

# Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

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Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 28th September 2015

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

WIT welcomes the opportunity to discuss development of the institute. While focused on their primary role of educating students, the institute also contributes to regional impact, setting priorities aligned to this at undergraduate and post graduate level.

The self-evaluation report shows that WIT has met most of its objectives, but it is noted that they are also trying to deal with legacy and other strategic issues that have taken away from core business.

WIT explained that the vast majority of students in the region (90%) leave for education purposes. Looking at their performance in attracting students, of the undergraduate pool, of 9,000 CAO applicants, 1,500 choose WIT and those with highest points tend to travel to universities, with the result that points across courses are dropping. For example the WIT course, LLB, stands at 500 points in a comparable university, while the same programme is on offer at WIT for 300 points.

Of those that study at WIT, however, up to 75% have stated the institute as their first preference on the CAO. But overall, there is a loss to the region. There are large numbers from Carlow/ Kilkenny travelling to UL or UCC.

WIT prides itself on its contribution to regional development at UG and PG level but they note that the funding model doesn't reward this. Definitional issues around the region have also been a challenge e.g. the reclassification of University Hospital Waterford under UCC and the classification of Kilkenny as part of the Dublin region. WIT remains active in the South cluster, largely driving the research agenda.

The compact is useful, has demonstrated good performance and that they have met targets. It is still, however, a new process and they continue to learn. Part-time and distance learners have been a challenge, along with numbers at Masters and PhD level. They believe that they continue to respond to regional and student demand but that in underperforming areas the main barrier or cause has been a lack of infrastructure. WIT plan to revisit the compact in terms of the metrics, reflecting a learning curve on the part of WIT.

Uncertainty has impacted too. Discussions at PAC on institute finances have been damaging at a time when the institute is seeking TU re-designation. WIT does not consider that financial issues are as significant as they have been made out to be, but the negative publicity has still been damaging. WIT is a cornerstone of the future TU for the south east, and a weakened WIT will not help the development of a TU. The HEA recognises that issues around the TU process have impacted on day-to-day performance of the institute.

The HEA invited WIT to set out benchmarking efforts underway. In terms of benchmarking, internal processes such as QA and school reviews are very well defined and the latter also have an international aspect. WIT is currently collating industry feedback, including that received from hosting students. Benchmarking in the research space is easier, either you get funded or you don't, which in itself is an indicator of quality. Furthermore international partnerships are an indicator of peer institutions.

WIT has gone through an interesting phase of institutional development, but perhaps haven't invested sufficiently in self-analysis and self-criticism capacity. Capacity for institutional research as a base for strategic planning currently isn't sufficient and they need a resource base to build that capacity and appropriate benchmarks. So benchmarking is happening, perhaps not at the level that might be preferred, but that is a resource issue.

The HEA raised the issue of research growth and the underpinning financial model. WIT explained that funding to post-graduates is self-resourcing as students effectively perform part-time teaching duties. To put it in context, of the 170 postgraduates funded at WIT, only 17 were part of the above scheme, otherwise they are in receipt of funding from ERC, IRC, industry etc. On the self-evaluation report feedback, it is correct that WIT only has a low number of IRC grants (15 grants in 2015), but a significant number are supported by SFI or the EU. Top performing students then apply to these programmes and the institute also limits the number of supervisor's students, so it's not necessarily possible for more students to apply.

On the subject of access and participation, WIT has looked at HE-FE links and fundamentally restructured the offer. There are now 22 FE progression agreements, at organisational or ETB level. Students coming from FE have grown from 17 to 124 under FETAC routes in recent years. In addition the institute has increased the range of schools that they work with, an outreach programme now includes 70 schools. WIT note that increasing access routes is part of institutional mission. WIT has also had much success in attracting students with disabilities, growing from 200-400, but this comes with a huge cost and there is a significant overhead associated with such activities. That aside, they consider that WIT has a very good reputation in this regard and are attracting greater numbers including international Erasmus students and mature students.

The cluster has also provided an opportunity to look at pathways in relation to access and progression, notwithstanding that WIT and Carlow operate in different markets. Regional skills fora also make a contribution to skills needs, but it's a crowded space and there are some concerns around coordination nationally.

There are issues that remain a concern, for example, although there has been progress in meeting their targets for flexible and part-time learning, it's unlikely that WIT will meet its 2016 targets. The Springboard programme, while valuable, displaced a number of mature/part-time and flexible entrants. Improvements in the economy have reduced the demand for mature places. There is also less demand also from industry with less freedom to release people as they are busier. WIT acknowledges that the targets set for part-time learners were (and still are) challenging and suggests that a broader definition of part-time student may be required as the institute recruits a significant number of part-time students, both on

accredited and non-accredited, night and other part-time programmes. WIT has developed its programmes to include minor awards and options within the curriculum, suited to industry relationships and requirements. Such offerings are flexible in delivery and design so can be aligned with industry needs. Programme content is also reverse engineered, as industry is involved and engaged in the design and development of these modules.

From a cluster perspective if credits can be recognised and transferred from modules at WIT, UCC and so on, it would be possible to align towards a multi-institution degree award.

More generally, the aim is not to grow numbers just for the sake of growing. As an example, the institute could grow agricultural science, doubling the numbers, but this could overload current staff or require the hiring of additional staff to run courses, with knock-on effects in terms of management of contracts. Courses must be strategic and regionally relevant for WIT to prioritise. Much upskilling elsewhere is aligned to industry grants for research. As it is developed in that space, it doesn't necessarily show up as upskilling or addressing regional needs, but it is.

More generally the lifelong learning or adult upskilling agenda isn't working. The HEA queried how best to access this cohort and WIT consider that the service delivery model needs to be looked at, early childhood care for example, can be delivered in all kinds of ways. So, it's not about growing numbers necessarily, it's about designing the service model, thinking of new models of delivery that are appealing to adult learners.

As part of the discussion on the Transitions Initiative, WIT stated that it currently has 40 programme entries on the CAO listing. The portfolio has, however, been rejuvenated (some added in, some taken out). WIT has removed programmes that should not feature in the spirit of the initiative. They are looking to revise the programme offering in 2017, but in reality it might be 2018 by the time this is done. There is an IOT sector commitment to realign as a sector and that's what they have committed to and the broad thrust is towards common entry. There are professionally-orientated programmes too though, so getting below 40 will be a challenge despite their strong commitment.

On teaching and learning, the HEA notes that metrics are rather numbers-based, with links to other objectives. The quality of the student experience is key to attracting the brightest and the best in the region. Internally, the institute is very focused on benchmarking T&L and addressing retention. T&L is aligned to addressing the broad student groups and moving to more of a process and output focus rather than inputs. Work has been done on non-presence and the HEA input has been useful on that. Programmatic reviews are to come so that will contribute to some of this. But more generally, the HEA advised that the institute should consider how it is assured in this domain e.g. the processes, ISSE, benchmarks etc.

On research activity, 40% of funding comes from TSSG, 60% from the other two research centres, PMBRC and Eco- innovation. WIT has always had a strategic objective to invest in critical mass of research centres and thus to focus on targeted growth. Research performance has increased across the board, each centre is associated with SFI, EI and EU funding. WIT also support emerging areas and want to see these aligned with the three priority areas. So ICT, Agricultural Science and Farm Management are also growing, but aligned to existing areas.

WIT has 179 contracts of engagement, these are active projects, not just contacts. They are also seeing the progress from innovation voucher, to innovation partnership to EU projects which is significant and rewarding. The focus has shifted to looking to larger and larger EU projects and Ireland has been behind the curve, less good on innovation, with a weaker industry base in this regard.

The HEA queried the risk associated with the current strong performance and its reliance on key individuals. The institute is determined to grow the next generation, hiring good staff, excellent post-docs and generally developing the next generation in that way and have an excellent reputation for postgraduate study and work in this regard.

As an institute, both ends of the spectrum (teaching and research) have been promoted but they both need to be managed and there is a strong research culture. About 45% of staff are involved in research which is impressive. There is a structure for promoting knowledge out to the SMEs such that the region benefits from that. There is also a value in communicating the research-teaching linkages in informing the undergraduate curriculum and selling that offering to potential students and parents. Employability and industry relevance represent a good offer and the HEA queried how that could be promoted. WIT has considered getting industry partners to promote the institute, but it might be a step too far. It may be valuable to connect transition year to industry and enterprise and approach it in that way. They also note that research around student perception of WIT did not highlight research activity as informing student choice.

WIT has exceeded its 2014 targets for the number of full-time, international students. Its 2014 target was 180 and the actual number is 438 international students. However the sustainability of these targets is questionable given the volatility of the market and the inclusion of 204 Brazilian students, as noted by WIT in the narrative report.

In terms of internationalisation, WIT has strong links with Brazil and with China, it is not just students, but joint degrees rather. The latter structure sees WIT staff teaching abroad for three years and then students come to Ireland for one year. Such relationships have a specific lifetime and the institute will look to concentrate more and more on settled markets as a balance, such as USA.

EU student numbers are easy to grow, but they don't generate the same income. They also continue to grow relationships such as through Fulbright, so there is real progress. Risks in this regard are being actively managed.

WIT has suggested several changes to the compact. These should be incorporated into future iterations.

Overall, WIT explained that finances remain a concern and a HR toolkit is lacking. On the research side they are in the fortunate position that they can generate income and not all the universities are in a position to do that. WIT has endured seven years of cuts, with substantial infrastructural deficits and it remains a challenge to try and attract students.

In terms of developing pathways with cluster members, it is less prestigious to be seen as a "feeder" to another HEI. Similar programme offerings can also be a source of concern. It took

time to get cooperation on research, but it worked well. The clusters will take time and investment and an understanding of the opportunities. In some parts of this, the boundaries for industry partners are defined and that functions well.

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.

**WIT representatives:**

Professor Willie Donnelly, President

Dr Derek O'Byrne, Registrar

Ms Elaine Sheridan, Secretary/Financial Controller

Dr. Peter McLoughlin, Head of Research & Innovation