

South Cluster (UCC, CIT, IT Tralee, WIT, IT Carlow)

The following issues are taken from the Strategic Dialogue Meeting held on 23rd 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. This cluster serves a large geographical region, comprising two sets of HEIs working to achieve TU status, and a university. It is recognised that this brings with it its own set of complexities in terms of the Institutes working together in the context of their TU ambition and the work associated with the wider cluster.
5. The cluster, while at an early stage, has already agreed high level objectives in key areas such as capacity development and responsiveness of the higher education system and will continue to build on existing successes, some of which have been initially achieved on a bilateral basis. The cluster intends to meet formally on 27th January to progress further.

6. It has been agreed that there will be a parity of esteem between all cluster members with clear terms of reference leading to an MOU. It is expected that there will be a rotating Chair and that the Presidents, and at least one other member of their Senior Management Team, will be nominated to the cluster Board. It has been agreed that stakeholders from industry, further education and other areas will participate as required in cluster specific projects. The strategic work plan will shortly be developed and consideration given to arbitration mechanisms
7. In terms of the priority objectives, the first piece of work to be undertaken relates to a baseline mapping process, setting out each HEI's profile and presence in disciplines at all levels across the cluster and this will assist in future academic planning and delivery. Shared academic planning would logically follow, on the understanding that a large geographical region such as this will require a broad base of higher education provision. It is noted that external stakeholders will also influence this planning and delivery process. A key outcome will be the establishment of a "one-stop shop" for higher education in the region. The cluster expects to complete the initial mapping by academic year 2014/15 while the HEA noted that similar clusters are working to the deadline of end 2014, notwithstanding the fact that this is a very important exercise.
8. The cluster has agreed to harmonise their objectives in relation to regional clusters as they appear in the compact and resubmit shortly. HEA also noted as a general principle for all clusters that, as this is still a development stage of the process, the timelines being submitted might be reviewed, particularly if systems of working that expedite projects can be learnt from other clusters.