

29<sup>th</sup> June, 2020.

Ms Aileen Fallon,  
Clerk of the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response,  
Leinster House,  
Dublin 2.  
D02 XR20

**Invitation to Make a Submission (Ref: SCC19R-I-0311)**

Dear Ms. Fallon,

Please find enclosed the written submission of the Technological University Dublin in response to the Committee's request in the required format.

Yours sincerely,



**Professor David FitzPatrick,  
President.**

## SPECIAL OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON COVID19 SUBMISSION

## TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY DUBLIN (TU Dublin)

29 June 2020

## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Ireland's first technological university was established on 01 January 2019, with the transformation of Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB), and Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT) to create the Technological University Dublin, or TU Dublin. For many decades DIT, ITB and ITT were a very significant part of the growth in Irish higher education, making a substantial contribution from level 6 programmes right up to PhD level. In coming together with designation under the Technological Universities Act 2018<sup>1</sup>, the goal was to combine their strengths to create a technological university that could deliver a broad range of higher education provision across a breadth of disciplines for the Greater Dublin region and beyond.
- 1.2 From its establishment TU Dublin has been the largest provider of third level education in Ireland<sup>2</sup>. Our ambitious 29,000+ students, from apprenticeship through to PhD, learn in a practice-based environment; our impact-focused research aims to benefit communities, society and the economy; and innovation and enterprise are at the heart of everything we do.
- 1.3 TU Dublin is also by far the most important presence in Ireland's **part-time** third level education, providing 19% of national enrolments. **Apprenticeship and Skills** programmes are a key means by which HEIs meet the ongoing need for a focus on workplace learning. TU Dublin offers 13 of the 27 existing statutory 'designated trades' which are colloquially referred to as 'craft' apprenticeships, and in half of these TU Dublin is the sole national provider of such programmes, which are critical to the success of companies in a variety of sectors. TU Dublin is unique in the Higher Education system in Ireland in that we currently provide 25% of the craft apprentice training at phase 4 and phase 6 for craft apprenticeships.
- 1.4 The development of the TU Dublin Strategic Intent 2030, launched in January 2020, has provided an opportunity to set out a future path and an exciting journey for TU Dublin for the next decade. Viewed through the lens of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 'Education' as the engine, a clear shape emerged for our strategy around the three interrelated themes of **People, Planet and Partnership**.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/oct/3/enacted/en/html>

<sup>2</sup> Figures represent FTE student numbers, and are based on HEA data, <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/data-for-download/>, representing years 2018/19, with apprentice enrolments numbers, included in total, based upon 2017/18 data

## **2.0 Third level institutions will face many challenges going forward and must put in place plans and procedures for the next academic year.**

- 2.1 TU Dublin has engaged in a partnership approach with all its stakeholders to maintain the delivery of its academic programmes and research activity to the highest standard since the pandemic came to Ireland earlier this year. This was achieved through the professionalism and commitment of all our staff, students and partners, while informed by and in compliance with Government Guidelines in mitigating the risk of the virus for all of us and our country. TU Dublin has framed its activities, not only as a single institution, but as part of the national response to the challenge of COVID19.
- 2.2 At this date, we have completed the delivery of our programmes for 2019/2020 in an unexpected virtual mode and also successfully completed the assessment process of all our students to confirm they have achieved the same programme learning outcomes as previous years and met the highest educational standards in a quality assured environment. However, the achievement of this success should not underestimate the operational difficulties and consequences of an extended delivery mode of blended or remote learning for our students, staff and stakeholders.
- 2.3 The University community has experienced many challenges in the last few months and we quickly re-direct its resources at very short notice. Thus we have gained a deeper appreciation of the continuing operational challenges and difficulties in the context of a COVID19 environment that must be overcome to continue to deliver programmes and research in the next academic year to our normally high standard while providing an excellent educational experience for all our students, including those in our international cohort here and abroad.
- 2.4 However, many of those same challenges and new ones, including the operational implications of social distancing for example, will continue in the academic year 2020/21 and are noted in the sections that follow.

## **3.0 Teaching with Social Distancing and Remoting Learning**

- 3.1 The University has decided, and informed our students, that our academic programmes, where possible and appropriate, will be delivered in a 'blended' approach due to the consequences and demands of social distancing. This is extremely challenging for the University, staff and students alike. The challenges include:

- Blended (a mixture of face-to-face delivery with remote learning) is not seen by many students as equivalent to the 'full' educational experience of higher education. Student interaction with such modes tends to drop over time and most at risk are the earlier years in undergraduate programmes. Therefore the University will prioritise as much as possible face-to-face interaction with our first year students.
- Social distancing at 2m as is the current health guidance and significantly reduces our operational capacity to between 15% - 20% of all our facilities including lecture theatres, laboratories and classrooms. A change to 1m social distancing will increase capacity availability to approximately 40% to 45% overall. Both scenarios have a major impact on programme scheduling; prioritisation of activities that cannot be delivered remotely; staff and student timetables as well as following guidelines on remote working as much as possible. Also, the smaller class sizes due to social distancing where face-to-face interaction is necessary may require additional staff to deliver in this format.
- When the majority of modules are delivered in a blended format, student engagement with their programme, discipline and fellow classmates diminishes. The educational experience becomes a challenge in replicating the added value of personal and human interactions between students, their lecturers, support staff and their contemporaries.
- Significant investment is required urgently in staff training, technical support, devices and the digital infrastructure generally, to deliver and develop programmes in a blended format by the University.
- Delivery of programmes in a remote format highlights the issue of 'technological poverty' within the student population. This includes access to good quality and reliable broadband; devices such as laptops that meet the requirements of their academic programme; availability of technical support and training to engage with the programmes through a virtual learning environment. An inadequate response to these issues will only add to the challenges already experienced by students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing and completing their studies at higher education.
- Blended learning and increased online assessment will require a significant reconfiguration of our programme syllabi to affirm these changes continues to produces graduates of the highest recognised standards by employers, nationally and internationally.
- Student and staff welfare supports in this changed environment need to be increased and enhanced. There are currently, given the expected increase in demand, limited resources available to address such issues of heightened anxiety, stress and personal challenges in a socially constrained and increasingly remote context.

## 4.0 Issues Relating to International Students

- 4.1 International students provide a source of additional non-exchequer funding to the University. Over the last decade or more this source has been used to address the fall in funding provided by the State to contribute to maintaining or act as a subsidy for our core activities for our home student population. This is a significant potential loss of income and risk to the University.
- 4.2 However there are non-financial aspects to this activity. International students come to Ireland and its Universities for the **educational experience** of studying abroad; to register as students and graduate from internationally ranked institutions with the enjoyment of our Irish culture and clean environment. Our indigenous students also travel abroad, for example under the Erasmus programme, for similar experiences as part of their studies, and in a COVID19 environment this will be less likely as many of our University partners abroad are offering programmes on a remote basis. Ireland and this University will be the poorer if this activity diminishes significantly or permanently in the future and all necessary steps should be taken to avoid such an outcome.
- 4.3 Our home students also gain from the experience of interacting with fellow students from different cultures and backgrounds. The expected reduction in international students coming to Ireland including this University next year, as well as possibly in subsequent years, significantly diminishes the positive experience and added value to our students of having international students on their programmes.
- 4.4 A number of specific issues are as follows:
- Expected reduction of up to 80% of international students travelling to Ireland with the consequential reduction in non-exchequer income for the University, including the drop in invisible exports and the multiplier effect for the Irish economy. The consequential financial impact of the reduction in this income stream has on continuing educational provision and services for our home students is significant.
  - International students do not appear to wish to register on programmes that are delivered remotely. Programmes delivered in a blended mode - as in the case where possible in TU Dublin - international students would currently appear to still consider such programmes but only where there is a significant face-to-face component. Final registrations for the September 2020 commencement will provide more definite information.
  - A fall in the number of international students in the University has a negative impact on international rankings.

- Fewer international students has a negative impact on our own home students and their educational experience.
- Ireland's appears to have a positive reputation abroad for how it has dealt with the COVID19 pandemic to date. To maintain and hopefully increase our share of the international student market in future years, it is important this positive view of Ireland and its response up now to 'keeping our international students safe' is maintained. In this regard, streamlined access through VISA application processing; continued medical and health supports for international students when in Ireland; financial support with accommodation costs etc., in the event of future outbreaks; as well as good communications with the relevant embassies, foreign partner Universities and families at home are very important.

## 5.0 Funding Challenges - Exchequer and Non-Exchequer

- 5.1 The financial implications of COVID19 for TU Dublin have been the subject of ongoing discussions and interactions with the Higher Education Authority in the past weeks and the University appreciates their cooperation and support to date. The overall net negative financial impact on this University, on the basis of agreed assumptions with the HEA is €16.792m. The composition of this amount includes:

<b>Net Additional Costs / Loss of Income</b>	<b>€ (millions)</b>
Reduction in Fee Income	10.514
Additional Operating Costs due to Construction Delays	2.750
ICT, Signage, PPE etc.	3.021
Net Additional Pay Costs	<u>0.507</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>16.792</u></b>

The primary issues for now and into the next academic year include:

- Increased operational costs due to compliance with national guidelines regarding COVID19 including social distancing, enhanced cleaning / sanitising protocols; PPE requirements on particular programmes; supporting staff to work remotely / from home etc.,
- Immediate investment required in the University's ICT infrastructure; technical staff to support it; availability of devices (laptops etc.) to allow staff work remotely on a continued basis; enhanced investment to provide and develop a good quality 'blended learning' experience with new materials to support this approach including new forms of student assessments while maintaining our existing academic quality standards.
- Investment to minimise the 'technological deficit' our students have in the context of access to devices and broadband.

- Challenge of the loss in income from international students and the consequential impact on the provision of services across the University.
- Increased demand and financial cost of addressing rising levels of anxiety, stress and mental conditions in our staff and students who are under individual pressure due to COVID19.
- Increased financial costs expected to be met by individual Universities from contractors under existing and approved capital projects arising from their implementation of COVID19 guidelines and possible cost increasing extensions of project completion dates.

**5.2** The University recommends the continued financial support in full from the State of all capital projects, including PPP's in progress, and generally as envisaged by Project Ireland 2040. If this investment in the Universities is cancelled or delayed it will have a significantly negative impact on how TU Dublin and other institutions can contribute to Ireland's economic recovery after COVID19; including the more immediate need for re-skilling in the workforce as well as the increasing demographically driven demand for higher education in the next decade.

## **6.0 Student Accommodation**

**6.1** Access to good quality, safe and appropriately priced student accommodation is essential for our domestic and international student cohorts. Currently, the increasing, and in many cases almost prohibitive costs of suitable accommodation available to our students is an issue deterring students from travelling to and staying near their University of choice. Delivery necessitated through blended and remote learning modes due to COVID19, for some, when examined with the cost of student accommodation, can act as a disincentive not only to register with this University but also perhaps even take up a place at third level. Currently, TU Dublin does not own any student accommodation and accordingly has no bank borrowings to be serviced in that regard. However, the general issues noted above remain a significant concern in attracting and maintaining students in this University.

## **7.0 Research Funding**

**7.1** TU Dublin regards research and innovation as a core activity and fundamental input to its teaching and learning programmes. This University has a particularly unique history and focus on enterprise engagement and support. Throughout all its activities it is well placed to address the

consequences of COVID19 in our economy and especially the immediate needs of workforce re-skilling and support. In line with Government guidelines, TU Dublin is currently re-opening all its incubation centres; research institutes and relevant staff are returning in a safe manner, to re-activate laboratory based activity. The University has also answered the call through Springboard+ to support workforce retraining and upskilling.

- 7.2 TU Dublin would more than positively respond to increased investment in research, innovation and enterprise supports by the State and play its part in re-building our economy. Increased funding as well as expansion of existing programmes, including Springboard+ is required. Greater flexibility in our nationally prescribed structures is also required, including the Employment Control Framework for example, to fully address this need.
- 7.3 It is beginning to appear that one of the consequences of the COVID19 pandemic is that research funding applications, in particular by females, may have declined. It will be important to further explore the underlying reasons for this, so that appropriate supports can be put in place to mitigate this risk in the future.