

# Criteria for Technological University Designation



Irish Business and  
Employers Confederation

**September 2011**

## **Criteria for Technological University Designation**

IBEC welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed Criteria for Designation to Technological Status. The proposed technological university offers considerable scope to improve how business and education institutions work together on a range of issues, including the development of more 'work-ready' graduates, the provision of employee education and training, more effective knowledge transfer, and a structure that acknowledges the importance of close-to-market research and the availability of consulting/problem-solving services

There are many good examples of the above in the existing Institutes of Technology (IoT). The sector itself has a strong regional presence and well-developed links with local business. However, from a business standpoint, it is critical that the proposed technological university designation is not, what the Higher Education Authority has termed, a 'relabelling exercise' of existing IoTs. The proposed change of status should drive improved performance while stimulating the development of a new type of institution with a distinct mission and character that differentiates it from existing universities.

However, the reputation of the Irish university must not be compromised during this process. Therefore the new institution must first qualify for, and then enjoy, parity of esteem with existing universities. Its executive leadership must also have, according to Professor Marginson's report, 'as much freedom as possible to respond to changing circumstances and develop new initiatives'.

### **Process**

Professor Marginson's report highlights the 'conundrum' of where the criteria will fit into the processes of policy and planning, and the importance of thinking about the scope of the new technological university 'sector' at an early stage. The Hunt report has indicated that 'When, over time, the amalgamated institutes of technology demonstrate significant progress against stated performance criteria, some could potentially be re-designated as technological universities.' The Minister of Education and Skills recently put forward the vision of 'a small number of substantial technological universities: each with a strong regional innovation and skills focus: and each working closely with existing universities and other education providers as part of strong regional clusters and a diverse responsive system.'

But the question still remains 'Is this a pathway that all existing IoT's will eventually be encouraged to go down, albeit in significantly different time-frames?' If not, what are the

implications for the structure of the further and higher education systems. As Marginson has suggested, 'Decisions made now on the criteria and other matters will have long-term system setting consequences'. Notwithstanding the view that internationally benchmarked criteria can be objectively developed, IBEC recommends that this issue is addressed at an early stage.

## **Mission**

IBEC supports the Mission of a Technological University set out in '*Appendix A: Excerpt from Report of Dr Simon Marginson*'. However, for clarity, it would be worthwhile amplifying this with the commentary in the full report that 'technological' should be understood as embracing a larger set of activities than those related to applied science alone.

The Confederation particularly welcomes the criteria on deepening the local orientation of the institution (IBEC's South East Office has provided a specific regional perspective to the HEA in this regard). However, the overall mission should be augmented with an explicit reference to the importance of research that is close to enterprise and a strong emphasis on knowledge transfer. While this is covered later in the document, it is of such critical importance that it should be part of the overall mission.

## **Institutional Profile (scale, level and breadth of provision)**

In the detailed report, Marginson reflects on the pros and cons of setting numerical benchmarks in relation to the institutional profile. He draws a distinction between numerical metrics, which can vary according to local circumstances, and 'central markers' of a technological university.

IBEC believes that a minimum commitment to Levels 9-10 as a proportion of total student enrolments falls into the latter category and should be an important marker for gaining technological university status. The Confederation also agrees that numerical benchmarks, as set out for adult education, occupational education and industry upskilling programmes, should be a 'central marker' of a technological university.

However, the HEA has posed two questions around Marginson's recommendations on institutional profile (i) are specific benchmarks for the proportion of students enrolled at Levels 6 and 7 appropriate so that the criteria do not act as an incentive for institutions to vacate this level of provision? (ii) is there potential for 'clearer benchmarks' on proportions of students accessing the institution from further education?

IBEC believes that it would be counter-productive to build fixed numerical benchmarks for the levels at which programmes are offered or the specific route through which the

programmes are accessed. There will be radical changes in the profile of learners and in the nature of their learning interaction over the next 20 years. Meeting this will require new ways of funding, designing and delivering higher education and learning opportunities, to support a growing emphasis on flexible opportunities, part-time provision, work-based learning and short intensive upskilling programmes. The issue of Level 6/7 provision and non-traditional access will be important considerations but, given the evolving trends in education demand, numerical metrics set at particular moment in time would restrict the responsiveness of the new institution.

It is more important that the institution is 'future proofed' in its capacity and capability to respond to fast changing demands and new circumstances'. The mechanism for this is outlined in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (the 'Hunt Report'):

*'A new contractual relationship or service level agreement between the State and the higher education institutions should be established, as part of a wider strategic dialogue, and this should be used to ensure that the requirements for performance, autonomy and accountability are aligned. Through this process, institutional strategies will be defined and aligned with national priorities.'*

Therefore IBEC believes that numerical metrics should be in place, but that they should reflect an evolving market or particular regional circumstances. IBEC believes that 'strategic dialogue' offers a more flexible mechanism for aligning institutional performance to evolving national priorities, changing local business demand etc. The application criteria itself should ensure that established procedures are in place for facilitating recognition of prior learning and facilitating entry of students from further education, but the metrics should be set and constantly reviewed through strategic dialogue.

## **International**

The requirement for Irish education institutions to grasp the opportunities presented by increasing trends towards internationalisation are set out in the Hunt report and are also outlined in *A Strategy and Action Plan for Irish Trade, Tourism and Investment to 2015*. Therefore IBEC supports their inclusion in application criteria in this section.

## **Teaching and curriculum development**

Given the importance of business involvement in curriculum matters, IBEC would recommend a strengthening of the criteria in this section, particularly around the issue of embedding 'employability' as a key concern in the pedagogy, curriculum and learning

environment. This begs the question of what employers mean by 'employability' but we would suggest that the following definition is a reasonable starting point:

*'A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'*<sup>1</sup>

The criteria should include:

- Writing employability into programme specifications.
- At the institutional level, ensuring that new module and programme proposals are appraised in terms of their contribution to student employability.
- At departmental and programme levels, ensuring that the contribution of the programme and the main constituent modules to employability are spelt out in handbooks, in assessment and teaching plans and in recruitment material.
- Ensuring that there is a variety of assessment methods in programmes.
- Systems in place to explain to students and teachers what is meant by employability and how the programme contributes to its development.
- Systems to help students to translate their achievements into employer-friendly language
- Review and evaluation systems to highlight employability issues. For example, annual module reviews, student evaluations etc.
- At institutional level, ensuring that enhancing student employability through the curriculum is a concern for academic councils etc.

## **Research**

IBEC supports the criteria and overall approach suggested by the Marginson report. Business would particularly welcome a strategy that emphasises applied research, links to enterprises and contributes to innovation and knowledge transfer.

The HEA poses a number of questions in relation to directing the application benchmarks more clearly towards collaborative doctoral provision, specifying the number of doctoral students/graduates and making the criteria for the proposed third field of study in doctoral provision more explicit. Again, we agree that these should be used as

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<sup>1</sup> Learning, Curriculum and Employability in Higher Education, Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke, 2004, RoutledgeFarmer

benchmarks but not as part of the application criteria. They should be determined through the funding mechanisms in line with the recommendation of the Hunt report:

*'In the future, funding should be allocated to an institution in the context of agreement with the HEA of the institution's mission and strategy, and the related targets over the medium term. It will be a key responsibility of the HEA to agree that strategy with the institution, and to be vigilant for any evidence of mission drift'*

We would also draw the Authority's attention to the comment in the full Marginson report:

*'...while it is essential to work within the national framework for PhD study, caution is advised in interpreting the approach suggested by the Hunt report. Care should be taken to avoid a supplicant model of research that would persist into the future and stymie parity of esteem. Sustaining an autonomous effort and the capacity to take initiatives is all-important in research.'*

However, as pointed out above, a prerequisite for this autonomous model will be that the technological university is operating at the highest academic level, albeit in an environment that is specifically focused on technology and its application.

### **Staff capacity and staff development**

IBEC broadly agrees with the criteria set out for staff capacity and teaching. Indeed, the criteria on staff development should be extended to the entire third level sector.

As the Hunt report pointed out, it is not sufficient for academics to be experts in their disciplinary area; they also need to know how best to teach that discipline. They need to have an understanding of learning, theories, and to know how to apply these theories to their practice. They need to appreciate what teaching and learning approaches work best for different students in different situations.

Therefore IBEC suggests that the availability of a dedicated teaching and learning centre should be part of the application criteria. This should provide professional development opportunities for academic staff through a suite of postgraduate programmes in third level learning and teaching, as well as providing training workshops and consultancy supports to departments, schools and faculties on matters related to pedagogies, programme design, assessment strategies and student support.

### **Leadership, management and governance**

IBEC agrees with the criteria on leadership, management and governance. We particularly endorse the view that the governing council should include representatives of

enterprises, occupations, professions and local community. The assumption of full awarding powers at all levels would also seem to be a pre-requisite for university status.

The criteria for an effective technological university leadership are particularly important given the challenges around merging divergent systems and cultures. But, as Marginson argues earlier in the full report:

*'Much depends on the clarity of mission definition and the extent to which this becomes embedded in policy, in the public mind and in institutional practices, while leaving the executive leaders of TUs as much freedom as possible to respond to changing circumstances and develop new initiatives.'*

### **Funding and entrepreneurship**

IBEC agrees with the criteria set out for funding and entrepreneurship and, again, would argue that these are applicable across the third level sector. While we would agree that it would be inappropriate to proscribe the proportion to be raised by this type of activity, the application criteria should ensure that the necessary structures are in place.

### **Engagement with enterprise**

While engagement with enterprise is central to many of the Marginson criteria, the relationship could be deepened through the development of a set of specific benchmarks around this process. The Hunt report highlights a recent strategy document<sup>2</sup> by Cork Institute of Technology identifying a 'a clear need to create a single identity for CIT as an engaged institute' which might help in developing these benchmarks. IBEC would also welcome an opportunity to participate in the development of a set of more specific enterprise engagement benchmarks.

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<sup>2</sup> CIT (2010) Campus Extension Centre & Framework – Proposals for a Centre for the development, support and marketing of CIT's external services