IT Sligo (ITS)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 17th September 2015

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

IT Sligo opened by providing the institutional context for the reporting on the first cycle of strategic dialogue. A new management team has been put in place at IT Sligo and there has been a period of adjustment over the past year. IT Sligo is confident in its mission, knows where it is going and what its key differentiators are. The institute considers that it is performing well while being aware of where challenges lie. For the most part, the student body is drawn from a non-traditional entry background and IT Sligo's role is to educate students with a view to offering them the potential to remain in the region. IT Sligo's track record in online provision is notable and more recently they have become leaders in the area of STEM online provision. The institute has invested significantly in this area in order to sustain and grow their presence.

The HEA asked IT Sligo about the commitment to levels 6 and 7 provision. IT Sligo noted that the Process Technology programme is a popular level 6 programme and the institute is keen to emphasise that it is not all about level 8 and beyond, but rather the focus is also on level 6 and 7 exit options too. That said, the fall in levels 6 and 7 is a challenge. The market trend is towards level 8's, often owing to parents' focus on level 8 university degree models, but they are still committed to the full spectrum in the regional interest.

On CUA, the HEA queried what benefits it can bring. IT Sligo responded that it is wholly committed to this and it is in the region's interest to pursue it. They look forward to new appointment at GMIT as it will bring a new dynamic to the project. From IT Sligo's perspective their offering is very good but the TU is an opportunity to build the region and address the challenges of the north-west. Looking at patterns of student migration, the Connacht-Ulster region typically loses students so this is a real regional alternative. A TU can also offer students a broader, deeper, engagement with research and industry. It is important to be a university, not just in title, but in practice. At the same time, they will not be not constrained by a need to be in the top 500 in the world, but rather to serve their region in the best way they can.

IT Sligo set out the need for greater resourcing of data analytics and institutional research, and it is acknowledged that this represents a challenge for a number of higher education institutions in the Irish system. More generally, finances are a constraint and reserves have been committed for specific strategic investments such as in online provision and in PEM (precision engineering and manufacturing). In respect of the latter, toolmaking has become a defining course for IT Sligo. Revisiting capital infrastructure requirements is key. The recently opened McMunn centre sits alongside 1970's buildings comprising teaching space. They plan to strategically develop the capital infrastructure in the context of the developing TU.

More generally, the €4 M to be allocated in respect of cluster performance in 2014 is awaited. The plan is to invest this in cluster activities to support retention in the first semester for under-represented groups.

IT Sligo expressed some concerns on institutional compacts, in particular whether they could unintentionally drive all HEIs in the same direction resulting in homogenisation of the system. In addition, the framing of institutional priorities in the compact is a concern, although it was noted that concerns are allayed by the fact that the compact is derived from the strategic plan. The HEA reiterated that it is the HEIs' responsibility to prioritise and to respond to the compact as they see fit. It is not the intention that all HEIs respond on all fronts. It's a strategic process and the strategic dialogue aims to get a sense of how HEIs and the system is performing.

The HEA queried the role of online learning and plans for expansion at regional level. While IT Sligo consider themselves to be competent in all areas in which they engage, they recognise that they could develop further in a number of areas such as online provision and cited their work with GSK as one example. This is something that could be developed further to be a world class institute on an island on the edge of Europe. More locally, they aim to be world class in respect of their engagement with industry in developing skills and CPD courses from levels 6 to 10. They recognise the ability to recruit from their diaspora is an advantage.

On benchmarks, they look at different comparators – for online provision this is complex, and they are looking at the US albeit there are differences in academic contracts that severely limits IT Sligo's ability to grow rapidly.

On non-progression, IT Sligo informed the HEA that it is aiming to improve rates from 27% to 24%, but acknowledges that there are still a quarter of all students that are lost. The HEA queried where the issue lies i.e. is it about teaching or the characteristics of the cohort they are recruiting. IT Sligo explained that a peer mentoring programme is in place, flowing on from a "buddy" system. IT Sligo is also analysing data on non-completers where they can be contacted. There is also a targeted induction summer school for those from non-traditional entrant backgrounds. IT Sligo is also looking at targeted academic interventions e.g. a maths drop-in centre and have developed a flow chart to assist staff to advise students at risk of leaving. More generally, this is less of an issue at level 8, where non-progression stands at 10%, comparable with universities in Ireland. Another way to frame this is that students are offered the opportunity to attend higher education, an opportunity that is not afforded to them by universities and up to 75% of them have a positive outcome.

The North West cluster collaborates in the area of medical technologies and this is one example of growth and joint development with cluster partners. To date, growth has been largely organic but they need to be cognisant of issues faced by other TU projects such as the TUI issues they faced. If they want to grow and expand then they are going to have to look at non-traditional working patterns.

On the subject of Transitions Reform, the institute offered level 8 add-on courses but these have since been converted to ab-initio programmes as this is what the market demands. IT

Sligo has committed to addressing the business fragmentation for example, but there is a challenge there and industry has to play its part in communicating the opportunities available for recruiting at level 6 or 7. Mechatronics is a good example, 15 students exited at level seven, entered the workplace and are now undertaking CPD opportunities at level 8.

The HEA queried developments on pathways between further and higher education. Extensive mapping to align higher education to further education has taken place at cluster level. Members are also looking at inter-institutional transfers and movement across the cluster to trace pathways. They have identified some blockages for example where IT Sligo students went to Dundee rather than NUIG for example, but they have addressed that now.

In relation to the research agenda, it is challenging for IT Sligo to offer a general programme of research with depth so they have had to prioritise in this domain. As a result the priority areas are Precision Engineering and Manufacturing (PEM), Environmental Science and Social Sciences. Resources have been put in place to buy out time, typically 2-3 hours of teaching, to allow staff to conduct research. With regard to the alignment with the Doctoral Education Framework, there is an agreement with NUIG in relation to ITS staff taking PhDs and there is also an agreement on smart medical technologies. The HEA raised the definition of "research active". This needs some consideration, however, and they will consider a definition in the context of the CUA.

Research income is being sustained by funding for SFI PIs and some EI start-up funding. Securing funding in the short to medium term is a concern. Applications have been made to H2020, another for EI's Gateway programme and also to InterReg for cross border collaboration. The latter will be a challenge as rules will change and InterTrade Ireland is a competitor on this. The cluster is looking at a research support service and common policies within CUA.

In relation to internationalisation, a manager has been appointed as it is important to target efforts. Oman is one target location, particularly with the public sector bodies there. As students progress in their careers they will engage online for CPD purposes. There was a rapid opportunistic expansion within Brazil, but efforts to diversify would also be beneficial for locally focused students. The aim is to diversify funding streams and the student body, create international links with host institutions and help place contacts on the ground abroad to grow awareness. Internationalisation will always be a smaller, targeted part of core business, but it remains important to IT Sligo and CUA.

The CUA Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy work continues. In the first instance they are looking at graduate attributes. The fall in new recruitment of full time undergraduate students has been a challenge, but they have managed to bridge the gap with online recruitment. When asked about stretch targets, IT Sligo responded that it is not inclined to stretch that online target just now as the full-time recruitment is a greater strategic priority; so that's where the stretch is and the institute will articulate that better in future.

<u>Appendix</u>

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 Sligo representatives

Vincent Cunnane, President
Colin McLean, Registrar
Tom Reilly, Head, Strategy & Planning
Elizabeth McCabe, Secretary & Financial Controller