

Mr Simon Harris, T.D.,
Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science,
Marlborough Street,
Dublin 1,
D01 RC96.

31st March 2021

RE: AIT-LIT Consortium Technological University Application, December 2020

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Board of An tÚdarás, I wish to report that the Advisory Panel completed its work and submitted its report for consideration by An tÚdarás at its meeting of 9th of March 2021, as specified under Section 29 of the Technological Universities Act, 2018.

The Advisory Panel's report and recommendations are attached and the views of An tÚdarás, regarding the report and any other information that An tÚdarás considers relevant, are set out below.

We are pleased to inform you that the Panel has recommended that the AIT-LIT consortium should be designated a Technological University under the *Technological Universities Act, 2018*. An tÚdarás supports the Advisory Panel's recommendation of TU designation.

The views of An tÚdarás regarding the report:

- An tÚdarás welcomes the report of the Advisory Panel as a thorough analysis in terms of the legislative requirements as set out in the 2018 Act;
- An tÚdarás thanks the Advisory Panel for their work in support of this national policy agenda;
- An tÚdarás notes and echoes the Advisory Panel's positive findings in respect of the application, in particular:
 - The concentrated efforts of the two applicant institutes over a condensed period of time and the shared enthusiasm for the project;
 - The level of integration, partnership, and collaboration currently evident;

- The depth of support and endorsement from staff, students, staff representative bodies and other stakeholders;
- The shared understanding of the benefits of this project on local, regional and national levels, and also the complex challenges ahead in bringing a new university structure into full operational effect.

While the Advisory Panel had some reservations in respect of compliance with the eligibility criteria set out in Section 28 of the 2018 Act, these reservations are appropriately qualified within the report. On balance, the Advisory Panel was satisfied at the potential compliance with these requirements, given the appropriate support, within the specified timelines.

An tÚdarás lends its support to the specific recommendations of the Advisory Panel in respect of this application:

- Expert consultants should be engaged to assist existing staff and the new administration and governing body to give greater specificity to research planning. An tÚdarás equally endorses the Panel’s view that the soon to be completed socio-economic study must inform this research planning.
- Balance must be maintained between the requirements relating to research capacity building and those relating to teaching capacity across all levels, including apprenticeships and skills training. The differing needs of students from Level 6 to Level 10 must be recognised and managed appropriately.
 - An tÚdarás also notes the Panel’s comments on addressing systemic/structural issues in support of TU development, such as supporting infrastructure and the TU academic contract, and we comment on these further below.

At its meeting, An tÚdarás also discussed the challenges facing advisory panels as articulated in the report and the recommendations to address same:

- Governance
 - The need for further clarification on interpretation of Section 28 (1)(k)(i) of the TU Act, 2018 regarding “*integrated, coherent and effective governance structures*” to assist future advisory panels. The Advisory Panel note that technically, applicant institutes cannot have the capacity to meet this criterion at the stipulated time of application, as a governing body and president for the TU cannot be in place until appointment day.
 - An tÚdarás suggests that guidance should be provided to future panels (and consortia) to the effect that the term ‘governance’ may be interpreted as relating to administrative structures in this context, where the legal authority comes after designation.
 - The Panel suggests that applicant institutions be encouraged to agree on plans fit for a functioning TU to be taken up by the new governing body and administration immediately after establishment day.
 - An tÚdarás supports these recommendations and proposes that plans should be developed for implementation as soon as practicable after establishment day.

- Terminal degree equivalence [Section 28 (1)(c)]
 - The Panel recommends that *“any future applications for designation as a TU include expert external review of the credentials of academic staff deemed by the applicant institutions to have the equivalency of doctoral-level preparation.”*
 - An tÚdarás recognises that this recommendation amounts to an additional element which was not required of previous consortia. However, given that this recommendation is intended to enhance the robustness of the assessment of this particular criterion and lend a further degree of external oversight to the process, An tÚdarás suggests it be implemented.

The report of the Advisory Panel also highlights pertinent overarching national systemic/structural issues impacting on the successful and full realisation of the TU ambition that warrant responsive action. As An tÚdarás has indicated previously, the successful development of technological universities requires a longer-term commitment in terms of supporting infrastructure, also short to medium term funding (5-10 years) and the significant issue of the TU academic contract.

You will note Minister, that while the Advisory Panel was fully satisfied regarding the basis for their positive recommendation via a remote review, it nonetheless recommends that *“if possible, any further reviews be postponed until a review team can do its work on the ground”*.

This was discussed with the Chair of the Advisory Panel at the meeting of An tÚdarás on 9th March. It is acknowledged by all parties that an onsite review process is the optimal approach. However, the consensus view was that the requirement to conduct future processes remotely in accordance with ongoing public health advice should not be an impediment to proceeding in circumstances where a need for a TU has been identified.

At its meeting, An tÚdarás thanked the members of the Advisory Panel and also expressed its deep appreciation and admiration of the work and dedication of the Chief Executive and Executive staff of the HEA in successfully overseeing this review in such difficult circumstances.

We trust the attached Report of the Advisory Panel and the comments above will assist you in making your decision on this application for designation as a Technological University under the 2018 Act. We look forward to engaging with you further on this process if required and remain happy to assist in any way.

Yours sincerely,



Michael Horgan
Chairman