

Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Reflections on Performance

Overview

- While it appears that progress has been made against outlined objectives in teaching and learning, the analysis would benefit from further details of baselines where appropriate. AIT has indicated that baselines will be further developed in future reviews of the compact.
- While the Institute states objectives in research and innovation have been met, it is noted that targets in the student profile for 2016/17 have been adjusted downwards for postgraduate graduates (212 down from 440). AIT has clarified that the initial figure of 440 was incorrect and the institute had not envisaged targeting 440 graduates in any one academic year. The latter figure of 212 is correct and should be used in future rounds. The Institute has also previously commented that economic issues, in particular the removal of funding support for postgraduate students is impacting on postgraduate enrolment.
- In respect of engagement, the progress report would have benefitted from benchmarking, or an indication that the number of industry projects, for example, is the appropriate number based on HEI size, activity etc. and this would have gone some way to explaining why targets have been met so early on. So, the self-reflection piece is missing and the targets will have to be revised. AIT raised the lack of a national model, or approach to benchmarking in this domain, as an issue. Engagement within the region has continued to develop in AIT and while not reported extensively in this iteration of the compact, will be reflected in future rounds.
- AIT's target of 80 students pursuing an international placement, study or training period abroad by 2016 is challenging and would represent an 8 fold increase from present numbers. The targets in this area are modest and fall somewhat short of the major strategic aim outlined in their strategy but on the basis of their evaluation they are making adequate progress. AIT note that the metrics relating to inward mobility of international students are but two of the metrics contained in the Strategic Plan which aims to deliver an eight fold increase in this area and is considered to be an achievable stretch target.

Developing shared opportunities in the context of the work of the cluster is something that could be explored.

- A detailed report of the coherence of provision across the cluster partners was targeted for delivery in 2014.
- AIT has a new strategic plan. A discussion on its impact may be required.

- The Leinster Pillar II Cluster consisting of Dundalk Institute of Technology, Dublin City University, Athlone Institute of Technology and Maynooth University have made impressive progress in meeting their objectives given lack of resources in some of the institutions.
- Overall AIT seem to be on target for their three initiatives in access, participation and lifelong learning but the initiatives could be more ambitious. AIT clarified that initial LLL figures included those undertaking both accredited courses and hobby courses and this breakdown has now been supplied.

Self-evaluation report - domain level review

1. Regional clusters:

Institutional objective 1: Agree and implement process to establish and support a sustainable and shared academic planning process to ensure coherent, coordinated and rational higher educational provision across the region.

The institution met its objectives. A Working Group of Registrars prepared a protocol for new programme provision within the Midlands East, North Dublin (MEND) cluster. The Working Group will keep working together in examining the requirements for effective, reliable and efficient systems for Student Data Exchange for Joint Academic Programmes.

Institutional objective 2: Develop a regional approach to access, transfer and progression. (ATP). Objectives have been met in relation to student pathways. SIDF have facilitated the Group in completing inventory of options and mechanisms for Access Transfer and progression. An agreed protocol for new programme provision will be rolled out across the entire HE and FE sectors.

The cluster objectives were met. The institutions are working collectively and collaboratively and a Regional Cluster Board which includes Presidents and Registrars has been established. This cluster was the only collaboration to be awarded funding under the SIDF programme.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning:

Athlone IT set out three objectives in relation to Participation, equal access and lifelong learning:

To increase the number of non-standard learners engaging through Lifelong Learning to 15% of student population over the lifetime of 2014 – 2018 Strategic Plan for the institute; to participate in a new AIT ENGAGE programme; to further develop and embed Peer Assisted Student Support programme (PASS).

Increase the number of non-standard learners - the institute used a baseline 827 students registered in September 2012, including those students on hobby courses and personal development programmes. As of 1 March 2015, 1,086 part time students were registered in the Institute including 458 on registered on accredited programmes with the Dept. of Lifelong Learning and a further 327 on hobby courses etc. exceeding the interim target for the end of 2015 of 900 learners.

Participation in new AIT ENGAGE programme – a new initiative to get students more involved in the Institutes clubs and societies, particularly those involved in civic engagement. Therefore, as it is a new initiative there is no usable baseline figure but an interim target of 100 members with 10 students undertaking leadership training for 2014 to double in 2015, rising to 300 members in 2016. AIT claims that membership of initiative currently exceeds target.

Further develop and embed Peer Assisted Student Support programme (PASS) – an initiative that was offered on eight 1st year courses in 2012/2013. An interim target of 17 courses was set for 2014 with PASS being offered on 23 and running on 17. A further target of 20 programmes is set for 2015 rising to 23 programmes for 2016. AIT are currently on target to meet the objective.

Overall AIT seem to be on target for their three initiatives in access, participation and lifelong learning but the initiatives could be more ambitious. AIT clarified that initial LLL figures included those undertaking both accredited courses and hobby courses and this breakdown has now been supplied. AIT might also consider if the metric for measuring 1st year participation (completion of HEA Equal Access survey) is wholly appropriate, might it be better to look at induction activities throughout the year and measure retention rates?

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

Institution Objective 1: Increase participation and attendance at new student induction

The target is reported as met. 44% undertook HEA equal access survey 2012/2013 which increased to 79.62% in 2014/2015. On average >70% of students participated in various induction activities. As it seems there are no figures for the baseline in previous years AIT might check and confirm that they exceeded this target?

Institution Objective 2: To promote excellence in learning, teaching and assessment, thereby enhancing learning experience of all students

In the interim report AIT mention that a working group on retention has been established to look at modules such as “learning to learn”. The newly published AIT strategic plan notes that pillar one is dedicated to learning, teaching and educational experience with a key aim to sustain and further develop an inclusive learning community.

Target in terms of staff members meeting APD (accredited professional development) is met and exceeded.

Target in terms of support for staff in use of VLE (virtual learning environment) is met. This includes initiatives such as induction class, further development of online resources, increased emphasis on developing staff knowledge and skills of moodle as a teaching tool.

Target is met regarding supporting staff in the use of student diary pro. An updated version of this is available on moodle, this has been incorporated into several programmes including veterinary nursing, pharmacy technician and LIN accredited modules.

While it appears that progress has been made against outlined objectives in teaching and learning, the analysis would benefit from further details of baselines where appropriate. AIT has indicated that baselines will be further developed in future reviews of the compact.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation:

All objectives in published compact match self-evaluation report and the self-evaluation report is completed in full and colour coded.

Institution Objective: Build critical mass around focussed areas of core research capability aligned with regional needs and national research priorities.

Overall annual targets exceeded to end 2014 although no breakdown was provided between the two research centres of MRI (materials) and SRI (software). The Institute notes that it is expected that activity will continue to grow and develop but the pace is dependent on the availability of competitive funding. The Institute requests the reinstatement of the Technological Sector Fund.

Institution Objective: Deliver top quality postgraduate research programmes at level 9 and 10, aligned with focussed research areas.

Targets have been met. The Institute states that it has achieved delegated authority for Level 10 in network and communications and software engineering and agreements are in place with Maynooth University for the delivery of creativity and entrepreneurship module. Agreements are also in place for the co-supervision of a postgraduate candidate. It would be interesting to learn of other proposals in this area for sharing of structured postgraduate research modules with Maynooth or other partners.

Institution Objective: Improved knowledge/tech transfer to enterprise via the commercialisation of AIT's research activities.

Targets here were met or exceeded.

While the Institute states objectives in research and innovation have been met, targets in the student profile for 2016/17 have been adjusted downwards for postgraduate graduates (212 down from 440). AIT has clarified that the initial figure of 440 was incorrect and the institute had not envisaged targeting 440 graduates in any one academic year. The latter figure of 212 is correct and should be used in future rounds. The Institute has also previously commented that economic issues, in particular the removal of funding support for postgraduate students is impacting on postgraduate enrolment.

5. Enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange:

Institution objective: Working with Enterprise Ireland, support the development of knowledge-based start-ups in the Midlands region via MIRC campus business incubator, including the New Frontiers entrepreneur development programme delivered in partnership with MU.

Quantitative targets were set for the number of New Frontiers programme participants and entrepreneur projects supported. Targets have been met and in fact, the 2015 targets have already been surpassed.

Institution objective: Provide a broad range of knowledge intensive innovation services to regional and national industrial clients, delivering results in a time frame that matches industry needs, and with a focus on start-ups and SMEs.

Quantitative targets were set for the number of industry projects, companies supported and innovation vouchers. They have exceeded all targets set and in fact, the 2015 and 2016 targets have already been surpassed.

Progress is clearly demonstrated by reference to the quantitative metrics reported. It is noted that one such objective has been delivered in collaboration with MU, further building on the HEI alliance. While all targets have been met in full, the question now is whether the 2015 and 2016 targets are still valid as they appear to have already been achieved.

The progress report would have benefitted from benchmarking, or an indication that the number of industry projects, for example, is the appropriate number based on HEI size, activity etc. and this would have gone some way to explaining why targets have been met so early on. The self-reflection piece is missing. AIT raised the lack of a national model, or approach to benchmarking in this domain, as an issue. Engagement within the region has continued to develop in AIT and while not reported extensively in this iteration of the compact, will be reflected in future rounds.

6. Enhanced internationalisation:

The strategic goal outlined in the AIT Strategic Plan 2014-2018 is to be "internationally focused in teaching, research and knowledge exchange." A target of 15% of international students registered in 2016 looks attainable - the Institute is currently on 12%. AIT also has 10 shared programmes in China.

AIT's target of 80 students pursuing an international placement, study or training period abroad by 2016 is challenging and would represent an 8 fold increase from present numbers. The targets in this area are modest and appear to fall somewhat short of the major strategic aim outlined in their strategy, but on the basis of their evaluation they are making adequate progress. AIT note that the metrics relating to inward mobility of international students are but two of the metrics contained in the Strategic Plan which aims to deliver an eight fold increase in this area and is considered to be an achievable stretch target.

Developing shared opportunities in the context of the work of the cluster is something that could be explored.

7. Institutional consolidation:

A detailed report of the coherence of provision across the cluster partners was targeted for delivery in 2014.

In relation to increased collaboration with further education, the report is somewhat vague and could benefit from improved presentation of the current position. But generally it would appear that progress in this area has been slow.

8. Additional Notes:

No changes to the compact objectives are planned, in spite of publication of the new Strategic Plan. Instead, the HEI objectives in the inaugural compact are embedded into the Strategic Plan.

Under enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange, two institution objectives have been reported as met or future targets exceeded and should now be revised or reconsidered:

- Working with Enterprise Ireland, support the development of knowledge-based start-ups in the Midlands region via MIRC campus business incubator, including the New Frontiers entrepreneur development programme delivered in partnership with MU.
- Provide a broad range of knowledge intensive innovation services to regional and national industrial clients, delivering results in a time frame that matches industry needs, and with a focus on start-ups and SMEs.