

# Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)

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## Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 28th September 2015

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

LYIT welcome the strategic dialogue process and have used it to align their own internal strategic planning processes, including the new strategic plan (2014-17). A set of functional-based plans stem from the latter.

The HEA noted that overall progress was good and LYIT provided a fairly coherent report. There is, however, a need for financial concerns to align with compact ambitions. In addition, quite a number of strategies are in development (e.g. research & innovation; teaching & learning) but not complete, owing to delays associated with the new strategic plan.

LYIT would like to see the budgetary process and compact discussion aligned. They also made the case for the funding model recognising regional needs. As they work to address funding issues, they note discussion of same at public fora, such as PAC, isn't helpful.

Their location as a border institution is important to LYIT. When benchmarking, for example, it becomes clear that they take 170 students from Northern Ireland, as compared to IT Tralee who recruit about 600 from its equivalent hinterland. There are improving cross border Derry-Letterkenny links and both local authorities are developing a common development plan. They also benchmark with regard to national data, looking at enrolment trends, ISSE responses, and similar at academic council. At this point, LYIT doesn't intend to revise 2016-17 numbers, but may revisit later.

There has been good collaboration on academic planning and pathways, notwithstanding a number of changes in personnel, but there remains good momentum there. In terms of the cluster addressing cross-border issues, LYIT is pivotal in that situation. Despite the variances in clusters, and the difficulty in benchmarking rural and city clusters they feel that they perform well despite geographical limitations.

LYIT notes that the self-evaluation report is inaccurate in its reference to the North West regional college and they request that this be corrected.

The CUA operates on the philosophy that the TU will be greater than the sum of its parts, notwithstanding the need to address underlying institutional issues. Having collaborated under LIONRA, the institutes have built trust through a number of projects. There is a recognition that progress can be made, but requires structure and planning to move things forward. There is no benefit to becoming a bigger IOT, CUA exists to become a TU.

The cluster has almost completed academic mapping, which has been time consuming, but has resulted in realignment. There is now a shared formal academic planning document. The process has now been agreed in two (business and engineering) disciplines; science,

healthcare and AHSS yet to be brought in. There is resistance and concern, but collaboration is part of the future as set out in strategic plan.

Shared services have been the slowest part of the process. Personnel changes have delayed this, but there has been some progress. In some instances local offers are better than centralised offers. The online QA mechanism has been developed and implemented across three academic councils, three unions and three management teams. A joint library service is in place too.

Targeting second-level non-completers is a new process. LYIT has also hosted an acquired brain injury programme in the college, students didn't necessarily progress to academic programmes but it represented life training. They have also been engaged in an access to access programme with ETBs linking further to higher education. There is strong progression there and as a result, students can be benchmarked against those 350 point achievers.

This year LYIT broke new ground in addressing LCA programme participants. The students were exiting to NI, and then returning to year three with a HND. The new model offers a different entry pathway and LYIT would be happy to share that. As the programme was approved late in the year, there are currently 5 or 6 enrolled, but they will have a full cohort in time.

In terms of student population, Donegal is somewhat unique in that there are people who are on their third or fourth chance that are successfully engaging and heading back into education and work through preparatory courses at level 6.

The School of Business uses RPL successfully and they have a comprehensive policy in place that provides access. The participation and preparation is as much a part of it as the portfolio preparation, and as an approach to access, the cost is not prohibitive. The policy has been marginally adopted and adapted across the CUA.

In terms of retaining target groups, the foundation studies students perform above average; the average year one pass is 72%, the direct and RPL stand at 77%, matures stand at 80%, FETAC stand at 72%. On the whole, the student mix is beneficial to the whole cohort.

As regards enrolments, the categorisation of the Springboard cohort has impacted the numbers. There are also part-time flexible learners on block release, if these flexible options weren't available then perhaps they might be fulltime students. There is also a challenge in that the economy is picking up, people are therefore looking at their options and this will have an impact on mature student numbers.

LYIT plays a key engagement role too, developing bespoke programmes e.g. Pramerica and including with GM in Limerick. When the recession hit the state, players regrouped in Dublin, but they are back on campus in the new business centre and LYIT will leverage that too. LYIT has retained level 6 provision in that regard.

More flexibility on delivery is required, accelerated approaches would see credits gained over the summer. RGAM would fund up to 90 credits at level 9 and HEI assets would be in use throughout the calendar year. If it can be done at post graduate level then the case can be

made to replicate this at undergraduate level. Tech-north-west support (skills development) is important to LYIT, and they are supportive in the regional interest. There is also the potential to re-orientate Springboard to support lifelong learning and upskilling.

On the access targets, most are appropriate and achievable but they would like to revise the mature target to 22% of first time mature entrants. Also, in terms of the target around access for students with disabilities, 8% was considered to be too high, in terms of formally capturing the data, so 5% is probably more realistic, using the current definition.

Retention is a strategic goal and the HEA queried the underpinning strategy. There are a number of different approaches -using student engagement software, looking at digital natives and how they are retained, not just in college but in the workplace. It is about being more engaged, the tool looks at learning analytics and feedback along with social engagement, wellbeing, community and creativity. Analytics capture the data on those retained and those not. As a pilot, the early signs are that students are involved.

Retention may also be related to the fact that students are underprepared and coming into HE at too early a stage. LYIT has tried to make semester one a “soft landing”, getting students involved and engaged slowly. In this regard, they have piloted a “week zero” initiative whereby first year students start ahead of other cohorts, allowing them to get a feel for the place. This is something that could be rolled out sectorally. In recognition that the first six weeks are critical, peer mentoring is used as a support too. LYIT is incorporating learning over the past 15 years or so and it is also down to literacy and numeracy. In terms of CAO entry points being too low, an analysis has shown that of 835 entrants only 35 were in the low (100 points) range.

The HEA acknowledges that LYIT has been very strong on T&L and compliment the work in relation to ISSE. The development of a new T&L strategy is to be welcomed. It is noteworthy that a target around further developing LYIT’s QA process has been set, benchmarking LYIT’s QA processes against other HEIs and data on the proportion of external examiners employed is provided. There remains a process focus in relation to teaching and learning objectives and LYIT needs to move more towards impact objectives.

Research performance is a concern with very small activity within the institute and concerns over academic viability. LYIT explained that everything stems from the strategic plan and a new strategy for research will go to Academic Council in October. Previously, they worked with UU under PRTL and to build on this, they are looking for building and soft supports. Now that they have the NW business park, that addresses the necessary physical infrastructure and they are looking to INTERREG for support on the soft infrastructure part.

For the Killybegs campus, LYIT is looking at the energy and seafood areas as options and will work with local and NI partners.

While they don’t have core funding for research in place, it remains very important - computing, science and business are key. LYIT is working with UMass and are offering an EU headquarters to them. There is the potential to leverage the North West diaspora in this way.

The institute considers that they are operating as a mini-IDA for the region and have to relate that back to national infrastructure and supports.

EI is the largest funder through WISAR, but LYIT would like to diversify that if possible. A significant proportion of the € 1.3M research income reporting relates to that. It has proved difficult to map research areas within the cluster, particularly in view of sustainability issues, but they have committed to that.

While LYIT have historically demonstrated a good level of international participation (students with international domiciliary but entitled to free fees), they do not demonstrate strength in fee paying international students and are attempting to grow this area, with two fee paying international students. There is a lack of clarity surrounding the international enrolment targets (including the counting of Erasmus students) which has made a complete analysis difficult. It is also worth being cognisant of the amount of time required to build a comprehensive strategy in this area.

Currently it is about managing international efforts given the lack of funding to invest. In many ways this requires them to be a niche within a niche. They didn't have the finances to attend the recent EI mission, for example but would be lost within that anyway. The CUA offers the opportunity to address issues such as these.

Overall, the HEA noted that it is largely process type activity that has been reported, when the compact and reporting should focus on future direction. That said, the compact should be underpinned by strong processes but the latter can be done in the context of the review of the academic schools, to align to future mission.

LYIT consider that metrics and benchmarking remain a challenge as there isn't a standard approach nationally or internationally. For example, by the time the data is published it's 18 months late e.g. the gap from registration to census data for example.

LYIT are learning from the HEA and this process, attempting to see impacts and best practice. A seminar would be beneficial in this regard.

## 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.

### **LYIT representatives:**

Mr Paul Hannigan, President

Mr Billy Bennett, Registrar

Mr John Andy Bonar, Head of Development

Mr Michael Margey, Head of School of Business

Dr Gertie Taggart, Head of School of Science

Dr Seán Duffy, Head of School of Tourism

Mr Denis McFadden, Head of School of Engineering

Mr Henry McGarvey