

West/North-West Cluster (GMIT, IT Sligo, LYIT, NUIG, St. Angela's)

The following issues are taken from the Strategic Dialogue Meeting held on 22nd 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.

The HEA acknowledged the initial progress in seeking to establish a set of principles and noted the importance of agreeing an overarching set of principles on which to develop the Regional Cluster. A discussion document prepared by Dr. Browne, circulated on the eve of the meeting, was noted which will be considered further by the Cluster Partners in due course.

4. In terms of the identification and response to regional needs this cluster has particular relevance because of the nature of demographic trends and projections, its

geographic spread and its economic development challenges. Evidence of a well functioning cluster will also be an important part of the demonstration of the effectiveness of the relationships between the three institutes working together in the context of their TU ambition and the HEA's role in advising the minister on whether an expression of interest made sense in that strategic context.

5. HEA invited the members to give their perspective on the cluster and its objectives:
 - Letterkenny indicated clear commitment to the cluster which would make progress based on trust and respect between the partners and commitment to the region and a moral responsibility for higher education to provide a leadership role in the region. Letterkenny indicated that the two initial agreed objectives provided an opportunity to work together focused on additionality for students and the region.
 - IT Sligo also indicated its commitment to a vision to improve the region and the work of the CUA focused on regional needs. The region which shares a border with Northern Ireland offers particular opportunities for cross-border collaboration and for opportunities for the cluster under INTERREG V (2014-2020) programme. Past collaborations including on technology transfer will be built on in the cluster in future.
 - GMIT indicated that it was fully committed to the regional cluster and that the concept made perfect sense. The institute was strongly collaborative anyway – collaboration being a pillar in its strategic plan – but collaboration needs to be incentivised to be effective and to be a priority. Collaboration amongst institutes is easier because of common structures disciplines and systems. GMIT is comfortable with the 12 principles document and will now work it through internally.
 - NUIG agreed that regional clusters were the right way forward and that the distinctive needs of the region – dispersed populations with a number of good sized towns – needed to be reflected as the cluster moved ahead. The basis of collaboration has to be shared academic planning of provision from level 6-10. NUIG are absolutely open also to jointly developing pathways into and through higher education in the region – Ireland has a great basis in the National Framework of Qualifications to facilitate that work. There will be quality as well as cost saving consequences for how provision is shared. The evidential data is now there to underpin shared planning and the technology for greater sharing is also there together with the learning from previous network collaboration in Lionra. The deliverables and outputs have to be greater than the inputs and the HEA has to be clear in the outcomes being sought from the cluster. However NUIG noted that this is also a real challenge for the institution facing as it does the tasks of delivering on mergers, maintaining an internationally competitive reputation and ranking as a top class university, as well as the regional cluster. They emphasised the need to underpin the collaboration with mutual and regional advantage.
 - NUIG also acknowledged the ambition of the TU alliance in Connacht Ulster and the ambition to become a TU. The title university is important, a bar has been set out that is challenging and achievable, and NUIG had no issue with those meeting the bar

becoming a TU. NUIG itself as a comprehensive university had a sizable technological university within it.

- The cluster members outlined their history in providing higher education to the region on a distance, flexible and outreach basis over a long number of years and intent to be at the forefront of flexible provision. It was noted that the glue that held the members together in this cluster was their shared commitment to the region. The term region was understood to mean seeking to reach international quality standards in 4 or 5 themes relevant to regional needs – on this basis, competitive research funding has been won for example. The nation economy is highly dependent on FDI which in turn is highly dependent on high quality higher education research infrastructure so the region has to compete globally. Also quite simply the institutions were working to the regions defined by the HEA for this purpose. The region also has definition in terms of regional assemblies.
- The cluster confirmed that they were likely to appoint an independent chair to be selected and agreed by the members with perhaps a registrars group and a research group working to develop and carry out a plan. HEA had an interest in who the chair might be and it could be a link point for HEA to the cluster from time to time.
- The cluster members had already agreed the main compact objectives – governance, shared academic planning and improved pathways. The HEA would have a further informal meeting with the member institutions to firm up on progress on setting measurable achievable targets in a plan arising from initial mapping exercises of academic provision and existing pathways.