Report
Of the
International Advisory Panel
To An tÚdarás

On the
TU4Dublin Application for designation as
a Technological University

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Panel Assessment and Recommendation on TU4Dublin

Background

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (January 2011), among other goals, proposed reform of Ireland's institute of technology sector to better meet national strategic objectives. Specifically, it recommended consolidation within the sector and a pathway for consortia of institutes of technology to evolve into technological universities upon demonstration that they have met or exceed threshold criteria to attain technological university status.

To this end, the Technological Universities Act, 2018, came into effect in March 2018. The Act sets out the functions, governance, academic oversight and operational requirements of technological universities. It specifies eligibility criteria and application requirements for consortia seeking technological university designation. It describes the order and transitional mechanisms in the establishment of new technological universities and provides for an independent advisory panel to assess preparedness for a merger.

The TU4Dublin consortium – Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) and Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT) – submitted an application on April 30, 2018 to become Ireland's first technological university.

This International Advisory Panel was convened in the third week of May 2018 by An tUdaras, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), to provide independent advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on the merits of the TU4Dublin application for technological university status.

Introduction: Panel Activities

The four-member review panel met in Dublin and conducted activities from 28 May through 31 May 2018 in consideration of the application of DIT, ITB and ITT to merge into one technological university (TU).

In addition to its review of the TU4D application and a number of presentations and supporting documents, the panel met with a very large number of people: senior staff, academic and administrative staff and their union representatives, student representatives, student societies and a number of additional students, and approximately 50 external stakeholders from the community and industry. Site visits were conducted at all three campuses. In all, the meeting schedule provided for 22 different discussions and briefings.

General Findings

The visit and review allowed the panel to verify and amplify the documentation received and to obtain a range of perspectives on the complex and varied issues involved in evolving to a technological university. It allowed the panel to observe that the formal documentation submitted to support the application for technological university designation, excellent as it is, did not do full justice to capturing and representing the excellent collaboration that currently exists across the three institutes. Discussions and the review of related documents also clarified that prior to actual technological university designation and legal merger there is only a fixed amount that can be accomplished within the framework of the enabling legislation to advance planning and implementation. Significant work, already scoped and planned, remains to be done on transitional processes to ensure a smooth transitional phase, should designation as a technological university be granted.

The panel experienced considerable enthusiasm from all quarters for this initiative. Everyone interviewed understood both 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. Importantly, the panel heard no dissenting staff voices on the need and desire for the project, although it was informed that about 10 to 15% of staff have some reluctance about the change.[1] There was marked uniformity and enthusiasm across all groups about the value of a technological university designation.

> Students were particularly unreserved in this regard. The three student unions have already informally merged and are working closely together. The panel was enormously impressed with their leadership, their level of confidence, and the diverse backgrounds that they represented, all of which speaks very well to the calibre of education and student engagement in the three institutes.
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> The academic and staff union bodies were also very supportive. They presented prepared briefs to the panel. They outlined several requests related to administrative staff's involvement in consultation processes and on decision making bodies, changes needed to support faculty engaged in a more intensive research agenda in the proposed technological university, and the resources and structures needed to support the academic and administrative operations of a university. Some of those requests relate to national rather than local issues but have a local relevance as well.

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[1] It should be noted that at the end of its visit, upon returning to the hotel, two panel members received an anonymous transmittal of copies of emails and correspondence dating back to November 2017 and January 2018 relaying concerns in relation to the governance and financial management of the TU4D project. Given the anonymous nature of the transmittal, the fact that no further comment or request accompanied it, the age of the documents, and the lack of any indication of current concerns in these regards during the Review Panel's visit, the Panel deemed the content of these documents to be irrelevant to its considerations.

Stakeholder groups expressed great appreciation for the support and partnership provided by the institutes of technology as well as the responsiveness on the part of the three institutes to stakeholder needs. They expressed the hope that a merger of the existing institutes into one university would not negatively affect current responsiveness and partnerships. Industry representatives were also supportive of the possibility of increased efficiency and effectiveness through working with one technological university instead of collaborations with three separate institutes.

The panel saw evidence of significant efforts to involve all three communities in the work needed to be designated a technological university and to promote ownership of decisions across all staff categories and levels. About 600 staff have been directly involved in the discussions and planning to date. Teams across the three institutions (such as the academic councils and professional services groups) have clearly worked well together, with a number of collaborations having been in place for some time and continuing to grow organically. The Programme and Communication Teams' study of other mergers internationally and interactions with relevant colleagues in recently merged institutions abroad also contributed to this work. The panel wishes to note in particular the coordination efforts and leadership provided by the TU4D Programme Lead, which have contributed greatly to this collaboration, the planning of a very complex process, and regular monitoring of progress toward goals. The quality and commitment of staff members who are part of the TU4D Programme and Communication Team gave the Review Panel confidence that the project is in good hands.

Panel Assessment Process

During the course of its site visits and in panel meetings following scheduled meetings, presentations, briefings and discussions, the panel noted and assessed three factors: the consortium's performance metrics benchmarked against the eligibility criteria set out in Sections 28 and 29 of the Technological Universities Act, 2018; the overall level of preparedness of the consortium institutions to transition to technological university status; and the comprehensiveness of the planning framework and work scope definition to launch the set of critical transitional activities.

Performance Metrics and Compliance with Eligibility Criteria of the Technological Universities Act 2018

Section 29 of the Technological Universities Act, 2018 specifies that two or more institutions may jointly apply to the Minister for an order to be designated as a new technological university [S.29(1)]. The TU4Dublin consortium *prima facie* meets the conditions of S.29 (1) of the Act.

Section 28 (1, a-k) of the Technological Universities Act 2018 sets out threshold levels for student profiles, research student growth potential, staff profiles, scope of research, academic breadth, quality compliance and innovation capacities commensurate with technological university status, and internationalisation.

The Tu4Dublin consortium addressed the Section 28 (1, a-k) performance criteria in Chapter 4 of the consortium application. The panel was assisted greatly in its evaluation of the TU4Dublin data by an independent audit of the metrics undertaken by Deloitte on behalf of the HEA, dated May 25, 2018. The panel had the opportunity to discuss the methodology and the outcome of its study in a meeting with Deloitte representatives and was unqualifiedly satisfied with the methodology adopted by Deloitte.

The panel makes the following observations with respect to specific data presented in the TU4D application (cf. Chapter 4) and the Deloitte findings in their review of those data.

Student and Staff Profiles

Deloitte provided a very thorough check on the staff and student profiles using a solid methodology. Their analysis is congruent with both the data provided by the institutes and HEA data. There were minor discrepancies, often in favour of the institutes, which were more rigorous than required.

The review panel finds these criteria to be met.

Research Activity

Deloitte also verified compliance with the research criteria. The requirement of providing programmes at the doctoral degree level in at least three specified fields is exceeded already. The consortium offers six such programmes which exceeds by one the legal requirement set for offering doctoral programmes in five fields within five years after the merger.

Each institute in the TU4D alliance is compliant with QQI requirements related to the provision and awarding of doctoral degrees.

The review panel finds this criterion to be met.

Engagement

The links with the local communities are exceptional, as evidenced by documentation provided to the review panel and interviews with stakeholders. On the part of the three institutes, there was universal and firm commitment to the centrality of the community engagement mission and to the critical importance of maintaining this mission as a core element of the culture and focus of the proposed technological university.

The Review panel finds this criterion to be met.

Governance

At this pre-merger stage, no new governance system is or could be in place. However, in the review panel's judgement the partner institutes of technology have demonstrated "the

capacity to effectively perform the functions of a technological university" and have existing governance structures concerning academic, administrative and management matters.

The panel notes that the unified structures of one governing body and one academic council will be created and a plan is in place for a post-designation governing body and an academic council. Further details of the institutional design will be conceptualised once the TU's strategy is developed.

All three institutes are in compliance with Section 28 of the Act of 2012 and have agreed to the goal for the unitary QA framework. They estimate that they are already largely convergent in their QA processes and that the gap represents about 20% of their current processes; they intend to embed a quality culture, which is in line with QQI's new priority.

The three partners currently have programmes in place to respond to the needs of business, enterprise, the professions and other stakeholders and are committed to continue to develop programmes to serve these constituencies. The three institutes are particularly proud of offering qualifications from level 6 to 10 and are intent on pursuing their access agenda.

The Review Panel finds this criterion to be met.

Internationalisation

The three institutes of technology have over 800 international agreements in place and have developed an international strategy, which includes "internationalisation at home."

The Review Panel finds this criterion to be met.

International Advisory Panel Recommendation to the Minister for Education and Skills

With respect to the threshold criteria, preparedness and capacity to function as a new technological university the panel is satisfied that the TU4Dublin 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 TU4Dublin consortium application to become a new technological university under the provisions of the enabling legislation, enacted in March 2018.

Further comments and suggestions related to the Road Map ahead for TU4D

The vibrancy of a new university of technology will be dependent on attention to both the external as well as the internal conditions of success. In this regard, the first new university of technology will be viewed as a model for those considering future applications for technological university designation. It is in this spirit that the panel provides further comments and suggestions.

As noted in the introductory statement above, there is considerable support by the internal and external communities for this project. And there are great expectations on the part of many internal and external stakeholders regarding what the new technological university can achieve. It will be important to manage those expectations and also to ensure that staff are well supported in their work, particularly those directly involved in the most challenging aspects of the merger.

In addition, it will be critical to manage several tensions effectively:

> The tension between becoming a more research active institution 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.

> The tension between creating a unitary institution while not losing the special assets and operating culture of each campus and finding the right balance between decentralisation and centralisation.

> The tension between the need to maintain agility and flexibility while having the optimal layers of hierarchy.

It is planned that a new unitary governing structure will be created upon designation as a technological university. In keeping with good practice, this structure should be clear, transparent and as flat as possible. The new strategic plan that will be formed under the leadership of a new president will need to be grounded in the new vision, mission and values of TU4D, recognise the challenges mentioned in the existing strategic plans of the three institutes, and at the same time prioritise the goals and objectives of the first stage of the technological university.

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. It is an opportunity to build a quality assurance culture and an internationalisation perspective into the operating DNA of the university. It provides a backdrop, through its related implementation plans, to clarifying the roles, responsibilities and authorities of the leaders and new leadership structures in the new institution, from the Governing Body, through the President to the line academic and administrative supervisors. Fundamentally, it provides a focal exercise through which the new university leadership, in transition, can maintain the rich tradition of consultation and inclusive planning that has served the three institutions so well in their past few years of planning. In this respect, early and inclusive engagement in the strategic planning process will obviate any lingering concerns about momentum that emerged during the pauses in the process in the past few years.

A set of recommendations has been drafted by consultants (PWC, April 24, 2018) to provide food for thought in considering transitional mechanisms and processes and the organisational structure from which to launch the new university. While such advice is always to be welcomed, it cannot substitute for the authority and the responsibility of the Governing Body and the President to establish the structures and processes, based on their engagement with the university body and its stakeholders and partners, that meets the bespoke needs of a unique institution and that is fit for purpose in enabling the rich vein of innovation and engaged relevance that is characteristic of the founding institutions of TU4Dublin.

Indeed, the span of qualifications that would be available through TU4D, from level 6 to 10, is very impressive, and representatives of the three institutes have made it clear that they are dedicated to this broad scope of offerings. A curriculum framework has been created to look at the curricula across the three institutes in a consistent and coherent way, and an analysis has been done to reveal the extent to which programmes across the institutes overlap and where efforts will need to be undertaken to rethink these offerings. A renewed first-year experience has already been thought out. Should designation be granted, efforts will be needed to ensure that the digital campus is developed in line with and in support of all aspects of the academic programmes. It is suggested that opportunities for lifelong learning also be explored fully, building on current best practices and tying into the needs of external stakeholders and alumni.

The potential and intention to increase research activities exist across the institutes. There are currently differences in the levels of research activity and the depth and maturity of research cultures, which is not unexpected given the age of each institute and the level of offering authority of ITB and ITT. It should be noted in this regard that according to comments received, ITB and ITT have a good track record at requesting approval of their research degrees in a careful and conservative way. This gives confidence that they will continue to be measured and prudent in developing this area, while promoting the opportunities for interdisciplinarity that the merger will provide. The stakeholders interviewed, optimistic about a positive decision, expressed hope that the technological university would keep the same flexibility in cooperating with them as has been the case in the past and that they might be considered as potential partners as research increases in support of innovation.

Post-designation funding will be needed as well as patience from authorities that there will be at least five years of a post-merger phase that will be unstable, when unexpected expenditures may be necessary. The need for greater levels of research activity may require changes in academic staff's contracts to ensure an appropriate balance between teaching and research. Development of the digital campus will require investment not only in technology but in staff development and student support. In the panel's judgement, economies of scale will not necessarily be realised by merger, at least at the beginning. However, statements were made during interviews with staff that possibilities exist to do more with current funding in some areas.

It is yet to be determined precisely what the resource ramifications of a new technological university will be. The panel hopes that resources will be available to make this new university a success. The panel is reassured that both the institutions involved in the current application and the government agencies engaged in processing the application, and supporting the Minister in his review, are conscious, respectively, of the fiscal pressures related to ensuring a smooth and seamless transition for students and community stakeholders. Indeed, the practice of the Irish Government to engage in long-term foresight, linking strategy to the development of supporting implementation programmes that are resourced appropriately, is refreshing from an international perspective.

Internationalisation is a major goal of the technological university. As a technological university, students earning a credential will have greater ease in receiving the appropriate recognition of their education by those outside the country who are unfamiliar with institutes of technology. Anecdotal evidence suggests that IT alumni in the diaspora are extremely pleased that they may have a new university platform from which to affirm the value of their degrees. It is anticipated that attending a technological university will also be more attractive to students from outside the country. This benefit to students as well as the opportunity to build more and deeper international networks with industry is looked forward to. At the same time, the regional remit of the institution will need to be maintained and tended to.

Internal communication should continue to be a point of attention: it is essential to the success of the project and should be a two-way communication process, insuring that the base has channels to express their views. External communication will be crucial to ensure that the new institution is well positioned nationally and internationally.

Post Script

The panel members would like to express their sincere appreciation to the Minister and the HEA for the privilege of having served on this seminal advisory panel. They would like to thank the leadership of the three institutes, their staff, students and stakeholders for creating the appropriate conditions to allow open, productive and energising conversations. They are grateful to the HEA officials who supported their work diligently, professionally and with good spirits.