



Review of UK transnational education in the Republic of Ireland: Ulster University and Irish Times Training

October 2017

Executive summary

Ulster University operates primarily from four campuses in Northern Ireland. Its mission is to 'deliver outstanding research and teaching that encourages the innovation, leadership and vision needed to help our community thrive'. The current student population is approximately 27,000, of whom around 2,000 are Ulster students studying at 'outcentres'. In addition, over 6,000 students are enrolled on Ulster validated courses at other partner institutions. As defined by the University, an outcentre is a type of partnership where the primary relationship is for the provision of accommodation and similar facilities.

Irish Times Training (ITT) is a wholly owned subsidiary of *The Irish Times* and is well known nationally and internationally as a provider of a wide range of short courses and other programmes in various areas of management education and training. Its client base includes multinational companies, government departments, and small and medium-sized enterprises. ITT has training suites in the Irish Times Building on Tara Street, Dublin. The University classes ITT as an outcentre for the delivery of its programmes.

The University's Business Institute offers undergraduate programmes in Management Practice, and an MSc Executive Leadership at ITT. Twenty-eight students are currently enrolled on the BSc Hons Management Practice undergraduate programme, with 32 enrolled on the MSc. All students are studying part-time. Recruitment in Dublin is largely by ITT, which also provides the delivery venue and some student support. Admissions to these programmes is the responsibility of the University and the courses share common curricula and learning outcomes with programmes delivered at the University. The great majority of teaching and all assessment is by Ulster staff. Tuition for the MSc is in three-day blocks. All undergraduate teaching is delivered at ITT. In the case of the MSc, alternate blocks are delivered at ITT and the University's Belfast campus, and one block is delivered in Boston.

The link started with an undergraduate certificate programme in 2005 and has grown to include more awards on the basis of successful operation. The partnership is highly valued by both parties and by students. The University provides ITT with a flexible and innovative approach to curriculum delivery, and ITT gives the University an established client base and client management system, and a recognised and respected brand name for business training in the Republic of Ireland. Students at all levels gain opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills, and networks of new contacts. The firms that employ students gain directly from practical and focused project work. While the reviewers recommend that the University considers some aspects of collaborative operations, particularly the quality

assurance arrangements consequent on the categorisation of partnerships, no problems have actually arisen, due to the inherently strong nature of this particular partnership.

Introduction

1 The Ulster University was established in its present form in 1984, although its constituent institutions date from early Victorian times. The mission of the University is to 'deliver outstanding research and teaching that encourages the innovation, leadership and vision needed to help our community thrive'. There are four faculties: Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Life and Health Sciences; Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment; and the Ulster University Business School (the Business School). The Business School has five departments, ~~one~~ of which is the Business Institute (the Institute), which is responsible for ~~also~~ commercial courses and consultancy. Institute programmes range from short bespoke courses to full master's programmes.

2 The University operates from four distributed campuses in Northern Ireland: Jordanstown (the largest), Belfast, Magee (Londonderry) and Coleraine. The University has always had a strong regional commitment, and states that it is uniquely placed fully to engage with, and to deliver, meaningful impact in communities across Northern Ireland. This intention is supported by long-standing partnerships with the local further education sector. The University also

the programme as delivered in Jordanstown, the students form a discrete group. Tuition for the MSc is in three-day blocks. All undergraduate teaching is at ITT. In the case of the MSc, delivery alternates between ITT and the University's Belfast campus, and one block is delivered in Boston.

7 The University's first partnership with ITT started in July 2005 with a Certificate in Management Practice, followed by approval of the Advanced Diploma in the following year. The University signed the first formal partnership agreement with ITT in 2006. The MSc followed in 2008, and the BSc (which adds level 6 modules to the Advanced Diploma's level 5 and recognises Level 4 learning outcomes using Accreditation of Prior Learning) in 2012. The University's rationale for the partnership is that ITT is a Dublin-based provider with an established client base and a track record in the provision of short courses in the areas of business and management. ITT had identified a demand from its clients for higher level accredited programmes and was seeking a university partner to deliver them. The areas of interest were management and executive education, both already well-developed strengths of the Institute. Additionally, the Institute and ITT have submitted joint tenders for specific short courses, fixed term or tailored leadership and management development programmes.

8 The University has no specific plan for transnational education, but its Strategic Plan commits it to 'selective and targeted partnerships' that will 'contribute to achieving our strategic objectives in academic excellence, social engagement and global impact'. The University's Partnership Handbook states that in collaborative work, it attaches 'overriding importance to serving the educational, economic, social and cultural interests of Northern Ireland', and that proposals for collaboration abroad are subject to 'very critical scrutiny'. This selective approach is reflected in its current list of international collaborative partners. The list includes many entries for student exchanges, study abroad and articulation agreements. However, the list includes only four outcentres, two validation arrangements, and no franchised course. ITT is not listed among the collaborative partners: in fact, there is no entry for the Republic of Ireland in the list. This omission perhaps indicates both physical and cultural proximity: the distance between Belfast and Dublin is not much greater than the distance between some University 'home' campuses, and there is a real sense that the

cou95.32 be Tf1 0 0 1 453 396.08 Tm0 g0 G 0.0151 Tc[(both)] TJETQq0.0othe Institute and ITT have subm

a form. The QMAU conducts what is described as a 'limited due diligence exercise', confined to legal and financial status, which results in a report to the Senior Executive Team (SET). If the APAG and SET give their approval, the faculty draws up an agreement, in consultation with the Finance Service, and the Governance and Legal Service of the University. The Partnership Handbook states that the suitability of the organisation to provide the service or resources required for a specific course is considered through the course approval process, and ongoing monitoring is undertaken through the University's internal quality assurance arrangements.

12 The Partnership Handbook describes a range of outcentre types. Where 'only the facilities of an outcentre are used,' a simpler legal agreement is required. Where the outcentre makes a contribution beyond provision of accommodation, particularly to staffing, there is a somewhat fuller legal agreement, covering University recognition of outcentre staff. Model agreements for both kinds of outcentres are provided in the Partnership Handbook. The review team found the current arrangements for approving new outcentres to be proportionate to the risks entailed.

13 The University states that, since the partnership with ITT began before the present arrangements came into force in 2008, no QMAU report of a 'limited due diligence exercise' exists. None of the subsequent additions to the portfolio of courses on offer at ITT was deemed to require the Partnership Handbook due diligence procedure for outcentres. There are two memoranda of agreement for the ITT courses: postgraduate and undergraduate. Both are for the simpler, 'facilities only' type of outcentre. The model memoranda, and the memoranda for the ITT courses, state that they remain in force 'for the period of approval of the programme[s]', but no specific arrangement for review of the agreements is specified.

14 The TNE review team noted that while

continuing suitability of the organisation to provide the service or resources required for a specific course.

17 ITT has a General Manager, but the partnership has no management structure independent of the management of the courses concerned. The course directors for the undergraduate and postgraduate offerings are the University's, and their responsibilities are for the course at large, wherever delivered. For each course, a course committee has responsibility for oversight of its course, wherever delivered. There is no separate course or campus committee or other academic governance arrangement. As described below, external examiners or others involved with assessment of these courses are not encouraged to consider any aspect of assessment that might be affected by place of study.

18 The review team found the partnership to be working well, and that students and staff of both parties are legitimately satisfied with its continuing operation; however, the limitations in oversight might be damaging in a weaker link.

Assessment

22 No distinction is made between MSc students, wherever domiciled, in relation to assessment or any other matter. Undergraduate and postgraduate students (following courses delivered in whole or in part at ITT) have the same regulatory framework for assessment as students enrolled for the courses at 'home' campuses, and the same assessment strategies apply. The same staff set, mark and moderate the assessed work using the same system as for home students: the single 'recognised teacher' delivers learning sessions but does not participate in assessment. Students undertake the same assessment tasks and receive feedback in the same manner as students on other courses. The same external examiners oversee standards, and neither external examiners or course committees distinguish between the assessment outcomes of ITT students and those of any other student. The same procedures for plagiarism or unfair assessment practice apply equally to all students of the courses, wherever based.

23 The review team considered the minutes of boards of examiners for the courses delivered at ITT for 2014-5 and 2015-6. Minutes are kept to a template provided by the University, with set headings that do not invite narrative. None of the headings invite comparisons between sites, or distinctions between the delivery of courses at the home site and outcentres. Assessment boards always meet at Jordanstown. The minutes are highly structured and concise, and provide a formal record of proceedings only. The MSc minutes do not distinguish in any way between students domiciled in different jurisdictions: in this as in all other matters the MSc group is treated as single body. In all examples of undergraduate courses, the minutes are given a header that relate to ITT: the course titles are given as 'Advanced Diploma in Management Practice SME ROI' or 'BSc Hons Management Practice ITT' respectively. However, the undergraduate exam board minutes follow course committee minutes in making no comparison between performance at ITT and at other sites.

24 The University uses the term 'programme management' to describe its system of routine monitoring, conducted primarily by course committees. There were significant changes to annual monitoring procedures in 2015. In October 2015, following the introduction of these changes, the Institute decided to hold all regular course committee meetings on the same day, running sequentially. This was considered to be more efficient, given significant overlap in membership of Institute course committees. A single composite record of action points and key issues arising from all meetings is subsequently prepared. These changes are intended by the University to reduce bureaucracy, to 'create greater space for discussion and consequently increase the emphasis on resolution of issues and development of good practice'.

25 The TNE review team considered the minutes of course committees from 2014-15 and 2015-16. No separate consideration is given to ITT. No BSc course committee minutes mention ITT. Two sets of MSc minutes mention ITT, although they report only factual information, such as student numbers. In the single 2016 course committee, intended to cover 'all Business Institute Programmes', ITT is mentioned, but only in relation to a planned marketing activity. None of the minutes, for either course, compare outcomes between centres, whether 'home' or outcentre.

26 The University describes its programme management system as 'risk-based'. In the case of the ITT partnership there would seem to have been no risk, hence the absence of frequent mentions in the records. However, the revalidation report of the MSc describes the programme as one of the Institute's 'premium programmes', and includes a long list of commendations. In one set of course committee minutes, it is recorded that of the seven MSc completions in 2015-6, six students were awarded a distinction, with the remaining student receiving a commendation. Although it is not possible to determine how

many of the seven were recruited by ITT, it is difficult to believe that with results this distinguished there is no good practice related to ITT worthy of recognition. The review team **recommends** that the University considers whether the present routine monitoring system meets its intentions regarding the identification of good practice in courses delivered in partnership.

Quality of learning opportunities

27 The great majority of students for all three courses have some prior experience of ITT. Entry to the undergraduate courses is typically at FHEQ level 5 via existing QQI-accredited courses, and most MSc students recruited at ITT have previously taken ITT's professional development courses. MSc students have what they describe as a 'comprehensive' induction to the University and the course in Ulster. Students for the undergraduate courses have an induction session at ITT, which involves both ITT and University staff. Although the induction sessions were regarded as effective, there was some feeling from undergraduate students that more attention might be paid to preparation for academic writing.

28 MSc students recruited by ITT experience the same support for the 'academic' aspects of the course as students recruited in Belfast. The undergraduate course students' association with ITT is stronger, as the majority are recruited with advanced standing, having already taken courses equivalent to a UK undergraduate first year at ITT. Students confirmed that they valued the day-to-day support of ITT staff highly, not merely in terms of the arrangement of facilities, but in being continuously available to give advice.

29 Physical learning resources for the courses are considered

31 Students based at ITT submit assignments via the University's virtual learning environment. Assignments are routed through plagiarism-detection software. Students of all courses valued the practical bias of the assignments, which were reported in some cases to have had direct benefits for the businesses in which they worked.

32 The standard Institute appeals procedure operates for students recruited at ITT. This differs from the University-wide procedure only in making proper allowance for the work-life balance typical of adult, working, part-

Ulster University's response to the review report

The University is pleased to note that the review team confirmed the effectiveness of its long standing and valued partnership with ITT in providing opportunities for students to improve knowledge and skills and develop meaningful networks, which experience has shown continue to be of benefit throughout their subsequent careers.

Given the 'soft border' between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and the relative proximity of Dublin to the University's Belfast-based campuses, this partnership with ITT is regarded by the University as an extension of regional activity through an additional delivery site rather than as TNE. The partnership arrangement is almost exclusively commercial, focusing on access to a high quality and convenient delivery venue in Dublin and allowing the University's Business Institute to offer relevant programmes to ITTs well-established client base. Consequently, and in line with the University's commitment to a proportionate and risk-based approach to quality assurance, monitoring and governance arrangements are necessarily minimal, reflecting the low risk to academic standards and quality represented by this partnership. The fact that the operation of the partnership is not subject to greater scrutiny should not be taken to suggest that the courses offered at this venue and on other Ulster campuses are not included in the University's course monitoring and oversight processes. However, the fact