

Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 9th September 2015

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

Limerick Institute of Technology made a strong submission under cycle 2 and the institute acknowledges the positive and constructive feedback received from the HEA. LIT, as a whole, is bringing institutional processes around strategy and audit together, primarily in the institute's own interest but with the added benefit of addressing the strategic dialogue process also. Capital and campus development are big issues for LIT and they have flagged that this discussion should be added to the agenda. In addition, LIT has engaged Deloitte to identify data sources, definitions (HEA or otherwise) as they pertain to the compact to ensure robust reporting.

Overall the collaboration with MIC and UL around NISE has proved to be a positive experience. LIT's current cohort is now heading into the second year of the UL-accredited programme in Art & Design, where students undertake 10% of their studies at UL and 90% at LIT. Students take 10% modules on campus at UL and this has been accommodated in the timetabling. Within the NISE structure, LIT predominantly works with UL. There are a diversity of objectives in NISE- LIT's involvement relates to Arts education. Both UL and LIT are looking at moving towards joint awards from 2016 onwards. Other aspects of NISE, including recruitment of a Director have been slower to progress.

The HEA invited LIT to discuss the flexible learning project, supported by Fulbright. LIT consider that this has been useful to build an evidence base. The institute has carefully analysed programme demand, including conducting programme review in one faculty, and will reconstruct the programme offering on this basis. Online provision as part of a blended learning curriculum is a part of a new approach to flexible learning, as is an understanding of who the students are and why they come to study. On pathways, LIT has looked at the community college model in the USA which offers an entitlement, upon completion, to a State University place. Along the lines of that model, LIT links clearly with LCFE and offers direct entry to courses. The National Framework for Qualifications looks for level 5 - 6 transferability and LIT has articulated that route, and indeed see a benefit in terms of student learning from the FE year. Generally, the outcomes for the students are better. LIT suggests that the model with the Limerick ETB could be a model for the sector. At the other end of the spectrum there is strong evidence that LIT students transfer from LIT to UL for taught masters as the range at LIT isn't as developed, so there are pathways at higher levels of the NFQ too.

The Federated Limerick Graduate School sees shared facilities for all students across Limerick. LIT PhD students will also receive dual accreditation from UL. LIT confirmed that the process remains the same whereby the student registers at LIT but that the award is validated by UL, which overcomes some barriers around awarding power. Structured PhD programme design

more generally needs to be mindful of the generic/ specific skills balance and the opportunity for constituent HEIs to work with partners. Key thematic areas and areas of institutional specialisation can be discussed as part of the Shannon Consortium structure.

LIT set out the regional approach to research which includes providing placements with local industry, such as in the arts industry during the city of culture. Of the 71 projects underway, the majority are at level 9 and almost all have external partners. LIT continues to develop programmes in the arts, science and food research along the lines of the Shannon ABC model. There are now 16 centres and groups, all aligned with regional work.

While LIT has met the incoming student targets, they are working to address the balance and encourage outgoing students, with placements secured in France, Canada and also the Netherlands. It is also a valuable opportunity for the “new Irish” as in many cases they already have the language skills or ability which is often traditionally a barrier to participation.

In terms of internationalising the curriculum, LIT also offer virtual internationalisation projects, where students work with international peers on specific projects via an online platform. LIT is also looking at programme structures, in particular conducting smaller portions of time abroad and investigating the feasibility of same.

Student retention is a concern and has been raised in the self-evaluation report. A number of students have withdrawn on financial (and indeed personal, which are likely financial) grounds. There are two research reports on the retention issue (TCD and UCD conducted), looking at what can be done to address incorrect programme choices. It is easier to do something on this issue; the financial challenges are far more difficult to tackle. LIT had envisaged getting such a project underway in a few years but it has proved far more difficult and probably won't be achieved in the timeline they had envisaged. LIT was invited to share any data they might have in this regard as it would be beneficial to the wider sector.

A key challenge for LIT relates to physical space. Current utilisation stands at 90%. This impacts on LIT's ability to offer programmes and places and the quality of student experience overall. This is not easy to address as it takes time and capital investment. Poor facilities also mean that they lose credibility with employers as graduates aren't familiar with the equipment in the way that they should be.

There is strong support from HEA/DES to deliver mechanical engineering facilities with industry funding for equipment and students, but there needs to be a lead on this, planning or otherwise, to entice industry in. In terms of a regional response to overcome space issues, LIT has investigated opportunities such as linkages with UL but in fact the profile and learning experience that LIT provides, largely at the applied end of the spectrum, means collaboration is not straight forward as their model and indeed equipment is different. There is evidence of LIT having turned down an incoming graduate class in mechanical engineering owing to space restrictions. The capacity of a university to attract students and deliver enhanced student outcomes rests on the value of the resource that they can utilise.

The HEA acknowledges that LIT have conducted benchmarking and their openness to share learnings. It would be useful from LIT's perspective to see how others in the sector are approaching this.

LIT made the case that stretch targets have been set out in the compact. The HEA explained that it is important to provide a level of reassurance to external readers that high performing institutions continue to set appropriate levels of ambition and so, it is important to see the stretch demonstrated in the report. LIT should consider this in the next round.

As a general comment, LIT notes that the data shows large differences in the ratio of academic to support staff. The ratios look imbalanced between HEIs depending on sectors.

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.

LIT representatives:

Dr. Maria Hinfelaar, President,

Mr Jimmy Browne, Vice President Corporate Services and Capital Development,

Mr Terry Twomey, Vice President Academic Affairs and Registrar,

Dr. Fergal Barry, Vice President Research, Development and Enterprise,

Mr Donnacha McNamara, Joint Head of Faculty of Business and Humanities,

Mr Paschal Meehan, Joint Head of Faculty of Applied Science, Engineering and Technology
and

Mr James Greenslade, Acting Head, School of Art & Design.

LIT requests for changes to agenda:

LIT requested that items on Student Retention; Quality of the student experience - the learning environment; and Benchmarking and sharing good practice across the system be added.