

Progress Report 1

Overview

Since early August the focus of the TUSEI project has been on –

- (a) Having regard to the state of readiness, setting a realistic timeline for the project, from the submission of the application for establishment of the TU to establishment day,
- (b) Putting in place structures and systems which support the objective of establishment day on 1 January 2022, and
- (c) Communicating with staff, students and external stakeholders, emphasising that the TUSEI project has entered a new and final phase with renewed focus and energy.

The work of putting new structures in place is now completed and the detailed work is beginning, overseen by a project leadership group and the Joint Governing Body Steering Group. A detailed project plan covering all aspects of the project has been completed and accompanies this report.

Timeline and milestones

As previously communicated to the Minister, a timeline has been agreed for the establishment of the Technological University on 1 January 2022. Key milestones along the way are –

- (1) Making the application to the Minister. This is set for March/April 2020. A more precise date will be fixed by the end of the year following an appraisal of the work that is required and what has been achieved. In this context it should be noted that the Technological Universities Act provides that “*at the time of application*” the institutes must provide evidence that they have “*the capacity to effectively perform the functions of a technological university*” in a number of areas including governance, business links, programme development and quality assurance.
- (2) Following submission of the application, the next milestone will be the review of the application by the advisory panel. The precise date of this review depends on

the date an application is made as the Act provides for time limits for the appointment of the panel - the TUSEI project is working towards a May/June review. This would allow a Ministerial decision to establish the TU to be made in July followed by detailed preparation (including the appointment of a president) for establishment of the TU in 1 January 2022

Structure of the Project

A diagram setting out the current project structure is attached. Since August last the project has been re-structured and resourced. The Project Office, which was established earlier this year with two Project Directors, has been augmented with the appointment of a Project Executive Director (PED) and an academic adviser. The project has been restructured into 8 workstreams. Each of seven of the workstreams has two co-leaders, one from each institute who are the senior executives in relevant areas of responsibility. An eighth workstream is led by the presidents of the students unions. Combined with the PED, this group of academic, administrative and student leaders forms the Project Leadership Group. The group meets weekly, chaired by the PED.

Given the range and complexity of the project each workstream has been subdivided into working groups. A call for expressions of interest to join these groups was issued in September and received a strong response from staff. At present there are 31 active working groups with a combined total of over 300 staff participating. 2 further groups are to be established in the near future (institutional research and corporate services). Students are also encouraged to take part in all working groups. Each group is co-chaired by staff from each of the institutes. These co-chairs have a central role in leading the work of the group, setting priorities and ensuring delivery of actions against plans.

The primary task of the workstreams and their respective working groups is to deliver on the required actions for their particular area of work in order to meet the TU criteria

and prepare the institutes for establishment day, as well as identifying the actions to support the further development of the TU in its early months. This will require mapping all policies, aligning, consolidating and developing new policies and procedures (e.g. finance/IT/HR etc., marks and standards, graduate regulations, graduate attributes, academic planning etc.), establishing new proto-structures (e.g. Joint Executive, interim Academic Council, Graduate School, Research Council, etc.). It will also require, where appropriate, having a realistic plan that demonstrates the capacity and capability to be a technological university, and to meet particular stretch targets.

A secondary, but also key, objective of the current structure is to bring academic, professional and technical staff and students together in order to show genuine evidence of “acting as one” and having a common purpose. In order to create the TU, the students and staff of the institutes have to, as far as practicable, participate actively in the processes leading to its creation and, where not directly participating, be kept informed and engaged as the project develops to designation and beyond. In this way the TU, once established, will from the day of establishment be in the best position to operate as a single, cohesive and effective Technological University.

Administrative support is being put in place for each workstream. In September a call for expressions of interest was issued to staff at Grade 5 to join the project as workstream co-ordinators. Seven have been appointed and assigned with two more to follow shortly.

The project structure has in this way been completed and it now turns to delivering the outputs and outcomes needed to establish the TU. A first step in that process is the putting in place of individual project plans for each working group. These have been collated into a comprehensive plan for the entire project.

Project plans

In early September a high-level project plan was developed by each workstream. The plan addresses in broad terms the actions and outputs required in the three phases of the TUSEI project – up to advisory panel, from panel to establishment day and post establishment. The first objective set for the working groups was, taking the relevant parts of that plan, to develop a detailed project plan for their area of focus. These have been completed as of 23 October and are submitted to the Minister with this project update.

Governance Oversight

The TUSEI project is being overseen by the Joint Governing Body Steering Group (SG). The terms of reference of the SG have been amended to remove the Group from operational matters leaving them to focus on overall steering and governance of the project. The membership of the SG has also been reformed to remove members of the institute executives (other than Presidents) and to replace them with staff members of the governing bodies. The student union presidents have now also been included in the SG. While the SG is at present chaired by an independent person it is the intention within the immediate future to change this arrangement to one where the chairs of the governing bodies alternate as chairs of the SG.

The presidents of the institutes are closely engaged with all aspects of the project. They meet weekly with the executive director and the academic adviser to receive a report on progress and to resolve any issues that arise.

Plans are being developed for the first meeting of the two institute executives with a target date in November, Thereafter the joint executive will meet on a regular basis.

Data

A central element to the setting up of the TU is that the institutes together meet the criteria set down in the TU Act regarding staff, students and research activity. In each of the successful application for TU status to-date, external auditors have been engaged by the HEA to conduct a forensic audit of this data. In each case the advisory panel had sufficient confidence in that audit to accept the conclusions of the auditors. Following the completion of a Data Sharing Agreement in October, the sharing of data between the institutes is now completed and plans are in place for the creation of an on-going single data repository. It is planned to conduct a “dry run” for the audit of the statutory quantitative criteria by the end of the year. This will review not just the data itself but the underlying methodologies and assumptions.

Communications

All communications, internal and external, relating to the TUSEI are co-ordinated through the project office in consultation with the institute presidents. A number of initiatives have been taken and in some cases are ongoing to enhance communication, and especially to keep staff and students both engaged and informed.

- (1) During September and October briefing memos on TUSEI have been issued to the staff of the institutes, the students, schools in the region and key external stakeholders informing them of the revised structure of the project, the timeline for establishing the TU and emphasising confidence that that objective will be achieved.
- (2) A central repository has been established through which all members of all working groups will be able to access all documents relating to the work of the groups.
- (3) Work is on-going to revamp the project website to make it more attractive, dynamic and informative.

- (4) The minutes of all leadership group meetings are made available to staff and students within 24/48 hours of the meetings.
- (5) The Project Office, working with the communications units in each institute, are developing a programme of internal communications which can be informative and impactful taking full account of the fact that for the foreseeable future there will be no opportunities for in person communications with larger groups of staff or students.
- (6) The Project Office in the past week have met with the student class reps in both institutes – approximately 300 students – to update them on the project, encourage their participation in working groups and to address their questions and issues.
- (7) The Project Office is organising a series of virtual workshops. The first such workshop took place on 22 October on the theme of the TU as an anchor for regional development. It was conducted by Professor John Goddard, Emeritus Professor of Regional Development Studies at the Centre for Urban & Regional Development Studies, Newcastle University. Further workshops are in planning including on the themes of internationalisation and how the mission of a technological university is seen and delivered internationally.

Technological University Transformation Fund (TUTF)

In August the institutes submitted their application for funding under the fund. Costs in year 1 were estimated at €9.8m of which €6.97m was sought from the fund. The amount to be allocated is €5.1m.

*Tom Boland
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23 October 2020*