



Higher Education System Configuration

Position Paper

for the

Higher Education Authority

January 2013

Contents

1.	Introduction	Page 3
2.	Importance of Diversity	Page 4
3.	Coherence	Page 4
4.	Definitions	Page 5
5.	Regional Clusters	Page 5
6.	Operating Principles	Page 7
7.	Alliances (national and international)	Page 8
7.1	Internationalisation	Page 8
8.	Thematic and mission based clusters	Page 8
9.	Consolidation	Page 9

1. Introduction

The “National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030” (henceforth “National Strategy”) offers a comprehensive vision for the future of Irish higher education, sets appropriately ambitious goals for teaching and learning, research, engagement and internationalization, and is the stated government policy for the development of the national system of higher education. The National Strategy also describes how higher education should be governed, structured and funded in order to achieve the primary goals of the Strategy. Specifically, Chapter eight of the National Strategy: “Developing a Coherent Framework for Higher Education” addresses the following topics: Retaining Diversity, Regional Clusters, Consolidation and Collaboration, and the Evolution of the IoT Sector.

The Minister’s recent speech of 22 November 2012 on Higher Education Reform has brought welcome clarity on a number of important issues bearing on system configuration as illustrated by the following quotations:

“A core objective will, therefore, be to protect and enhance the role of the IOT sector in supporting enterprise, underpinning diversity and promoting access and participation.

Some Institutes of Technology are on a developmental path towards becoming Technological Universities.

I endorse the criteria set out by the HEA for the establishment of a Technological University. It will be an arduous journey from existing Institute of Technology status to arrive at and meet those criteria. In some cases where institutes merge they may need to consolidate for some time in the new amalgamated entity before advancing further.

...It is clear at this stage that some institutes are not seeking to amalgamate with others and become Technological Universities. I want those institutes and those that do not become Technological Universities to concentrate on their core mission of developing close links with the local and regional business community and giving the best possible quality of education to their students, both from home and abroad.

There is need to achieve critical mass through consolidation and collaboration and the development of Regional Clusters. But the level of system change and rationalisation required will not, frankly, be achieved on the basis of the submissions received to date from the institutions.

...I do not envisage forced mergers of any of the 7 Universities – we have been there before and it simply does not work. Nor would I envisage Institutes of Technology merging with existing Universities or mirroring their provision on a smaller scale. We want collaboration and clusters yes, but not at the expense of losing the distinctive Institute of Technology mission.

It is my view that institutional consolidation together with much stronger levels of inter-institutional collaboration will bring benefits to students, staff and the wider system.

Consolidation and collaboration bring opportunity to pool expertise, concentrate resources, improve choice and enhance the quality of the student experience.”

2. Importance of Diversity

The universities' approach to the landscape process is entirely aligned with the National Strategy. The success of the national system depends first and foremost upon the success of the individual institutions which the system comprises, and second on ensuring that those institutions collectively achieve national goals and priorities. The first is more difficult than the second, and a national system is destined for mediocrity if it does not foster the success of its constituent institutions. The National Strategy articulates this in the following terms:

“At the heart of this strategy is the recognition that a diverse range of strong, autonomous institutions is essential if the overall system is to respond effectively to evolving and unpredictable societal needs.”

Based on the content of the universities' submissions to the HEA, we reject the statement in the HEA's Gap Analysis to the effect that: *“the institutional responses are in general conservative in their approach, concentrating on the future of the institution concerned rather than dealing with system level requirements or overall system coherence.”* We would argue to the contrary that the submissions reflect the considerable efforts of the universities to date in building collaborations and alliances and, in particular, the diversity of these efforts. We emphasise that, consistent with the approach of the strategy to diversity, it is essential that there continues to be a richness and variety to the web of relationships among higher education institutions, and between the institutions and the socioeconomic fabric, nationally and globally.

3. Coherence

However, we also recognize that the level of diversity cannot be so great as to fundamentally detract from the Strategy's goal of achieving a more coherent, efficient and effective system of higher education. The National Strategy expected that issues of: “system level requirements or overall system coherence” would be dealt with through the strategic dialogue process:

“the strategic dialogue will also enable consideration of the sum of the institutional plans to test for overall system coherence and completeness, to ensure national needs are being met, and to identify and address unnecessary duplication.”

In this latter regard, the “landscape” process pursued to date, comprising a top-down desk-based exercise by the international panel and a bottom-up process via individual institutional submissions, and a further desk based “gap analysis” could never be expected to yield a coherent blueprint for the evolution of the Higher Education system. This is especially the case when the major variable of Technological University designation is taken into account, since this has inevitably had an influence on institutional aspirations in terms of matters such as student profile, internationalization, and, critically, the formation of regional clusters.

Achieving coherence has not been helped by the absence of an agreed terminology to describe the various relationships. A further complication is the fact that a concept such as consolidation can have very different meanings depending on the context. For example, in the process to date it has been used to connote both voluntary groupings but also a centrally determined process of institutional rationalization.

We therefore advance the view that it is best to first achieve clarity on the matter of clustering and alliances and having done this, to draw out some principles about how clusters should operate.

4. Definitions

For the purposes of this paper we employ the following definitions:

- **Regional Cluster**

Having due regard for necessary competition, a group of educational institutions, each having articulated their distinctive mission, collaborating and coordinating activities across a broad range of activities (e.g. academic programmes, research, outreach, progression pathways, regional development) within a defined geographical region;

- **Alliance**

A collaboration arrangement between two or more institutions nationally and internationally including partnerships and joint ventures;

- **Thematic or mission based cluster**

A group of institutions collaborating across regions to achieve a common set of goals or purposes associated with a specific theme;

- **Consolidation**

Merger of two or more institutions, the incorporation of one or more institutions into another, or the closure of an institution with the transfer of some or all of its provision to another institution.

As stated previously, the institutions can have a multiplicity of relationships spanning these definitions – and indeed at the margins there is some crossover between the headings. It is vital that the policy debate does not become overly focused on any one set of relationships, since all are important. We now deal with each category in more detail.

5. Regional Clusters

Having underscored the importance of diversity of relationships, we have appropriate regard for the particular emphasis the strategy places on regional clustering. This is especially important in respect of the relationship between Universities, Institutes of Technology and other smaller providers.

The National Strategy outlines the advantages of regional clusters:

- *Better planning and organisation of programmes, allowing for differentiated offerings*
- *Greater impact through pooling of effort and development of shared services*
- *More explicit attention to student pathways and progression*
- *A coordinated approach to enterprise and other stakeholders at regional level*

The National Strategy goes on to state how a regional cluster should operate:

“Clusters will be characterised by close coordination and cooperation between various types of independent higher education institutions. Together they will determine and meet the needs of a wide range of students, communities and enterprises in their region. This will require joint programme planning, collaborative research and outreach initiatives, agreements on mutual recognition and progression, and joint strategies for advancing regional economic and social development. The institutions will also engage with other statutory providers of education and training, such as FÁS and the VECs, to develop integrated regional learning strategies.”

At our recent (December 2012) meeting with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills we stressed the commitment of the universities to the development of regional clusters. We believe that that commitment can be given greater clarity by setting out our vision for a set of clusters. Such clusters must be based on mutual respect among all the participants. But with due regard to this, for the purposes of this paper it is necessary that the universities take a lead in articulating a vision for a particular configuration of geographical relationships between universities and other providers¹. These are the institutions with which the Universities are actively involved in clustering or with which they have the express intention of pursuing a clustering strategy. The proposed five configurations are:

A. North/West

NUI Galway, Galway-Mayo IT, Sligo IT, Letterkenny IT, St Angela's College, Shannon College of Hotel Management.

B. Mid West

University of Limerick, Limerick Institute of Technology, IT Tralee, Mary Immaculate College of Education, St Patrick's College Thurles.

C. South

University College Cork, Cork Institute of Technology, Waterford Institute of Technology, Carlow Institute of Technology.

D. Dublin /North East/ Midlands²

NUI Maynooth, Dublin City University, Royal College of Surgeons, Athlone IT, Dundalk IT, National College of Ireland, St Patrick's College Drumcondra, All Hallows College, Mater Dei Institute, Church of Ireland College of Education and Froebel College of Education.

E. Dublin^{3 4}

Trinity College, UCD, Royal Irish Academy of Music, Marino Institute of Education, National College of Art and Design, Institute of Art, Design and Technology Dun Laoghaire, Institute of Public Administration, Institute of Bankers.

¹ Since regions are different the shape of clusters may differ across regions. This is especially the case in the Dublin/East region

² NUI Maynooth, Dublin City University and the Royal College of Surgeons are in strategic alliance through the 3U Partnership, Athlone IT, Dundalk IT, National College of Ireland and All Hallows College will participate through bilateral arrangements with DCU or NUI Maynooth; prior to their planned incorporation in DCU, St Patrick's Drumcondra, Mater Dei Institute and Church of Ireland College of Education will participate through linkage agreements with DCU, Froebel College of Education will transfer to NUI Maynooth.

³ UCD has three recognised colleges – the National College of Art and Design, the Institute of Public Administration and the Institute of Bankers - which have formal governance links with the university - and is in discussions with the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, DunLaoghaire. TCD is pursuing a similar approach with the Royal Irish Academy of Music and the Marino Institute of Education, with the former recently having become an Associated College of TCD. Simultaneously, UCD and TCD are deepening their existing alliance and have put formal structures in place to progress this, including joint degree awards. TCD is formally collaborating with DIT in teaching and research and is exploring further prospects for collaboration.

⁴ In the context of the greater Dublin region, it is noted also that the DIT, IT Tallaght and Blanchardstown IT have stated their aim to progress an application for Technological University Status.

6. Operating Principles

As shown above, the shape of clusters will vary depending on the makeup of the participants and the geographical area within which they will operate. Nevertheless, it is important that there be a common set of principles underpinning the clusters. We articulate those principles as follows:

- Clusters should be based on a formal written agreement among the members as to the membership of the cluster and the core operating principles;
- Subject to adherence to the principles and any formal bilateral agreements regarding consolidation, the members of the cluster continue to be autonomous institutions operating through their established management structures.

The overall goals of a cluster are to:

- Enhance the student experience and optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of educational provision within the cluster by facilitating joint planning of educational provision and effective inter-institutional collaboration;
- Promote collaboration to ensure critical mass in research and more effective knowledge transfer and commercialisation;
- Engage more coherently and systematically with stakeholders.

In fulfilling these goals, the functions of the cluster would include but not be limited to the following:

- Cooperating to continually analyse, document and respond to the needs of all stakeholders served by the cluster;
- Joint planning of programme provision, and assessment of demand and supply of programmes across levels six to ten;
- Academic co-operation in teaching and research including research sub-specialisation;
- Sharing staff and facilities to the extent feasible and appropriate;
- Agreements on mutual recognition and progression pathways and improving access and progression by non-traditional and part-time students, generally;
- Achieving critical mass in research programmes and doctoral education through sharing of facilities and appropriate mechanisms for supervision and accreditation;
- Cooperating in technology transfer and intellectual property protection in a manner consistent with the Technology Transfer Support Initiative;
- Advancing joint procurement, shared services and improved efficiency and effectiveness in administration and support services generally.

Over time, planning and metrics for the clusters should become more concrete and be reflected in an appropriate reporting mechanism.

The cluster should have a formal governance structure comprising the relevant senior officers of the member institutions together with the 'rules of engagement' which comply with individual institutional governance and autonomy.

7. Alliances (national and international)

Alliances and partnerships may form part of the building blocks of a cluster or they may extend significantly beyond its ambit, nationally and internationally.

Examples of the former are the strategic alliances between DCU/DKIT and UCC/CIT.

Another example is the TCD/UCD Innovation Alliance, which is now being extended on a cross-border basis through cooperation with Queens University Belfast;

Moving beyond clusters, the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance suitably refashioned has the potential to create synergies between the various Dublin/East region clusters;

Similarly, the UL/NUIG Strategic Alliance is developing synergies between the two universities which could not be achieved in a purely regional context.

7.1. Internationalisation

In line with the focus of the HE Strategy on internationalization, international alliances are of particular importance to the universities. Some involve bilateral relationships such as DCU's alliance with Arizona State University, or the Bio Innovate alliance with Stanford University.

We also wish to highlight the various joint ventures which are very significant in the context of the future development of the universities. Examples include: Penang Medical College, Malaysia - UCD and RCSI and AUCMS Malaysia – NUIG and UCC; Beijing-Dublin International College, Beijing - UCD and Beijing University of Technology; UCC- Nanyang Business School Singapore. Some of these collaborations are on a scale which is very substantial in the context of Irish Higher Education. They offer a range of benefits including: (a) enhancing international reputation of individual institutions and Ireland; (b) study abroad locations for Irish students; (c) employment opportunities for young Irish academics; (d) joint research programmes; (e) conduit for fee-paying students to Ireland through joint programmes; (f) financial benefit; (g) support for Irish industry seeking links overseas.

8. Thematic and mission based clusters

While many issues can be addressed regionally, national concentration will remain essential to achieve specific national objectives. As with alliances, thematic and mission based clusters take many forms. At the most aggregated level the IUA and IoTI play an important role in interfacing with the various organs of the state and providing a forum for joint analysis and strategy formulation on the part of their member institutions. Shared service clusters such as the Central Applications Office and the HEAR and DARE admissions systems are further examples. This form of clustering is also evident in the international education environment, involving Education in Ireland based within Enterprise Ireland, and the International Education Officers networks supported by IUA and IOTI. The complete absence of reference to this cluster in the Gap Analysis document is a notable omission, also reflected in that document's apparent lack of

understanding of the overall strategy for internationalization overseen by the Department's High Level Group on international education.

There has also been extensive clustering of effort in area of teaching and learning with a number of significant networks in place. These activities are being further strengthened under the aegis of the new National Forum on Teaching and Learning.

A third vital category of thematic clustering is in the research area. Collaboration to build critical mass has been a requirement of most of the major initiatives supported by the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation (SSTI). The CSETs supported by SFI and the EI supported Technology Centres are all multi institutional collaborative ventures which involve both HEIs and industry partners. They are complemented by initiatives such as Molecular Medicine Ireland and collaborations with other research performers such as the Teagasc and the Marine Institute. These collaborations extend internationally, especially through the EU Framework Programme/Horizon 2020.

Research performance is extensively tracked by the universities via bibliometric tools such as the Thomson Reuters inCites citation index, and by the research funders. This is not reflected in the Gap Analysis document which also contains an inexplicably erroneous reference to *"the lack of significant research collaborations"*. Commercialisation policy also operates on a clustering basis. Under the forthcoming TTSI II (Technology Transfer Support Initiative) a new hub and spokes model is being adopted which will link up the Universities and Institutes of Technology and put in place a new Central Technology Transfer Office which will be jointly supported by IUA and EI.

It is essential that Higher Education policy fully recognizes the importance of the thematic and mission based clusters and is fully joined up with other policies in areas such as internationalization, research and commercialization.

9. Consolidation

As reflected in the universities' submissions, a significant process is now underway to consolidate teacher education provision up to and including mergers of some institutions with universities. The Minister's speech made it clear that he does not envisage forced mergers of universities and our view is that a consolidation of the number of universities would not be beneficial, especially when seen in the context of regional clusters and the pivotal role universities will play in such clusters.

While many of the recent policy documents treat institutional consolidation and rationalization of academic provision as synonymous, our view is that they should be treated separately. In an overall systems context, provision is best dealt with through the mobilization of clusters, potentially supplemented with dedicated assessment of some aspects of provision at a national level as has happened in respect of teacher education.

It is important that any such rationalization has a solid evidence base, both as to the existence of unnecessary duplication and the feasibility and benefits which would accrue from addressing it.