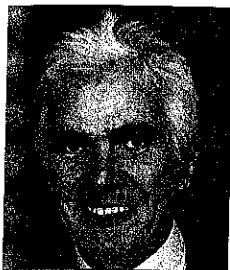


# The drive for Technological Universities

Will TUs fulfil the dream post-designation?



By Prof Tom Collins  
former President of Maynooth University

**P**rof Tom Collins analyses the ongoing push in Ireland for Technological Universities in light of the most recent changes in Higher Education and in Irish society as a whole. He examines both new and historical challenges, setting these against a backdrop of international priorities for Higher Education.

## The ever-changing panorama

The Irish Higher Education landscape is a rapidly evolving one, with an array of new challenges presenting themselves to both sectors - universities and institutes of technology - and having specific impacts upon each of them. The policy environment has changed markedly in recent years, with developments in the areas of compacts, clustering, mergers and re-designation all underway. Similarly, developments in the wider society, particularly to do with the opportunities which a recovery from the recession represents, dealing with the legacy of the recession, and demographic changes in the short- and long-term, all present opportunities and challenges.

## New challenges

The changing structure of the Irish economy, which has already resulted in skill shortages in some areas and emerging shortages in others, together with the ever growing centrality of sectors such as food, bio-pharma, ICT and tourism means that Irish higher education must keep a vigilant eye on economic trends if it is to remain relevant. Globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education present opportunities for Irish Higher Education institutions as they attempt to attract students from abroad, but equally present challenges as the sector itself becomes an internationally traded commodity. The emergence of private players in the field at a time when public institutions receive reduced levels of public funding, and the awaited deliberations of the HEA on the funding issue, must also be considered. Likewise, the emergence of distance delivery and its potential impact on the campus of the future require some deliberation.

## Historical challenges

While many of these are new, some of the historical challenges remain. For the institutes, these include parity of esteem with the university sector, differentiation along the binary divide, the preparedness level of the student intake for the demands of higher education, a complex HR environment, constrained budgets, a decade of cuts in staffing levels and the ongoing degradation

in buildings and equipment. Collectively, these present something of a perfect storm to this sector.

### International priorities for Higher Education

Against such a challenging background, it is possible to identify a number of general priorities which characterise higher education policy internationally and within which it is possible to locate the drive in Ireland for technological universities. These include:

- » Mass participation and generalised access
- » Competing demands of attaining world class research reputation while sustaining a teaching agenda
- » Need for closer inter-institutional collaboration to enhance economies of scale and increase efficiency
- » The internationalization agenda, both as a source of revenue in a period of declining state subvention to higher education and to promote greater inter-culturalism
- » The opportunities and the challenges of digital learning
- » The threat of private providers to the sustainable and ongoing development of the public higher education system.

### Mission differentiation

The binary divide has come to be seen by higher education policy makers in Ireland as a mechanism through which all of these policy objectives can be kept afloat, with the concept of the Technological University a further iteration of this strategy.

The HEA, for instance, notes that a high level of institutional diversity has come to be recognised internationally as one of the key strengths of a well-functioning higher education system. Accordingly it advocates "a system approach" where different institutions deliver in different ways against overarching national objectives. Mission differentiation, therefore, especially between the institutes and the universities has emerged as a key policy priority.

With regard to the international situation, Clancy<sup>1</sup> employs a threefold categorisation of OECD countries. Unified (or unitary) systems include post binary systems such as UK and Australia and university dominated systems such as Italy. Binary (incorporating dual systems) relates to the development of institutions to complement or possibly rival universities. Such systems emerged from government's desire to create a clear and distinct alternative to the universities, to meet the needs of the labour market and strengthen regional economies.

Ireland is categorised as binary in such international categorisations, although as noted by Skillbeck<sup>2</sup>, the system in Ireland is more complex and varied than the term usually suggests. Diversified systems are those inspired by the US where higher education is conceived as a total system

1 Clancy (2015) following on from international work by Furth (1973), Scott (1996) and Kyvik (2004).

2 Skillbeck, M (2003) Towards an Integrated System of Tertiary Education. Unpublished Discussion Paper.

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but where there is a great diversity of institutional types and where there is a hierarchy of higher educational establishments where different institutions are allocated specific roles within the overall system.

### Numbers of students in IoTs

As the following table shows, the institutes are generally far more successful in attracting non-traditional students, and in operating a ladder of progression through the qualification framework, i.e. they make a major contribution on the participation and access dimension. For much the same reason they have lower levels of retention and completion than the universities.

**Table 1: Institute of Technology Student Base as Share of Total Public HE Provision**

Apprenticeships & other	100%	2,821
<b>Undergraduate</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>78,630</b>
Level 6	60%	3,979
Level 7	100%	25,665
Level 8	32%	38,333
Occasional	63%	5,653
<b>Postgraduate</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>6,850</b>
Level 8 & 9 Taught	20%	5,399
Level 9 Research	42%	575
Level 10 (PHD)	7%	566
Occasional	23%	310
<b>Total</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>88,301</b>

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Similarly, the institute sector as a whole fares less well in winning research income than the university sector, though there are big differences between the different institutions within each of the sectors in this regard.

### Perceived benefits of mergers

Reflecting a growing trend throughout Europe, national policy in Ireland has moved significantly in favour of the merging of smaller institutions from within the institute of technology sector in the belief that the system differentiation is best secured by the scale, cohesion, singularity of purpose and greater efficiencies of amalgamated unitary bodies – hence the policy preference for technological universities. The proposed TU4D, for instance, involving a merger between DIT, IT Tallaght and IT Blanchardstown, will be Ireland's largest third level institution, with close to 30,000 students.

## THEMES

### Conclusion

However, critical mass and coherence of provision will not alone differentiate the technological sector from the university sector post-designation. This will require a compelling vision within the technological sector around its pivotal position in the emergence of a society in Ireland which has an ongoing capacity for self-generation and redefinition; which can support an energetic and expansive, indigenous economic development agenda; which is democratic and inclusive; which can enhance the career potential of both staff and students and which can provide hope and possibility to a future generation of learners in Ireland.

### REFERENCES:

- Clancy, Patrick (2015) Irish Higher Education – A Comparative Perspective, IPA, Dublin.  
Skillbeck, M (2003) Towards an Integrated System of Tertiary Education. Unpublished Discussion Paper.



The institutes [of technology]... make a major contribution on the participation and access dimension.

### Intel Women in Technology Award

Louise Ni Chonghaile, a fourth year student in the GMIT School of Engineering, is a winner of the Intel Women in Technology Award for achieving a Distinction in her Bachelor of Engineering degree in Computer & Electronic Engineering (Level 7).

Louise, who is now in the fourth year of the honours degree programme, was presented with the Award at a formal ceremony in Dublin in November 2016 alongside her lecturer Natasha Rohan, Dept of Electronic & Electrical Engineering, and GMIT Careers Officer Bridie Killoran, both of whom nominated Louise for her award.

Pictured here are (centre) Louise Ni Chonghaile from Carna, Co Galway, (left) Bridie Killoran, Careers Officer at GMIT and (right) Natasha Rohan, Lecturer at GMIT.

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By Peter Cassells  
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