



Report on request by Institute of Technology Blanchardstown for approval to submit, on a case-by-case basis, applications for registration of PhD programmes in the areas of:

- **Informatics**
- **Engineering**

26th November 2008

1 Introduction

In May 2008 HETAC received an application by Institute of Technology Blanchardstown for approval to submit in principle, on a case-by-case basis, applications for registration of PhD programmes in the areas of Informatics and Engineering.

The application included the following documents:

- Application for approval to submit research degrees at PhD (NFQ Level 10) in Informatics and in Engineering on a case by case basis

The following additional documentation was provided during the course of the visits:

- ITB Strategic plan 2006-11
- Postgraduate studies policy and procedure documentation
- Graduate Index with External Examiner reports
- List of postgraduate research students and graduates
- ITB Journal contents table

A panel of expert assessors was assembled by HETAC to evaluate the case for approval by perusing the documentation submitted and visiting the College. Details of the panel are provided in the final section of the report.

A site visit took place between 09:00 and approximately 14:30 on October 17th at the ITB campus. The panel also held a private meeting during the previous evening.

Assessors met and had discussions with the senior management team; research active academic staff, graduates and current postgraduate research students; perused research outputs; and viewed relevant facilities.

2 Summary of findings

The panel recommends that HETAC approve Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown to submit, on a case-by-case basis, applications for registration of PhD programmes in the areas of

- Informatics
- Engineering

subject to the standard conditions that

1. The Institute produce a response detailing how it will address the issues raised by the assessors and which is considered satisfactory by HETAC.
2. Approval be granted for a period of *five years*.

The panel is confident that the graduates of these programmes will attain the HETAC doctoral standard. This will entitle them to an award at Level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

3 General comments and summary of specific recommendations

The panel recognised the clear progress ITB has made in developing research programmes since its establishment, as evidenced by the MSc (NFQ Level 9) programmes. In order to support the progression to the delivery of PhD (NFQ Level 10) one condition of approval is proposed and a number of recommendations are made:

3.1 Approval to submit candidates is recommended based on a suitable Institute response to the following condition:

That the postgraduate regulations be amended to reflect good supervisory practice whereby it is required that at least one supervisor has previously successfully supervised to completion a PhD thesis.

AND

3.2 To the following recommendations:

- 3.2.1 That the Institute provide greater clarity in its documents and procedures on the supervisory responsibilities of individuals versus those subsumed by the 'thesis committee' and in addition provide clarity on the time allocated or remitted in the context of supervision.
- 3.2.2 That the School seriously consider strengthening their research by the development of greater cross school research activities. A cross school single strategy for research may be very helpful. Additionally consideration could be given to research groups or centres.
- 3.2.3 That the Institute appoint a Director of Postgraduate Studies who has oversight of all the activities of research students and research student supervisors in the School. It is recognised that given the scale of the Institute a dedicated post may not be appropriate, but it is suggested that this role be allocated to a senior member of the School. It is suggested that it may benefit the organisation to consider separating the functions of a Head of Department and a potential Director of Postgraduate Studies whereby responsibilities such as those described on page 6 of the document *Research Policy & Strategy* not be ascribed to the HOD. The creation of this role may also assist in addressing the recommendation in 3.2.2.
- 3.2.4 That the Institute consider improving the availability of research resources by obtaining access to the IEEE and ACM digital libraries
- 3.2.5 The nature of the contract of employment for lecturing staff in the IOT sector is unhelpful in supporting research. Whilst it is unambiguous that the terms of the contract do not hamper individual staff member's commitment or the support of students in the School of Informatics and Engineering at ITB, it would be desirable that the Institute fully participate in any available national dialogue to resolve the anomaly. In this context it is recommended that prior to the acceptance of a candidate on a PhD programme the Head of Department and the Research Supervisor meet to agree that the staff member will be available over the summer months for supervision and secondly that the Institute agrees to ensure appropriate supports are in place for students over the Summer period.

4 Other comments - Detailed Reports & Recommendations

4.1.1 Is there a clear and realistic research strategy?

Yes, but it would benefit from greater development.

Areas for improvement

Whilst the Institute Strategic Plan does not identify research as one of its five priorities it does set out academic strategies in dealing with research under Priorities 2 and 3. The School of Informatics and Engineering has done good work in its development of the two year research Masters. Nevertheless the School does not have its own dedicated research strategy and as stated in the recommendations it would be helpful to create one. The strategy is linked to having a 'champion' and the recommendation to create a Director of Postgraduate Studies role would assist its creation, implementation and a clear focus on good practice research processes and outputs. A greater focus and development of training and support for research students would also be beneficial.

4.1.2 Is there a suitable research environment including facilities (i.e. library, access to research journals, computer facilities, laboratories etc.)?

Yes, but access to online journals needs significant improvement.

Strengths

The production of an in-house research journal and the running of focussed research seminars are good activities. Student involvement is encouraged in these activities and should be continued as a matter of significance in their development of their individual research capacities.

During the site visit the panel had the opportunity to view the facilities available to research students. Some of the research space is still under refurbishment, and will greatly enhance the environment when it is brought to completion.

4.1.3 Is there adequate research leadership?

The research activity taking place would suggest that there is research leadership. There was a good range of funded projects and publications listed. A significant number of individuals presented as leaders of research. Given the activities in the School of Informatics and Engineering the appointment of a Director or nominated 'leader' may strengthen the ongoing work.

4.1.4 Are there research-active staff who can supervise research students?

There are appropriate models of supervision available to research staff and student.

Improvements

Evidence was provided of a number of staff having successfully supervised MSc by research degrees to completion. Less evident was the number of staff who have supervised to completion at PhD level. A number of staff hold PhDs and a further number are pursuing doctoral studies. Over time this will enhance the capacity to supervise. As indicated in the *condition* of approval, it is essential that a student have at least one supervisor who has supervised a PhD to completion. A mentoring model can be applied with the addition of co-supervisors so that PhD supervisors grow their capacity also.

Particular consideration should be given in the regulations governing the level of support required for part-time students. Robust procedures must support their programmes of study.

4.1.4 Is there capacity for research success?

Yes.

There is an evident commitment and enthusiasm of staff around their respective research areas.

Improvements

The capacity for success may be strengthened by work to develop to identify more cross-school research activities.

4.1.5 Has the institution established agreed institutional regulations and procedures, code of good research practice and administrative support?

Yes, but some changes are essential as indicated by the condition cited in 3.1.

Other areas for improvement

Generally the Institute's documentation is excellent. However the issue referred to in 4.1.4 requires an amendment to procedures. The document *Operational details for registered postgraduate students* needs amendment on pages 8 and 9. See 4.1.6 also.

With regard to the teaching load of staff and the remission of teaching hours in respect of research students it was noted by the panellists that the breakdown of hours is radically different to the model employed in universities in general, and may put undue pressure on teaching staff. It is suggested that consideration be given to this dimension and that if possible a greater remission of hours be made.

It is further suggested that staff be fully supported in their own PhD studies, attendance at conferences, etc. and that this support be both financial and in respect of time allocated. Clear documentation of such supports would be beneficial.

4.1.6 On the compliance with the general requirements set out in Appendix C.

There is general compliance with these requirements but greater detail would be helpful on the transfer between the Master's and Doctoral registers. It is unclear whether an independent expert is involved in the transfer, which would be appropriate to this process. Perhaps a form other than that titled PG1 should be evolved for this process.

4.1.7 Research performance indicators

4.1.7.1 Research Administration and Quality Assurance

See 4.1.5

4.1.7.2 Access to research degree programmes

No issues

4.1.7.3 Transfer between the Master's and Doctoral Registers

See 4.1.6

4.1.7.4 Other Appendix C criteria

No issues.

4.1.8 On the assessment procedures for candidates for research degrees which are fair and consistent and for the purpose of compliance with standards determined by HETAC.

These are adequate and have been utilised effectively at Master's level.

4.1.9 On the implementation of procedures for access transfer and progression as determined by the Qualifications Authority under Section 8(2)(d) of the Act.

See 4.1.6

5. Conclusion

The primary function of the Institute of Technology at Blanchardstown is to provide undergraduate degree programmes and to serve the local community. As part of its strategic development of its teaching role and also its position as a resource within the community research programmes have also been undertaken. The School of Informatics and Engineering has successfully provided two-year research Master's programmes for a number of years and this has clearly informed the development of a sound research strategy. The proposed PhD programme is a logical development in this context and the activity and strength of the host school is a good location for it.

Final

6. The Panel

Professor Cornelia Boldyreff, University of Lincoln

Dr Patrick J Doherty, University of Liverpool

Professor Michael Ryan (Chairperson), Dublin City University (*Retired*)

In attendance

Ms Tara Ryan, Higher Education and Training Awards Council

7. Declarations of Interest

None were made.

Final