
Limerick Institute of Technology

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 4 Reflections on Performance

Self-evaluation report – institution overview

Institution overview:

LIT has provided a detailed self-evaluation report of its progress against its 2016 targets. The report is completed in full and is colour-coded.

Overall, progress is in line with the objectives in the compact. That said, compared with last year, there seems to be have been some fall-off of performance in places, e.g. in active learning.

There is a strong emphasis throughout on the funding constraints faced by the institution. Its reflections open with criticism of the “dysfunctional situation” and posits that “no thought whatsoever” has been given to the need for sector expansion to meet growing student demand. The HEA notes the financial outturn in 2016 of a surplus of €678,000 in LIT; and a projected 2017 surplus of €878,000.

This is a strong institution that is succeeding despite a challenging external environment so it is doing many things well. In its evaluation LIT should look to reflect more on what it can and does achieve and where it wants to go as part of a more introspective rather than retrospective analysis of the external limitations on its own performance.

For example, reference is made to the “further inequity of watching my near neighbour across the river expand its physical footprint”. The Institute might reflect on its use of language in the reporting and how it can and does compete nationally. LIT states that: this point was made in the context of the lack of any borrowing capacity currently within the IoT sector, a constraint that does not exist in the university sector.

More widely, LIT considers that the financial crisis is more acutely felt in the IoT sector than the university sector; there is strong criticism in the opening statement attributing the “downward trajectory” of IoTs to the current funding model. HEA statistics are used to illustrate this point.

It is noted that a new strategic planning process being embarked on and it would have been helpful to hear more about this and about how LIT, through it, plans to address identified issues across the domains.

There is inadequate use of benchmarking overall across the compact reporting and it is not clear which areas are of particular priority to the institute. There is a lack of a single coherent voice within the submission and it reads as though the reporting has been completed by multiple authors. LIT states that the Compact document covers a broad and diverse range of Institute objectives and it is indeed the case that all members of the Executive Management team contributed to the reporting.

LIT might also reflect upon the responsibility assigned to external sources and its ability to perform to the standards it has set itself in the compact.

Self-evaluation report - domain level reviews

1. Regional clusters:

Initial commentary:

LIT's Reflections focus on the progress of the Shannon region in tackling unemployment and social deprivation. The role of the Institute and the other regional HEIs is an implicit part of Limerick's regeneration.

The Institute has set itself five objectives under this section, all of which it has coded green. The Federated Limerick Graduate School is now fully operational. A joint BA between UL and MIC is offered on the CAO for the first time this year. The Reflections also note that the plans for the National Institute for Studies in Education are now progressing and the appointment of a Director has been granted approval.

The focus of the Institute's shared services activity is on its Thresholds concepts project which supports transition from second level into third level. The reflection also references the shared services history and joined up approach to procurement which has resulted in significant savings for the cluster.

Overall, the Institute has reported specifically against the compact objectives set. Variations with targets originally set are outlined below. The Shannon region itself has been an example of good practice in regional regeneration and LIT continues to form an important part of that.

National Policy Context:

Shannon Consortium preceded the initiation of regional clusters and has been one of the more developed groupings from the outset.

It is clear from the self-evaluation that LIT is actively and intimately involved in ongoing regeneration through the Mid-West Regional Skills Forum. LIT is also represented on the Mid-East Regional Skills Forum.

The reflection does not reference the Action Plan for Rural Development 2016-2020, which may present opportunities for the Institution and indeed the cluster for further civic engagement and employment partnerships.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

While the Institute has coded Objective 5.1.2 green, the stated objective in its compact for 2016 was to evaluate pilots and add one or two disciplines. Its 2016 update comments on the further development of the collaborative Construction Management programme and there is no reference to the addition of other disciplines. The coding of this objective may therefore be worth discussing with the Institute.

In addition, the Institute's Reflections note that the mapping exercise across the Shannon Consortium has been completed. Under Objective 5.1.2, it is stated that LIT is "awaiting the establishment of the Shannon Consortium as a Corporate Entity of the Regional

Cluster to manage and resource joint undergraduate programme activity”: may merit exploration with the Institute.

With regard to Objective 5.1.4 on shared services, the 2016 update focuses on LIT’s Thresholds Concepts project which supports transition from second level to third level. This project has now been mainstreamed with the Take1Step transition programme: a collaboration between the three HEIs and regional second level schools. Under this objective, the Institute also draws attention to its engagement with Unijobs Ltd, highlighting that because the service is on a cost recoupment basis, it falls outside the scope of VAT which means significant savings for LIT.

On the final objective to promote the region (5.1.5), LIT’s role in relevant initiatives like the Regional Skills Forum and Limerick for Engineering is highlighted. It continues to second a Head of Faculty to lead the Limerick City of Culture bid. While the compact states a 2016 target to develop a joint capital project as part of the Limerick 2030 plan, its 2016 update notes that a study commissioned by the local authority deemed the proposed student accommodation project not feasible in the Opera Centre so LIT is working with the authority to identify other locations. While this target hasn’t been delivered, the reason plus LIT’s other regional endeavours justifies the green coding.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning:

Initial commentary:

LIT has set itself four objectives under this Domain. It has coded one component of one red (around flexible learning) and all the rest green. The Institute is behind in its market share objective (5.2.1), highlighting again the lack of funding, yet codes this green. It continues to perform well in its targets to widen participation (Access targets) and notes the high proportion of LIT students in receipt of SUSI grants. In its Reflections, the Institute points to its MoU with Limerick and Clare ETBs (in place last year) and its close relationships with the FE sector.

It recognises its challenge in flexible learning and, accordingly has coded this red. It states that it is re-developing its FL model: more information on this would be helpful.

National Policy Context:

- The Institute is very conscious of the targets set out in the National Plan for Equity of Access and is performing well in most of these (please see below for more detail).
- With respect to the Transitions agenda, the Institute's Thresholds Concepts projects is again referenced (in its Reflections).
- It cites the campus environment and financial constraints as key reasons behind retention challenges (the latter being addressed specifically in Objective 5.3.4 in Domain 3).
- The EU Gender Action Plan 2016-2020 or the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 are not referenced. Links to both documents below;

<https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/public-gender/minisite/eu-gender-action-plan-2016-2020>

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/National_Strategy_for_Women_and_Girls_2017-2020

Critical evaluation and feedback:

The Institute has sought to benchmark its student numbers through Objective 5.2.1 on market share. It has coded this green despite being slightly behind and states that the lack of funding has constrained it from developing new programme offerings. LIT confirms that its performance was considered to be effectively on target (and hence assigned "green" status) given that the % of IOT sector CAO acceptances achieved was within 2% of the stated target.)

- With respect to Access, the number of mature students has fallen slightly but this reflects national trends and the Institute is still above average. The high level of students on SUSI grants (58.1% of new entrants in 2016/17) is noted with consequent pressure on LIT support services. It is well above national averages on

students with disabilities.

- Its Reflections advise that, for financial reasons, it has not invested in a Student Retention System, a Student Placement Support System or a 'one stop shop' CRM system. However, in reflection 3, the appointment of a student retention officer and an attendance monitoring system are cited as measures which are currently being planned.
- The component of Objective 5.2.3 that pertains to flexible learning is coded red and the Institute suggests that the initial target may have been too ambitious. More positively, LIT is working on its blended learning offering and says that it has secured contracts with particular industries to provide large-scale education programmes: specifics on these would be interesting.
- It is also worthy of note that in reflections 2016, a Fulbright Scholarship was cited as part of the progress in the area of Flexible Learning. However, reflections 2017 do not offer any follow up or outcomes on this development.
- The Institute continues to engage well on progression routes between FE and HE and is nurturing strong relationships with the regional ETBs and other relevant providers. Based on its examination of the US Community College progression system, it has moved away from discipline-based links and towards a model around core competencies and transition readiness. This could be an example of good practice if looked at in more detail.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience:

Initial commentary:

The Institute has set itself six objectives in this Domain, three of which it has coded green, one amber and the other two a mix of red and green. It appears that there has been a deterioration in performance on the previous year across several areas, for example, active learning, completion rates and progression to employment. LIT repeatedly cites financial constraints as the reason for its difficulties in meeting targets.

National Policy Context:

- The main national policies referred to in this Domain are the retentions agenda and ISSE performance. LIT has an explicit Learner Retention Strategy.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

- Under Objective 5.3.1, LIT notes a fall-off in Engineering, Manufacturing, Construction as well as Arts and Humanities. It cites national trends for the decline in Construction and A&H. It cites campus infrastructural gaps for the others.
- The Institute has seen a reduction in the % of learning assessed through active learning assessments, down from 65% in 2015 to 62%. It still meets its 2016 target of 60%.

LIT states that the reported rates were based on a report extracted from LIT's student record system (Banner) which, at module level, represented active learning assessment components (continuous assessment/practical/project) as a % of total assessment components (terminal examination/ continuous assessment/ practical project). It was and is LIT's stated ambition to embed active learning strategies across the Institute and to achieve a target of 60% of learning assessed through active learning assessment methods by 2016. LIT is happy to report that this target has been achieved. LIT is not advocating a complete CA system and feels that the 60% level is the appropriate level.)

- The benchmarking data provided in its explicit benchmarking objective (5.3.3) notes that its ISSE Active Learning score equals the IoT average of 54. It therefore codes this red as it had targeted a 'significantly above average' result. Its other benchmarks on preparation for employment and staff helpfulness meet IoT averages (which was the aim and is accordingly coded green).
- With respect to retention (5.3.4), LIT's year 1 and undergrad completion rates have both deteriorated since last year and this is therefore coded amber. LIT has again cited financial constraints in Reflection 2 as a barrier to the implementation of a student retention system. Its Reflections advise that an external audit has been commissioned this year (2017) to reassess what further supports are needed to meet these compact targets (bearing in mind that there is already an explicit Learner Retention Strategy). A student retention officer will be appointed and a student attendance system will be fully deployed in 2017.

- The 2016 target for % of students going into employment, further study or volunteering was set in the compact at 90%. This had in fact been achieved in 2015 but has declined in 2016 to 87%, assuming that the same measure is being reported (yet this target is coded green?). The Reflections advise that preparation for the workplace is being strengthened with the systematic introduction of a third-year work placement and more placements across all programmes. (Note: under Domain 2, LIT said that it has not invested in a Student Placement Support System for financial reasons).

LIT responded that the 87% reported was based on the "Class of 2015" First Destinations Survey and represents the proportion of surveyed graduates in paid employment (78%), unpaid employment (1%) and further study/training (8 %). The 90% reported last year was based on the "Class of 2014" First Destinations Survey and represents the proportion of surveyed graduates in paid employment (80%), unpaid employment (3%), further study/training(6%) and those not available for employment or study (1%). As is the case with most surveys of this type, the results are accurate at the 95% confidence level plus or minus 3 percentage points.)

- With respect to uniform student services standards (5.3.6), the Institute is piloting the helpdesk and referral system FRESHSERVICE.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation:

Initial commentary:

- As with previous years, LIT combines its Reflections commentary for this Domain and the next.
- Also in keeping with previous years, the Institute cites the inequity of the RGAM for supporting its postgraduate research students and infrastructural deficits as two major obstacles in this domain.
- It has five objectives in this domain, three of which it has coded green (down one on last year), one amber and one red.
- Even though this is a slight deterioration on last year (four green and one amber), the Reflections provides a comprehensive and overall upbeat picture of activity on the part of the Institute to enhance its research capability.
- It is important to note, however, that the final targets stated in the self-evaluation report appear to differ from that in the original compact. For example, a 2016 research student target of 110 (Objective 5.4.1) is given in the self-evaluation, while the compact puts this target at 120. And it was noted in last year's self-evaluation report that they thought they would be very close to 120 by now.
- Similarly, the 2016 target for non-Exchequer funding (Objective 5.4.3) was set in the compact as €5m but is given in the self-evaluation report as €3m: while in this instance there is reference to a target revision, it would be useful to clarify when such changes were made.

National Policy Context:

- The Institute highlights that it has secured funding under TTSI3 to support its tech transfer function.
- It has also won €660k for a Superhomes 2.0 project in partnership with Tipperary Energy Agency, ESB and ESB Networks. This will focus on air sourced heat pumps to improve the efficiency of retrofitted buildings (might be useful to clarify the funder?).

Critical evaluation and feedback:

- LIT has coded its research student target (5.4.1) amber because it stands at 106 against a stated 2016 target of 110 (yet target in original compact is 120?). HEA data for 2016/17 indicates 112 research student numbers.

LIT responded that on examination of the post graduate research student numbers (112) previously reported to the HEA as part of the Student Record System (SRS) Return, it was noted that a small number of those students (6) had actually graduated from LIT prior to the reporting date of 1st March 2017 but still remained

on the student record system as "active" students at that date. This error has subsequently been corrected on the student record system and action has been taken internally to ensure this is not repeated in future years. It is important to note that they will not be included on LIT's RGAM submission later this month (ie no funding has or will be claimed for these students.)

- Its standing as a research degree provider and, linked to that, its participation in the Federated Limerick Graduate School, are progressing broadly positively.
- As flagged above, clarity on the non-Exchequer funding target (Objective 5.4.3) would be helpful.
- Objective 5.4.5 concerns postgrad supervision capacity as defined by the number of staff with a PhD qualification. This is coded red (green last year) because a figure of 17.38% was reached against a 2016 compact target of 21%. In 2015, the target of 20% was achieved. It would be helpful to obtain a reason for this deterioration and an outline of plans to address the issue.

LIT states that the reported rate of 17.38% was based on the total number of staff with completed PhD qualifications (as per LIT Human Resources Department records) as a proportion of the total staff population (as reported in LIT's December 2016 quarterly headcount return to the HEA). Both staff figures included academic and research staff only. The rate included in the prior year compact submission (20%) was based on the same data sources but included a number of non-teaching research support staff who, although PhD qualified, did not have specific postgraduate research supervision responsibilities. It was deemed appropriate to exclude such staff from this year's reported rate.)

5. Enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange:

Initial commentary:

- The Institute has set itself four objectives in this domain, three of which it has coded green and one mostly red.
- While not strictly a compact objective, it is clear that LIT is very active in entrepreneurship and engagement across the region. The scope of community and regional engagement is commendable, as demonstrated by the hosting of a range of activities in the Institutions facilities.
- It has been less successful in reaching its TTSI targets (hence coded red). It would be worth finding out if there are plans to expand the approach which saw a successful TTSI3 funding bid with UL to further its performance in this area.

National Policy Context:

- LIT is very active in entrepreneurship throughout the region, with multiple support programmes and multiple enterprise centres.
- It is also working on its engagement with existing companies and has put in place a dedicated support to help SME engagement.
- While it has not set an explicit compact objective for wider civic engagement, it is clear from its Reflections that the Institute is very active in this space. It has put in place a Development and Public Engagement Manager position and is developing a Public Engagement Strategy. This will be in place by the end of 2017 and will include metrics to measure the scale of such activity across the Institute.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

- LIT's target (Objective 5.5.1) of graduate numbers is slightly behind: 1,677 versus 1,700; yet this has been coded green. Note that HEA figures for 2016 indicate 1,650 graduates. LIT states that LIT's performance was considered to be effectively on target (and hence assigned "green" status) given that the graduate numbers in the reporting period were within 1.5% of the stated target. The figure of 1650 students is based on a report compiled by the HEA Statistics Section which
- excludes "occasional" graduates. The figure reported by LIT includes such students and is based on the 2017 Student Record System (SRS) Return previously submitted by LIT to the HEA.)
- It has well exceeded its target (5.5.2) for entrepreneurship/ start-up support. The Institute appears to have a relatively large number of support programmes and centres: may be worth discussing if any consolidation would lead to greater efficiencies?
- It is worth noting that it has secured €692k from Enterprise Ireland to run New

Frontiers for five years (clarify timeframe?).

- Its collaborations with existing companies appears on track: 56 externally supported collaborations and 123 'active P codes involving external partners' against a 2016 target of 60.
- In terms of technology transfer (5.5.4), LIT has achieved its target of securing TTSI3 funding. This commenced in January 2017 and will run for five years, with UL as the lead partner. Given that all the other TTSI targets, i.e. the actual research commercialisation ones, have not been met, it would be useful to discuss with LIT how the new round of TTSI funding will be applied to improve their results in this area. A stronger explanation of the projects which have been funded under the Erasmus+ and Interreg calls would be useful. The reference to Build-up Skills and Qualibuild projects would also benefit from more information, including their timelines and outcomes.

6. Enhanced internationalisation:

Initial commentary:

- The Institute has set itself five objectives in this Domain and, consistent with last year, has coded four green and one red.
- The continuing identified problematic objective is that of outbound study abroad and the related ratio to inbound (Objective 5.6.2). The reasons for this are outlined in the Reflections.
- The inadequacy of the funding for the socio-disadvantaged students is cited as a barrier to progress in the area of study abroad.
- It should be noted that some of the 2016 targets stated in the self-evaluation report differ from those set out in the original compact. For example, target 5.6.1 and target 5.6.5. Such changes were agreed by HEA.

National Policy Context:

- The International Education Strategy is not referenced.
- Steps are being taken to try to improve the level of outbound study activity, for example, semesterisation and consideration of international study in programmatic reviews.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

- LIT has sought to mitigate the loss of Brazil's Science without Borders programme by building up alternative markets like Malaysia and Canada. It has achieved a non-EU intake of 104 against its forecast in last year's self-evaluation of 100 and is therefore coding this objective (5.6.1) green.
- It continues to experience significant difficulty in increasing its outbound study levels (Objective 5.6.2): 6 achieved against a target of 20 and down from 8 last year. Its Reflections caution that its targets were very ambitious and gives reasons for the situation, including the high proportion of LIT students in receipt of SUSI grants and the numbers enrolled in technological disciplines.
- Its 2016 target for international placements has been achieved and its target for transnational education has been well exceeded.

7. Institutional consolidation:

Initial commentary:

- The objectives in this Domain mainly relate to sustainability and viability, and are largely on track: out of five objectives, four are coded green and one red (the same as in 2015).
- While the Institute's performance is thus pretty much on course to achieve its compact objectives, it reiterates its strong concerns about the overall IOT sector financial position based on its benchmarking of other countries (UK and Denmark). It commends highly the related HEA report.
- The missed target on unit cost is apportioned to costs at Tipperary Institute. Action to address this is outlined in the Reflections.
- As with some of the other Domains, there appears to be a discrepancy between some of the 2016 targets stated in the 2016 self-evaluation report and those contained in the original compact. For instance, Objective 5.7.1 has a target of 2% in the original compact and 1.5% in the 2016 self-evaluation. Similarly, 5.7.4 has an original compact 2016 target of 46% yet a self-evaluation 2016 target of 45%.

National Policy Context:

- As noted above, LIT has focused in this domain on sustainability and viability.
- Workload allocation is not referenced.
- Note: the Reflections refers to a 2016 HEA call for capital investment proposals to which LIT has made a submission with a detailed implementation plan to 2021 of key infrastructural projects.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

- The Institute has comfortably exceeded its target (5.7.1) for % of recurrent budget available for reinvestment.
- Its benchmarking by way of unit cost relative to the sector (5.7.2) is coded red because of costs at Tipperary Institute. The Reflections advises that new programmes (started Sept 2016) in Social Care and Early Childhood Studies should help with this objective. It is also looking at the issue of small cohort sizes across the Institute.
- The pay:non-pay expenditure ratio target (5.7.3) is achieved. However, LIT warns of the consequences of the underfunding of the reinstated flex hour.
- While its objective (5.7.4) on income generated from non-State sources has been achieved, it notes that further diversification is needed.
- Lastly, the Institute has appointed a dedicated staff member to coordinate its internal resource allocation model (IRAM) to support the planning cycle and

resource efficiency.