

The Seanad Special Select Committee meeting to discuss Impact of Brexit on the higher education sector

Letterkenny IT and Dundalk IT are presenting as representatives of the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA). This paper seeks to illustrate steps taken by both Institutions to mitigate the impact of Brexit.

Letterkenny IT

The North West Cross-border FE HE Cluster comprises Ulster University (UU), Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), North West Regional College (NWRC), and Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB). The North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP), led by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council, was instrumental in the launch of this partnership in February 2018. NWSGP is a unique interjurisdictional structure, endorsed by both Governments through the North South Ministerial Council.

The agreement is the result of years of successful collaborative working amongst the four education sector providers – Letterkenny Institute for Technology (LYIT), the Ulster University (UU), North West Regional College (NWRC) and Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB) – with the aim of improving access to higher and further level education and training to students living and studying in the North West City region.

The North West Strategic Growth Plan identifies that “for the North West to remain competitive and at the cutting-edge, the education partners must increasingly collaborate and adopt a joined-up approach to attract students to their campuses”.

This formal strategic alliance among the four partners provides a conduit for a collaborative project which will harness the breadth of partners’ programmes and facilitate development of shared services; boost the economy of the North West region; strengthen the local skills-base; and block the brain-drain of students leaving the area for what they perceive are better opportunities elsewhere. The partners work together as ‘anchors’ for the economy of the region exploiting the links between research, education, workforce development and economic competitiveness.

The project partners are committed to supporting activity which can enable delivery, in a value-adding context, of the following strategic outcomes which are cited in the Irish Higher Education Strategy:

- 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; and
- A coordinated approach to enterprise and other stakeholders at regional level.

Additionally, the agreement supports work which can contribute to the following outcomes of the Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland:

- Facilitate cross-border student mobility;

- Reduce the obstacles to student mobility between North and South;
- Pursue collaboration that is beneficial to the institutions involved and for students; and
- Facilitate cross-border cooperation in teaching and learning, particularly where it is geographically advantageous.

Funding of €250,000 from the HEA Landscape Call 2018 was granted to:

- establish a functioning regional cluster
- focus on programme mapping and student pathways
- develop a regional FE/HE prospectus
- identify opportunities for collaboration to better support the innovative industry in the North West City Region (NWCR).
- examine opportunities to make the region more attractive to inward investment.

The 2019 proposal to support Smart Industry in the North West City Region (Smart Industry NoW) received €500,000 from the HEA Landscape Call recognising that the NWCR has transitioned over the past decade to become a hub for companies in the Smart Industry sector with a particular strength in Fintech/ICT. This proposal:

- concentrates on industry engagement
- focusses on the Smart Industry sector
- delivers on the significant potential of the education partners
- better supports the innovative industry in the NWCR.

This *Smart Industry NoW* project is in line with *Future Jobs Ireland 2019 Preparing Now for Tomorrow's Economy* will give students/employees the skill sets that are in very high demand and offer access to exciting and rewarding careers. The partners collectively have the potential to deliver the key cutting-edge skills identified in the report: Artificial Intelligence, Augmented and Virtual Reality, Data Analytics, the Internet of Things and blockchain.

In recent months the Cluster has established a Smart Industry Board comprising representatives from industry, local authorities and education providers on both sides of the border. In addition, the North West Regional Skills Forum is represented on the Board. This is a significant development and will lead to many positive outcomes over future months and years.

Further projects from this alliance will aim to leverage the partners' ingenuity and flexibility in providing bespoke cutting-edge programmes for innovative industry in the NWCR. Partners provide research informed education and training via the very significant and developing research assets in the region. These assets include the WiSAR Lab at LYIT together with LYIT's INTERREG funded cross-border centres: Centre for Advanced Manufacturing (involving Ulster University), Centre for Personalised Medicine (involving Ulster University), and Bryden Centre (Renewable Energy); and Ulster University's key research strengths at its Magee campus: Cognitive Analytics Research Lab (CARL); Intelligent Systems Research Centre (ISRC); and further enhanced through City Deal Innovation projects: Centre for Industrial Digitalisation, Robotics and Automation (CIDRA); and the Transformation for Healthcare Research, Innovation and Value-based Ecosystem (THRIVE).

LYIT's Strategic Plan 2019-2023 affirms that the Institute is motivated to seek out collaboration partners that can add value, extend our reach, or provide impetus to ongoing activity. The continuation of the cross-border cluster engagement is strategically important to LYIT and key to our

pursuit of Technological University status through the Connacht-Ulster Alliance with our partners IT Sligo and GMTI. The CUA has recently made its application to become a Technological University and this initiative will be processed over the summer months with a proposed designation date for the new university of January 2022. Our partners in the cross-border cluster share our understanding of the challenges that Brexit represents, and this cluster offers opportunities for a better coordination of the FE and HE response to these challenges for the North West cross-border region.

In June 2019, the education partners presented their plan for 2020 in ‘Delivering Economic Growth through Regional Innovation Pathways and Networks’ at the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) meeting at Dublin Castle. In 2020 the Cluster also presented to the Council of Europe, Centre of Expertise and in 2021 to the North West Regional Development Group. The coming years clearly offer many exciting opportunities for increased collaboration in tertiary education in the North West City Region with the significant City Deal projects for Derry and Strabane, commitment via the Irish Government for greater support for cross-border collaboration in higher education and research via the *New Decade New Approach* agreement, plans to develop the Ulster University Magee campus including the delivery of the School of Medicine (opening August 2021), and the planned €20 million extension at LYIT.

The initial MoU between the partners reflected the HE strategies of RoI and NI, and regional development strategies on both sides of the border. There has been significant ongoing alignment of this project with the changing national policy context and the changing operating environments for each of the partners. Much has changed since the MoU was signed in February 2018; at that point the real implications of Brexit had not been fully grasped and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement including the Executive, the Assembly and the North South Ministerial Council were not operating as planned. The inclusion in the ‘Programme for Government – Our Shared Future’ of the establishment of a Shared Island Unit launched by An Taoiseach is also very welcome in progressing the work of the Cross-border Cluster. The future impact of Brexit on the North West cross-border region, the most connected cross-border region on this island, has garnered significant national and international attention and has both shaped and given greater impetus to the activities of the Cross-border FE HE Cluster.

Mr Paul Hannigan, President, Letterkenny IT

Mr John Andy Bonar, VP for Research, Equality and External Affairs

31 May 2021

Dundalk IT

Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) has been at the forefront of delivering excellence in higher education to meet the educational, economic, social and cultural needs of the distinctive and unique region in its long fifty-year history. At the centre of its commitment to the region is its enduring and unwavering commitment to the learners, families, schools, colleges, employers, enterprises and the wider community. We attach our visioning strategy which provides the outlook for moving forward both in the context of consolidating existing relationships on the M1 corridor and a merger as a Technological University.

In relation to the impact of Brexit from a Dundalk Institute of Technology perspective, we have structured this opening statement under 5 key headings of strategic location, students, staff, enterprise and innovation, research and technological university.

(1) DkIT is located in a strategically geographic location:

- Located in the North East region, serving North Leinster-South Ulster region, the Institute is strategically positioned along the M1 Economic Corridor between the two capital cities of Belfast and Dublin in the most advantaged part of the island in terms of population, GDP, economic and industry profile:
 - With the ability to engage with a potential critical population of 3.33 million within a 90-minute drive time from many key urban centres along the Dublin-Belfast corridor;
 - Positions the Institute to directly deliver on the key aims and objectives of Project 2040 in ensuring balanced regional development;
 - The National Planning Framework: Ireland 2040 Our Plan highlights the opportunity of the border network of Drogheda-Dundalk-Newry in the mid-stage of the Dublin-Belfast Corridor. Project 2040 has identified Dundalk as a key economic centre in the context of the Dublin-Belfast corridor and is earmarked for strategic investment to ensure that Dundalk has the capacity to grow sustainably.
- Border location serving a rural/border region with strong links nationally and internationally positions the Institute:
 - To contribute as a strategic Higher Education Institute (HEI) in the Shared Island agenda with cross border HEI partners positioned along the M1 Economic Corridor to include Queen's University Belfast and Dublin City University;
 - With a strong identity as an Institute located in the border region to Northern Ireland in the context of the Shared Island agenda, Good Friday Agreement and its proximity to the non-EU jurisdiction land border resulting from Brexit and the opportunities that this affords the Institute and the region;
 - Access to Peace Plus funding for Northern Ireland and Border Counties only to advance research, innovation, knowledge cluster development, infrastructure, climate agenda and address disadvantage communities.

(2) Students:

Recruitment Trends

Recruitment from Northern Ireland has moved forward in a positive trajectory in recent years due to focussed marketing, the efforts of the Institute's Northern Ireland Working Group and a harmonisation of application pathways.

Enrolled students from Northern Ireland (including first years) in DkIT stand at over 8% of the total student population.

We have seen a decrease in applications to CAO this year. We attribute this to pandemic effect which has prevented school visits and attendance at live UCAS Fairs. It is not clear what the effect will be on enrolment in September. However, prior to this we were experiencing a steady increase year after year following the Institute's decision to invest heavily in Northern Ireland.

One of the significant barriers to increasing cross border numbers remains the transfer and grading of non A Level results (BTECs / OCR Cambridge Technicals Vocational Qualification Level 3 UK equivalent of Republic of Ireland Level 5) and the timing of offers. Central Applications Office(CAO) offers come out after the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) offers - so while a student may have been keen to come to DkIT - if they accept a UCAS offer they are very unlikely to take a DkIT offer which may only be made to them 1 or 2 weeks later. This will be an issue for us this year as UCAS offers will be made on 10th August. We also lose potential students as some of them receive unconditional offers from UK colleges from around Jan/Feb onwards.

Our Ask: More flexibility around Round Zero/early round offers within the CAO for those programmes that are not in high demand where we can predict with certainty that we have capacity (unlike high demand programmes).

Our Ask: Dedicated funding to help promote and create awareness of the Republic of Ireland opportunities in Higher Education

Our Ask: It would be very helpful if the BTEC results were submitted electronically to CAO in the same manner as A level and Leaving Cert results.

Fee Status of Students in NI

Schools need updated guidelines on the status in relation to fees and finance/grants available and what sources of support are available via Student Finance Northern Ireland and SUSI - Brexit has created huge uncertainty in this area.

Recognition of qualifications

This has been raised by students and parents following Brexit. Appears to be confusion with regard to RoI National Framework Qualifications

Our Ask: Promotion by QQI regarding National Framework Qualifications stressing the EU wide/global mobility and recognition that flows from this

(3) Enterprise and Innovation:

Memorandum of Understanding MOUs

DkIT has recently developed our Corporate Partnership Programme, which is a key strategic initiative aimed at providing a structured framework for the Institute to work with high profile organisations across industry, community and professions in the region. To date DkIT has signed partnership agreements with Northern Ireland headquartered companies and the North/South based Energy Trading Ireland, and the Fintech Corridor Initiative that spans the Dublin to Belfast economic corridor and are currently in development with others including the Focused Engineering Network.

Southern Regional College

2019 collaboration between RSC and DkIT School of Business and Humanities i.e. Brexit Research Study conducted by students from each institute exploring the issues faced by small businesses and documents their concerns in a joint cross border survey of local businesses and entrepreneurs.

A joint submission to IntertradeIreland was made and funding awarded by the DkIT Regional Development Centre with Southern Regional College on the following for a cross border pilot concept Supporting Student Enterprise & Innovation in the North East, South Ulster and cross border Region; that unfortunately was cancelled due to Covid 19 to be revisited in 2022

Fusion

On average, we conduct six Fusion programmes funded through IntertradeIreland. We have been recognised on three successive occasions in recent years awarded “Exemplar projects” status on the Fusion Programmes in the Engineering and ICT sectors which supports cross-border applied research collaborations between industry and academia. In 2020 three Fusion programme projects were awarded between NI Industry and the DkIT School of Engineering

IntertradeIreland on its Interreg EU funded cross border Co-Innovate Programme

We have partnered with IntertradeIreland on its Interreg EU funded cross border Co-Innovate Programme providing expertise to industry requirements on a number of ongoing projects. To date we have 10 Co-Innovate projects awarded and operational across the school of Engineering and School of Informatics and Creative Arts

The Regional Development Centre (RDC) is in excess of 30 years in existence and was the first campus-based enterprise and innovation centre in Ireland Established in 1989. Since its inception, the centre has supported more than 1,660 entrepreneurs through a variety of supports aimed at helping them to grow and sustain their businesses.

(4) Research

The Research Office has actively worked towards the development and consolidation of research links with partners in Northern Ireland in recent years. The following are a sample of the initiatives undertaken:

- Institute for Connected Health and Wellbeing/Netwell/Casala involved in Interreg project led by UU in connected health domain.

- CREDIT involved in energy storage project with UU and is Interreg funded
- Institute for Connected Health and Wellbeing/SMRC leading a Interreg funded project with QUB
- Research Office hosted 12-15 A level students to undertake summer research projects in DKIT (this could be scaled up with a dedicated funding scheme cross border)
- Modest numbers of PhD / MSc students from NI currently doing their degrees in DKIT
- Numerous PI to PI collaborations between DKIT and QUB/UU but these need be scaled up

Our Ask:

- Dedicated fund to drive research collaborations between QUB/UU and a border college (like DKIT). If involving other universities in Republic of Ireland, a border college must be included. Purpose would be to develop existing and new research collaborations between partners and should be domain driven and take a prioritised approach.
- Funding to allow an Institute of Technology (ie DKIT) to second Research Leaders from QUB and / or UU. This would drive both collaboration between DKIT and UU/QUB and allow the Research Leaders from QUB/UU to apply for EU Horizon Europe funding.
- Dedicated funding scheme to have research placements for A level students within our region to undertake research projects in DKIT. This will attract student into our Institute. Research Office have successfully funded this type of initiative previously

(5) Technological University

The Institute has set out its vision for Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) as a significant and important constituent of a multi-campus Regional Technological University (TU), located in the North East serving North Leinster-South Ulster (DkIT Strategic Plan 2020-2022). The Vision is set out as follows:

Our Vision as a campus of a Multi-Campus Regional Technological University (TU)

A leading higher education provider of technological university education, which is regionally embedded and regionally focussed with a crucial role in addressing national priorities and with an international outlook. A TU campus, located in the North East serving North Leinster-South Ulster:

- that is accessible, dynamic and student-centred;
- where teaching and learning is research informed and employer relevant;
- which positively contributes to the educational, economic, social and cultural development of a unique and strategically significant region.

The ambition is to achieve TU designation by late 2022/early 2023. In order to achieve this designation, it is required that DkIT must identify a Technological University Partner and jointly apply under Section 38 of the Technological University (TU) Act 2018.

DkIT is currently supported by HEA in its ambition to become a campus of a Regional TU.

Our Ask:

DkIT is publicly supported by the Seanad committee in its ambition to achieve TU designation and consideration be given to incorporating initiatives and actions in Northern Ireland as a contributing part of the criteria and metrics for our merger ambitions.

Dr Michael Mulvey, President

Dr Sheila Flanagan, VP for Academic Affairs and Registrar

31 May 2021