

# Institute of Technology Carlow (IT Carlow)

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## Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 22nd September 2015

The HEA welcomed IT Carlow to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which the process operates. IT Carlow was invited to provide an update on institutional progress.

IT Carlow circulated a folder containing supplementary information prepared in advance of the strategic dialogue meeting. This provides contextual and statistical information in relation to the agenda and items raised as part of the feedback on the self-evaluation report.

IT Carlow then provided a high level overview, noting that recent years have seen significant change, along with the emergence of a new strategic plan (2014 – 2018), focused on TU readiness. All of this has been timely, as the critical targets for the plan align with those chosen for the compact. This includes some metrics agreed jointly with WIT as part of the pathway towards TU readiness. This is also addressed in the supplementary information provided. The HEA noted that since a separate process is in train relating to the preparation of an application for TU status, this would not be discussed directly, save where it is relevant to the compact discussion.

The HEA raised the issue of significant growth in student numbers and how this is being managed. IT Carlow can report a 32% increase in student numbers. They highlighted that there are some comments in the feedback that they wish to correct and have addressed this in the supplementary information provided e.g. that growth has occurred in the STEM area, not exclusively in HSS and Business areas. The institute has undergone a review of all schools and will bring the conclusions together in an overall institutional review.

They consider that progress in implementing change over the last five years has been outstanding given the challenges posed, but the institute has maintained the balance between quality and growth. IT Carlow has been centrally involved in the Action Plan for Jobs in the South East, and will be contributing to Mid-East plan too (encompassing North and East-Leinster). In addition, they lead the regional skills forum initiated by the Department of Education and Skills.

In the context of TU, an institutional review process has been challenging to conduct, but ultimately worthwhile. It has helped form the view that IT Carlow, as part of a large, integrated, financially sound institution would be of great service to the region. An opportunity also presents in terms of reducing competition in the region. Some logistical challenges also arise, for example IT Carlow teach 29 weeks per academic year; WIT are moving to a 23 week academic year, so there are significant difference and this needs to be planned carefully.

In terms of challenges, the institute has had significant staff turnover. Related to this, there are large numbers of postgraduate researchers whose participation in teaching has required planning.

As regards participation, equal access and lifelong learning, IT Carlow has strong relationships with ETBs in the region. The regional skills forum also acts as a lever to share information. ETBs are at different stages of development, however, and the institute is trying to ensure a consistency of approach and engagement across the different partners. In order to ensure that links are transparent and to make student choices and options clear, this has been published. Good links are also in place with adult guidance officers too.

The HEA noted that IT Carlow appear to be attracting and retaining students in areas where retention has traditionally been difficult. In response, ITC noted that here is a learner-centred focus in place, underpinned by pedagogical approaches such as continuous assessment, so that teaching and learning strategies are addressing the retention challenge. In addition, they engage with parents of first time learners to engage them in the student experience.

In terms of growth in student numbers, the growth in full-time learners is as agreed in the compact, as per earlier agreement with WIT and targets set for 2017. The increase is largely due to enhanced retention and growth in add-on programme provision; the latter has been the biggest area of growth encompassing conversion programmes, taught masters and add on programmes. Funding was secured for 16 Springboard programmes last year. The main obstacle to growth has been the constraint on new capital infrastructure, notably the pausing of PPPs. Space has now become an urgent issue and although the institute has managed to bring one capital project per year on stream, this is not enough to meet demand; there is a need to re-instate the PPPs.

Of the lifelong learners, 98% of students are in employment in their catchment area. On analysis, the courses do not represent “hobby” courses, so there is a significant contribution to the region, but it is notable that only 10% of such students are employer-funded.

The strategic review, carried out by an independent panel for IT Carlow, has verified the quality of provision. It is noteworthy that some part-time programmes offer 60 credits in a single part-time academic year and IT Carlow is confident that the learning outcomes students achieve are appropriate to a 60 credit programme.

As an institute that has grown relatively quickly, they remain conscious of the need to ensure a level of quality across the range of provision. Core funded staff are largely employed on full time CAO-entry programmes. Part-time staff are also resourcing these programmes, including notable academics, who work elsewhere in the sector. Staff training, inductions and other measures are all aligned to ensure quality of provision. Part-time staff are fully involved, e.g. represented on academic councils, so they are fully participating and very willing to be engaged. In addition, the motivation of students is palpable; they strive from day one to succeed. They also make use of the online environment to support the independent learning that this enables.

IT Carlow is keen to stress that the strategy is not growth at any cost – there is a value in providing the opportunity to individuals to deliver on skills requirements. For a modest investment, the institute can respond to regional and national skills needs e.g. ICT.

The HEA noted that while growth is welcome, particularly in view of demographic trends, the issue of stretching too far arises. HEA data suggests a staff-student ratio of 19: 1 ratio, but it depends on the subject mix and IT Carlow will revert on that. From IT Carlow's perspective they would question how academic programmes can be delivered in other institutions in two semesters of 11 weeks each and have decided not to pursue that option.

IT Carlow note that they have evidence of strong employment outcomes too, notwithstanding the fact that relevance of employment take-up is an issue across the sector. There is a very strong alumni network. There are up to 45,000 graduates, of which about 10,000 are recorded on Linked-In, allowing the institute to see the employment profiles.

On research performance, the intention is to grow strongly in a relatively short period. IT Carlow note that the target around increasing the number of postgraduate students to 100 registered students by 2016/17 does not represent a new target but reflects previously held ambitions.

In terms of researcher numbers, there are 77 Masters and PhDs students on the register; all students could in fact be registered as pursuing a PhD from the outset to meet certain metrics. Appropriate supports are in place and the institute has delegated authority up to level 10. Research students are aligned to the three core centres of research activity at IT Carlow, albeit the three centres are currently growing to five. There is an existing structured research programme in place, which offers generic skills to all students - some modules rely on externs nationally and internationally to deliver elements. IT Carlow considers the programme to be well received by students and supervisors. Master classes also allow for capacity building.

External research funding needs to be scaled up. The strategic plan is in place and the institute is meeting its targets. They have established a new centre, appointing a head of graduate studies, so the capacity there. A scholarship programme is in place to support own-institution students. There is now a move to targeted expansion via core leaders and an effort to release staff to pursue research activity. Whereas previously they were restricted by the ECF, they have been able to free up staff and still remain compliant.

The HEA noted that the institute has demonstrated a strong appetite for risk in the area of internationalisation, but they counter this by explaining that they have set clear focused goals and have proceeded to hire and invest with that in mind.

There is also a funding driver, even though it wouldn't seem so; there is a need to diversify income streams to support other activities. At one point, there were over 160 Chinese students, but the international cohort targets have been revisited to reduce numbers and diversify with other countries. A decision was taken not to engage with the Brazil programme as there were no credits attached to the programme of study and funding was not made available upfront. That said, last year there were 9 Brazilian students studying at the institute. The Brazilian government reduced the stipend for students attending institutes outside Dublin and Carlow therefore lost out as it appeared less attractive financially. In addition, last year, IT Carlow hosted 56 students from the Middle East. The Erasmus programme has been capped at 120 incoming students as there is a need to balance mobility across the sector;

approximately nine students on average go out. The graduate placement programme for outgoing students has a lot of potential.

IT Carlow notes that the strategic dialogue process has been helpful. They have scheduled a midterm review of the strategic plan in January 2016, into which a range of reviews will input. As a general comment, the institute doesn't consider it necessary to increase targets simply because they have been met. Rather, they will look at priorities and what light is shed following the programme review.

In terms of Transitions reform, they now have a new common entry mechanism for two domains on two campuses. Change is ongoing and remains challenging.

Resource concerns were flagged in the compact. While IT Carlow is at least as large, in terms of student numbers, as AIT, they have 150 less staff owing to the ECF. The eight core leaders, should have been in place two years ago, but they were restricted.

**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.

**IT Carlow representatives:**

Dr Patricia Mulcahy, President

Mr David Denieffe, Registrar

Mr Cormac O'Toole, Secretary/Financial Controller

Mr Declan Doyle, Head of Development

Ms Maebh Maher, Head of School of Business & Humanities