



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 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 states that, in pursuit of this aim, it has partnerships with other organisations, including higher education institutions, throughout the island of Ireland.

3 The University has a current student population of some 27,000, of whom some 8,200 are studying with a partner. The University classifies partnership arrangements (excluding such collaborations as study abroad, student exchange and research links) under five headings: validated courses, franchised courses, courses delivered jointly, articulations, and outcentres. An 'outcentre' partnership is defined by the University as one where the 'University uses the premises of another organisation to deliver all or part of one of its courses'.

4 Some 6,200 Ulster students study under 'validated' arrangements, the great majority of them at a network of local further education colleges, mostly for access awards and foundation degrees. About 2,000 are 'registered students' for University courses delivered at 'outcentres' - Ulster refers to programmes as 'courses', and this terminology is used for the rest of this report.

5 Irish Times Training (ITT) is a wholly owned subsidiary of *The Irish Times* and is 'registered' by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as a provider of programmes leading to qualifications at levels 5 and 6 of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The NFQ corresponds to *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). It has 10 levels: NFQ level 6 is equivalent to FHEQ level 4. ITT delivers a wide range of short courses and other programmes in the areas of management and finance, business, digital marketing, personal development and executive education. Its client base includes large multinational companies based in the greater Dublin area, 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 courses.

6 In partnership with ITT, the University Business Institute (the Institute) offers an Advanced Diploma Management Practice, a BSc (Hons) Management Practice, and an MSc Executive Leadership. The Advanced Diploma is set at level 5 of the FHEQ. 2016-17 enrolments include 28 students in years 2 and 3 of the BSc; one in the Diploma; and 32 in years 1 and 2 of the MSc. All students, undergraduate and postgraduate, are part-time. While the undergraduate courses share a common curriculum and learning outcomes with

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 courses are not 'transnational' at all. In the case of the MSc, 'Belfast' students travel to Dublin as much as 'Dublin' students travel to Belfast.

Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link

9 To govern partnership development, there is a comprehensive Partnership Handbook and a supporting Protocol for International Partnerships, which lists in detail the steps necessary to bring a partnership into approval. The list includes agreement of purpose, memoranda of understanding, proper management arrangements, due diligence, and risk assessment. The Protocol refers to associated forms, which ensure that all necessary information is gathered. The Handbook and the Protocol are thorough, demonstrating the University's prudent approach to offering its awards overseas.

10 The procedure for bringing new partnerships into approval varies with the nature of the partnership, and involves consideration at more levels of the University when the partnership is more complex: a validated or franchised course undergoes a more complex procedure than an articulation. Outcentres are the least complex form of partnership involving the delivery of courses.

11 Following the identification of a potential outcentre, a faculty informs the Quality Management and Audit Unit (QMAU) of its intentions, and seeks approval from the University's Academic Planning Advisory Group (APAG), providing structured information in

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 both agreements with ITT are of the 'facilities only' type, as defined in the Partnership Handbook, the programmes use at least one 'recognised teacher', paid by ITT. In addition, ITT is responsible for marketing, advertising and recruitment; issuing timetables and workshop materials; 'client relationship management'; the organisation of company visits; and monitoring 'client satisfaction information'. Students reported that, while they would apply to University staff for academic matters, ITT was the route for applications and the payment of fees, and the first port of call for day-to-day support. They believed that evaluation of their experiences was by ITT, using ITT instruments. While these activities are either jointly managed with, or subject to approval by, University staff, none is mentioned in specific terms under the current agreements, despite the nature of the partnership being, in practice, far more than 'facilities only'.

15 The University states that use of ITT as an outcentre was confirmed at the relevant course revalidations (undergraduate and postgraduate) in February and April 2016, and new agreements were signed following the reviews. The report of the undergraduate review only lists ITT as one of the centres where the programme is delivered; no specific or detailed attention is given to ITT or students based there. The postgraduate review report includes a short section on ITT, with mention of staffing and library resources. Neither report mentions any visit to ITT; while both panels interviewed student groups, there is no indication that ITT students were included. Neither report makes any recommendation specifically concerning ITT, either for continuing outcentre status or any other matter.

16 Both reports were considered by a Course Approval Subcommittee, but its resolutions contain no recommendation about the continuing suitability of ITT. There is every indication in this instance that ITT is, and will remain, a desirable and suitable outcentre. However, a general review of the health of a programme, without specific reference to the continuing viability of the outcentre, or any specific recommendation concerning its continuation, does not appear to guarantee the University sufficient assurance of the

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. The review team **recommends** that the University considers whether its existing academic governance arrangements, including legal agreements, provide for sufficient oversight of the full range of activities undertaken by outcentres.

Quality assurance

Academic standards

19 In the case of the MSc, students travel between sites for alternate 'blocks'. In standards terms, with the exception of the actual entry qualifications of different MSc recruitment streams, there is no difference between 'University-recruited' and 'ITT-recruited' students. While ITT has the main role in advertising and marketing the courses in Dublin, students complete University application forms, and the entry criteria for students who study on the 'home' campuses apply equally to ITT students. Students may apply for advanced standing via the University's standard Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning arrangements.

20 The courses delivered at ITT were originally validated as in-house offerings. All courses observe the standard requirements of the University's other courses: programme specifications refer to Subject Benchmark Statements and the FHEQ, external expert advice was used in programme development and approval, and the intended learning outcomes are identical, wherever the courses are delivered.

21 External examiners are appointed for courses overall: two for the undergraduate courses and one for the MSc. External examiners report on a form that includes a requirement for faculties to identify basic details of the areas under examination. One box identifies 'Partner Institution (if applicable)'. The review team noted that in the five examples of external examiner reports from 2014-5 and 2015-16 to which it had access, the faculty had entered 'n/a' in this box, or left it blank. None of the reports mention ITT or otherwise distinguish ITT students from others. In these circumstances there would appear to be no guarantee that an external examiner would be able to identify patterns of high or low achievement at particular outcentres. Course leaders respond to external examiner reports. None of the responses seen by the review team mention ITT, perhaps because neither external examiners nor course directors are encouraged to consider them separately. Students stated that they are aware of external examiner arrangements, but had never seen their reports, although they are made available to students on the course support area of the University's virtual learning environment.

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 good by both students and staff. As students register directly with the University, they have access to all the usual University resources, and MSc students meet as often in Belfast as in Dublin. One block of study for the MSc students takes place in Boston, USA. Arrangements for the Boston trip are made jointly between the University and ITT: the Boston module is highly valued by both staff and students, and provides opportunities for networking and internationalising course content. The Boston module and its organisation is a **positive feature**. ITT facilities are as available to Ulster-registered students as to students registered for ITT's own, QQI-accredited courses: ITT has convenient accommodation in the centre of Dublin, and is a long-established provider of high status digital and face-to-face training.

30 Routine teaching for courses is by permanent University staff, although, as is typical of similar business courses, much use is made of guest speakers working in industry. University courses running at outcentres may make use of staff who are not employees of the University. Such staff must apply to become Recognised Teachers of the University, by submission of a CV: the single Recognised Teacher at ITT was long established, and had been approved under this procedure. Students on all courses stated that 'the quality of the lecturers' was the best feature of their learning experience. They commented favourably on the way in which the University makes allowance for the dual demands of an academic course and professional responsibilities; and the MSc students commended the system of delivery in three-day blocks. Flexibility of delivery was a **positive feature** of the courses. Students also valued the networking opportunities, although some MSc students thought that the use of the word 'executive' in the title of the degree did not fully match the experience of some of the students recruited. University staff stated that at least five years' experience at executive or director level was normally sought. The students acknowledged, however, that relatively small classes brought inherent benefits, and it was clear that MSc students as a group were high-calibre, an impression confirmed by the staff and validated by their achievements.

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-time students; it applies to Institute students north and south of the border. Complaints about facilities are managed by ITT, and complaints about academic matters are managed by the University. None of the students met by the TNE team were aware of any complaint, and believed ITT to be very responsive to any minor matter reported informally.

Information on higher education provision

33 ITT has a large role in marketing the programmes, particularly among the extensive client base it has built up over its approximately 40 years of operation. The University spoke positively about ITT's commercial strengths, and its contribution to finding new markets and opportunities. The University in particular valued ITT's links with media advertising.

34 The memoranda of agreement include clauses forbidding ITT to publish any misleading or incorrect information about courses. Informational materials are checked by both the University marketing team and the Institute. The brand-name of Irish Times and Irish Times Training is well protected by ITT itself, and valued highly by the University. Information on the MSc is common to all students wherever domiciled or recruited.

35 The same programme literature is used by all students, wherever they are based.

36 All certificates and records of study are produced by the University. MSc certificates and records of study are common to all students wherever domiciled or recruited. The undergraduate transcripts record place of tuition.

Conclusion

From its consideration of the evidence provided by the University, and from discussions with managers, staff and students of the University at ITT, the review team formed the view that the partnership was highly valued by both parties and by students. The University provides ITT with a flexible and innovative approach to curriculum delivery, and ITT provides the University with an established client base and client management system, as well as 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 employed the students benefit directly from practical and focused project work. While the review team recommends that the University considers some aspects of collaborative operations, particularly the categorisation of some types of partnership and the quality assurance arrangements consequent on it, these relate to procedural matters: problems have not arisen due to the inherently strong nature of this particular partnership.

Positive features

The following positive features are identified:

- the contribution of the Boston module to the MSc course (paragraph 29)
- the flexible mode of tuition, recognising the dual demands of academic study and professional practice in both tuition methods and such procedures as academic appeals (paragraph 20).

Recommendations

The Ulster University is recommended to take the following action:

- consider whether its existing academic governance arrangements, including legal agreements, provide for sufficient oversight of the full range of activities undertaken by outcentres (paragraph 18)
- consider whether the present routine monitoring system meets its intentions regarding the identification of good practice in courses delivered in partnership (partnership 26).

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 ITT's 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 that they do not specifically feature in University level reports is a good indication of the sound performance of these programmes.

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