Developing Organisational Design Criteria in the Redesign of an Irish Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

This paper outlines the first phase of a process of re-design strategy that was undertaken in an Irish higher education institution. The re-design strategy was undertaken prior to a merger of three autonomous higher education institutions in the Dublin area. The strategy undertaken comprised three main phases: identification and consideration of design criteria; short-listing and consideration of design options; and finally, the development and selection of the most appropriate design option. This paper focuses mainly on the first phase of the process undertaken: the identification and consideration of design criteria.

Keywords: Organisational design, organisational change, organisational structure, colleges, universities, organisational models, organisational design criteria

Introduction

This paper reflects on a process of developing organisational design criteria for a new Technological University (TU) in Ireland. The new TU will emerge as a consequence of merging three Institutes of Technology in the greater Dublin area: Dublin Institute of Technology, which is located in the city centre; Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown, which is located north-west of the city; and Institute of Technology, Tallaght, which is located south-west of the city. The merged TU will have a total student population of approximately 30,000; thereby making it the largest higher education institution in the State. This paper serves as an introductory article in the organisational design process of an emerging type of higher education institution in Ireland. It serves as a record of what occurred in the first phase of the organisation design process which culminated in the identification and consideration of design criteria for Ireland's first Technological University.

Context

The Irish higher education system is a binary one, with universities on one side and Institutes of Technology (IoTs) on the other side of the binary divide. This binary system is likely to continue for some time (DES, 1995, p.93; Coolahan, 2004, p.30 7 p.51; OECD, 2004, pp. 21-22; HEA, 2011, p.101; Feeney, 2014, p.15). The past 15 years have seen significant reforms taking place in the Irish higher education (HE) system. The most relevant of these reforms, for this paper, are those proposed in the '*National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030'* which was published in 2011. This Strategy followed from a lengthy consultation process with stakeholders, including higher education institutions (HEIs), individuals with an interest in Irish HE, and others (Feeney, 2014, p.159). The Strategy supported the establishment of Technological Universities (TU) and envisaged that some IoTs may be in a position to apply for TU status following from a process of consolidation and mergers in some locations. This new TU designation would maintain the current binary divide

by safeguarding the mission of the TU/IoT sector of developing their fields of learning to be closely aligned to industry and business, with particular emphasis on science, engineering and technology disciplines (Feeney, 2014, pp.161-162). It is in this context that the three Institutes of Technology [Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) and Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT)] entered into an alliance in 2011 and proceeded to work towards a merger into a single HEI by late 2015.

Organisational Design
Organisational design is considered to be the '*foundation of organisational action*' (Miller et al., 2009, p.273). Overholt (1997, p.22) considered organisational design to be a configuration of the structure, processes and behaviours of an organisation. The structure of organisations goes some way towards enabling organisations to operate in open, global systems during these turbulent times. HEIs need to embrace an era of constantly designing and re-designing their organisational structure to ensure that they stay relevant, remain flexible and innovative in terms of purpose. A seminal definition of organisational structure was provided by Mintzberg (1979) which states that structure is "*the sum total of the ways in which it [the organisation] divides its labor into distinct tasks and then achieves coordination among them*".

Several models of organisational design were considered for the purpose of establishing criteria for the Dublin TU alliance, including the '*Business Strategy Diamond*' (Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2005), the '*Pyramid of Capabilities*' (Collins, 2001), and the '*Flexible Organisations Model*' (Overholt, 1997). None of these models proved to be appropriate however, as there was no defined strategy or mission for the final merged institution. As a consequence, the model chosen by a working group overseeing organisational design was Goold and Campbell's (2002) model which provided adequate flexibility to enable progress to be made in determining organisational design criteria in advance of having a clearly defined and agreed strategy.

The Process
The Organisation Design (OD) process was overseen by an OD Working Group. This Working Group appointed 4 members to act as Workshop Facilitators. Two of the Workshop Facilitators are staff members from IT Blanchardstown and the remaining two are staff members from Dublin IT.The 4 workshop facilitators designed a series of workshops to ensure that there was a high level of participation in all three institutions. All Colleges and Schools were invited to write a submission to the OD Working Group in relation to the OD principles for their discipline area. All 4 DIT Colleges and both of the other institutes provided written submissions in this regard.

The first stage of the OD process comprised a large group meeting of all managers, both academic and non-academic, from all three institutions, which was held in July 2014. That group of managers clarified that their views were important to the ongoing OD process and it was agreed that a participative process would be adopted. A second large group meeting was held in

September 2014. Managers from all three institutions were represented at this meeting. Participants were asked to nominate colleagues and themselves for a series of workshops with the purpose of establishing OD criteria before Christmas 2014. Workshops were designed and developed by the four facilitators and these were approved by the OD Working Group. Staff were organised into broad-based discipline groupings for the purpose of the workshops. Each workshop had approx. 12 invitees (although some had fewer, while others had more) to ensure that there was adequate participation by all of those who participated. Each group attended two structured workshops for the purpose of designing OD criteria. Seventeen staff workshops were conducted between 7 October and 31 October 2014.

The outputs of these workshops, along with the written submissions received from Colleges and Schools were brought back to the OD Working Group for consideration in drafting the OD Criteria. The OD Working Group approved the eight OD Criteria for the TU 4 D Organisation in November 2014.

The Outcome
At the conclusion of the process outlined above, eight organisational design criteria were agreed and approved by the OD Working Group. These are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: TU 4 Dublin Organisational Design Criteria

Our unitary TU4Dublin will have a unified curriculum and qualifications, unified organisational policies, procedure and systems, common student and staff experience, a single external image and a single staff identity. Within this framework, the organisation will be entrepreneurial, agile, flexible and responsive to the changing environment.
1. The operational academic units will be organised around disciplines and academic units will be grouped into externally – recognisable and appropriately – synergistic aggregates.
2. Each academic unit will be involved in teaching/ learning, engagement and research. The units will be practice-led, research-informed, outward-facing, focused on student and other stakeholder needs, and capable of innovative and entrepreneurial activity. Each will operate with autonomy within a framework of accountability and responsibility to agreed strategic objectives, policies and operational plans.
3. Professional services will be organised into specialisms, responsive to service users, and grouped into functions focused on supporting the strategic and operational activities of the academic units and other services.
4. Each professional service will be structured for efficient and effective delivery, be that centralised, decentralised, or both.
5. Decisions will be devolved to the most effective level under a philosophy of subsidiarity. Executive-level decisions, particularly in relation to budgets, resource allocation and HR process, will be clear and transparent, evidence-based and capable of independent audit.
6. There will be a clear separation of responsibility between the role of the Governing Body and the executive leadership team.
7. The make-up of the executive leadership team will recognise that the academic activities are the core of TU4Dublin business and the team will be constituted accordingly. Some roles on the executive leadership team may have cross-cutting leadership responsibilities (e.g. a regional remit).
8. Staff will have cross-cutting responsibilities alongside their individual-unit responsibilities, with clear reporting and accountability arrangements, and will be supported accordingly.

The above OD criteria now serve as an important foundation stone for the development of a new organisational structure for a merged Technological University.

Conclusions

In this paper we have outlined the activities involved in identifying and considering the design criteria for a new type of HEI in Ireland. The broader organisation design process is still ongoing. Based on our experience of the process to date, we contend that organisational structures could not be considered before explicit design criteria had been developed and agreed. Consequently, the development and agreement of organisational design criteria formed the initial phase in our process. Notwithstanding this however, the organisational design process and consequent organisational structure can only achieve the TU's mission and purpose if consideration of organisational processes and procedures are adapted. Further research is recommended on organisational design activities in HEIs in the current rapidly evolving global landscape. Finally, this paper focussed on phase 1 of the organisational design process. Phase 2 is currently underway and Phase 3 should be complete by the end of 2015. Further papers will follow regarding each phase of the process. We have focussed on the development of design criteria in the merged Dublin Institutions which will seek TU designation. We would be particularly interested in undertaking a comparative study on similar processes undertaken elsewhere.

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