunities across TUTF (transformation fund) should be accessed to support this development.

On an internationalisation strategy

11. A number of ideas could be integrated into the future internationalisation strategy such as creating a 'European and International Commission' in charge of elaborating and proposing a

European and international strategy to the Governing and the Executive Boards; setting up a European and international support service (e.g., for the management of Erasmus grants, advice and support for researchers responding to EC calls for proposals, hosting international guests, etc.); negotiating with certain industrial partners to set up an 'international chair' hosting a recognised researcher in one of the TU's main research fields each year; engaging in a 'Smart Specialization Strategy' with regional partners; applying for membership in EUA and Cesaer.

On a symbolic level

12. The future name of the TU will be decided in a few months. It should give a strong sense of regional identity and signal the importance of its geographical location, including the nearness to the border region.

13. Expectations in the region for the new TU run very high. They will need to be carefully managed. Part of that process could be a launch event that describes some of the extensive array of joint arrangements in teaching, research, and student/corporate services that have already been put in place, and some that are already well under development, together with a sense of what will be required to take the TU forward, and over what timescale.

14. An ambition to create a new 'centre of governance' literally and symbolically is very important. A future estates strategy could suggest ways to consolidate a new identity for the new TU, which could propose a centre for QA, governance and the president's office. A central office for the new registrar and QA office should be established at the start of the TU designation to give confidence to students about the authority of this new office. Similarly, while the panel understands the argument for not having a fixed location for the president's office, it will be important to consider very carefully, with reference to the practical implications, the balance of arguments between the proposed 'roving location' and a fixed office. The new president is likely to want to be involved in this decision.

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