

Mid-West Cluster (UL, MIC, LIT)

The following issues are taken from the Strategic Dialogue Meeting held on 15th January 2014. It is recognised that this does not represent a full minute of the meeting but focuses on issues of particular importance.

1. HEA outlined the rationale for, and the importance of, regional clusters, both as an essential and a required part of the Landscape. Clusters will work in the first instance to the two priority objectives of shared, coordinated academic planning and a regionally coordinated approach to transfer and progression pathways. In the case of the latter national objective, the range of pathways spans progression from further education to higher education; entry routes for mature students; reduced points entry routes (eg DARE and HEAR); processes for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL); advanced entry; Transitions reform work; part-time/flexible/credit-based pathways as well as pathways for transfer and progression within higher education.
2. Clusters will work to enhance quality student outcomes and capacity through a more coherent co-ordinated approach, thereby enhancing outcomes from the entire education system as a whole. In addition, they provide key support to regional enterprise and the communities they serve. Since they are a primary objective and key pillar in national policy, HEA will use the mechanisms available to support cluster activity, including funding in this regard.
3. HEA does not want to be prescriptive about cluster governance but does have an interest in an effective governance model emerging, capable of delivering on the agreed objectives, which would be reflected in the compacts. . In line with institutional autonomy, the HEA does not wish or expect to become involved in the operation of the cluster but will engage in appropriate monitoring and review of performance. The latter will be conducted annually through the strategic dialogue process with each institution, and the former on a more informal basis to supplement the strategic dialogue process. It was noted that Mr Pat Harvey will act as the liaison between the HEA and the clusters.
4. HEA welcomes the very positive and proactive approach taken by the partners in addressing the formation of the regional cluster, which has drawn on the good track record of collaboration among partners in the Mid-West cluster.
5. The HEA supports the proposal from the cluster regarding the appointment of an independent Chair to the cluster. It was noted that in addition to the normal and direct reporting between HEA and the individual institutions, the Chair could helpfully act to support the HEA in terms of reporting on the work of the cluster.

6. The HEA suggested that the cluster would benefit from an Advisory Group of local and regional stakeholders. The institutions agreed and noted that they were already engaged in a number of similar processes in the Limerick region.
7. The formal monitoring of progress within the regional cluster will be done via the strategic dialogue process, with the compact submission forming the basis of the review, and with each compact submission being consistent with other cluster members in respect of cluster objectives. It was noted that each individual compact already contains commitments in respect of the cluster. In addition, as outlined above, the HEA will engage with the cluster via Presidents and the Chair to be informed on progress on a more regular basis.
8. It was noted that a Framework Proposal for the establishment of a National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE) has been received. This will be discussed further as part of a separate process looking at progress on Initial Teacher Education.
9. In conclusion the HEA noted that
 - a. it might be useful to review the compact in terms of
 - i. the advisory board
 - ii. clarification on the formal reporting via the strategic dialogue process
 - b. that the HEA considered the MOU might be signed off with the compacts in early March.
 - c. the HEA would reengage quickly with the institutions in respect of the document submitted in respect of teacher education.