

# Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)

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## Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 10<sup>th</sup> September 2015

The HEA welcomed Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which the process operates. AIT was invited to provide an update on institutional progress.

AIT has appointed a lead on strategic planning and institutional performance, John McKenna, who has linked the strategic dialogue process to broader strategic planning. For the most part, AIT looks East which fits with its cluster work and the student intake which is largely drawn from the Eastern region (Longford, Westmeath, Offaly). AIT's objective, as set out in its strategic plan is that it is aiming for TU re-designation. As it stands, it meets all the criteria except the issue of who to partner with, but is talking to potential candidates.

The HEA noted that in some parts of the self-evaluation report the self-reflection is lacking as is the coherence in the overall structure or how the objectives and targets in the various compact domains align. The overarching strategy could be better communicated in the context of the compact. AIT indicated, notwithstanding the appointment of a lead on strategic planning, that the resources required to complete such an exercise are not insignificant.

The HEA invited AIT to set their efforts in the teaching and learning domain and how a quality student experience is ensured. As an institute, AIT is engaged with LIN and have hosted guest speakers as part of that. They are sharing data in this regard (hard copies provided at the meeting) and 259 staff have undergone professional development, so this is an active piece of overall developments.

AIT sees ISSE as an important part of student engagement, with over 50% of students participating. AIT can demonstrate strong results, some indicators scored 80% or greater. The outcomes have been used to inform internal programme review, but it should be borne in mind that students engaging need to see a return on it, to show that their engagement is valuable. The institute prides itself on strategy and coherence, having regard to looked to their situation and geography and would contest HEA feedback which considers that high level strategy is lacking. As an example, over the last ten years AIT has been re-tuning their induction process, largely based on feedback. They are not introducing wholesale changes from one year to the next but rather are tweaking the process. This year saw the first years come back a week early and was a result of significant reflection. The institute is also conscious of benchmarking, but there are challenges in terms of time and resources, but building that slowly.

In terms of retention, overall rates are consistent with regional averages. The HEA noted that there are fragmented offerings though, with some courses dropping below 200 points, including those in more challenging areas. AIT agreed that it does represent a challenge, in

civil engineering for example, numbers are low and the institute had to consider their role in the space. Unfilled places resulted in a range of CAO points being accepted. On balance, they have a very popular veterinary nursing programme, standing at over 400 points. Overall, they consider that points are a crude measure by which to judge; it may be more appropriate to look at minimum standards such as the requirement for maths, but they don't want to disqualify people either. There are also supply-side issues to consider, in that in the absence of students, the HR toolkit is not available to release staff.

The HEA also drew attention to the current target around retention being linked to the completion of the Equal Access Survey and whether retention could be measured more effectively. AIT undertook to consider this.

AIT has good relations with ETBs, notably a good model is in place with Offaly and Cavan ETBs. They are working with ETBs on course content and encouraging visits to AIT. They are looking to grow the model out to Longford/Westmeath. In terms of school linkages, rather than having individual relationships they have developed broad joint links with schools.

AIT notes that mature applicants have fallen 50% due to upturn in the economy. The HEA pointed to the fact that this is not always the case nationally. AIT point to the fact that while the percentage fall is significant, overall their share was higher at the outset. They are also looking at this with the ETBs in the context of the MEND cluster. This will have an effect but is in its early stages. They continue to grow apprenticeship programmes, along with links with industry.

The HEA raised the issue of research in the context of broader institutional activities. AIT noted that research priorities have been set across three specific areas, with each institute having a profile of PIs, post-docs and postgraduate students are targeted to those areas. In terms of the latter, it is noted that the postgraduate student target has been revised downward in light of available funding opportunities. A pipeline of postgraduate students is needed and AIT is engaged in the Irish Research Council programmes but aren't securing the number of awards they would like. They would welcome the reinstatement of the TSR as a specific initiative to the institute of technology sector.

AIT stated that they are not funded for research and have to support it themselves. They note the TU requirement of 4% of the student cohort being engaged in research, but question where that funding is to come from and where the policy coherence lies. The HEA acknowledged that the sector needs to make the case for targeted research funding should there be a strong evidence base on which to do so.

To build research capacity they need to have people willing, capable and available to engage. While they have willingness and capability, resources and availability are challenges. To address the latter, they are working with other partners, such as MU on transferable skills or innovation to leverage this.

On engagement and related metrics, the HEA queried the definition that the institute works to. AIT responded that that the definition is understood internally, albeit it is qualitative in nature. The metrics are as outlined and they pointed to the fact that they have a large number of contacts, reflective of the number of SMEs and the industrial landscape in the region. The engagements with SMEs in the midlands, for example, relate to service delivery. In meeting the deadline for submission of the compact in the first cycle, the metrics selected were rushed and it would be worthwhile revisiting them. In fact, a number have already been achieved or surpassed.

AIT has also looked at benchmarks and some interesting work was done in Finland in this regard, so they want to reflect on that. As a general comment, it would be useful to have a national model or a national approach to benchmarking, not alone on research but also more broadly. This would allow benchmarks to inform compact targets e.g. the appropriate number of industry contacts given the HEI size.

On stretch targets, the HEA noted that institutions should communicate in which areas the stretch lies. Areas of lesser priority should not see so great a stretch.

Overall, there are some issues on style. AIT considers that the template can be a bit limiting – the internationalisation section for example doesn't reflect the full gamut of activities in this area. As it stands, the internationalisation strategy is largely focussed on attracting international students rather addressing internationalisation more generally. AIT also raised the issue of monies owing to the HEIs for the Science Without Borders programme which is currently being dealt with.

## Appendix

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with an External Advisor, met with the institutional representatives as set out below. The meeting was chaired by HEA Chief Executive, Tom Boland. A process auditor was also present at the meeting.

### **AIT representatives**

Prof Ciarán Ó Catháin	President
Mr John Mc Kenna	Vice-President Strategic Planning & Institutional Performance
Dr Joseph Ryan	Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Registry
Mr Bill Delaney	Vice-President for Financial and Corporate Affairs
Mr Paul Killeen	Dean of Innovation, Research and Enterprise
Mr Pat Timpson	Strategic Advisor
Ms Mary Goode	Project Officer – President’s Office