27th June 2016

Tom Boland
Chief Executive
Higher Education Authority
Crampton Avenue
Shelbourne Road
Dublin 4

Dear Tom

IT Sligo is pleased to submit its self-evaluation on progress against Performance Compact Targets for the year ending 2015.

From the attached report template you will see that, once again, IT Sligo has achieved or made considerable progress towards the achievement of the majority of its objectives. Below I will provide a number of reflections on IT Sligo's performance, but it would be remiss of me if I did not begin by making a critical point about the context in which IT Sligo is operating.

The Higher Education System is underfunded and the current funding situation is unsustainable.

This is not only my view, it is your view as stated at the RIA, it is the Minister's view and it is the view of the Department of Education and Skills, as set out in its briefing document for the incoming Minister. This view is supported by the fact that cumulatively the IoT Sector ran a deficit in the year ending August 2015. In this context, simply balancing the budget and keeping the doors open to students is a major achievement. IT Sligo is one of only five Institutes to achieve this balanced budget and as such I believe that in itself marks us out as performing very well. We continue to focus on what is important for IT Sligo, our students and the Region but all of our efforts are constrained by this financial climate.

From your letter of 23rd May and Fergal Costello's presentation of 2nd June there are a number of additional specific issues you have asked us to reflect upon in this round of Strategic Dialogue including the **transitions agenda, improving retention, workload management, stretch targets and overall strategic coherence**.

Starting with the last of these points, the opportunity to be **strategically coherent** is a luxury afforded to financially strong and financially independent institutions. In an underfunded system institutional behaviour is more likely to be determined by tactical and opportunistic actions to maximise funding. I believe the HEA needs to be cognisant of this and tailor its expectation of the system accordingly. Almost uniquely in the IoT Sector, IT Sligo is currently financially strong and currently enjoys a degree of financial independence due to our substantial online activity that allows for a degree of strategic coherence.

In this funding environment suggestions of **"stretch targets"** is incomprehensible to Institutions. I believe it is effectively contradictory for the HEA to seek to encourage institutes to revise targets to incorporate "stretch targets" when at the same time accepting that the system is underfunded. Even in our position of relative financial strength IT Sligo is not minded to revise targets upwards.

The **Transitions Agenda** has a different meaning for IT Sligo. With a mean and median CAO entry point of 310-320 points, IT Sligo is not contributing to an upward manipulation of entry points for marketing purposes. Therefore it is not appropriate for the Institute to reduce the number of entry points, indeed such a course of action runs counter to IT Sligo stated aim of making higher education accessible to the

people of the region. Additionally it would financially naive to remove a number of our specialised and successful programmes.

IT Sligo's response to the Transitions Agenda has been to;

- move to increase commonality across 1st year programmes to allow students to more easily transfer between programmes,
- increase the number of general entry points and exit points so that, where possible, if students exit early they can do so with an award,
- use our online learning expertise to lead the development of the National Forum funded Transitions MOOC . This MOOC has been designed to assist 2nd Level students transition to Higher Education.
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Improving **retention** is a vitally important issue for IT Sligo; it is inextricably linked to our commitment to Access. There is little point in making higher education accessible if students cannot be supported through to an award. Improving retention is one of our key Performance Compact targets and we have been moderately successful in improving retention. From a baseline of 27% non-progression IT Sligo has improved to 23% this year. We are pleased with our progress but there is so much more that we could do and want to do to improve this further. We want to increase tutorial support and learning support as well as re-establish a Learning & Teaching Development Unit. These plans are limited by finance and the ECF – indeed our earlier Education Development Unit was one of the first victims of the funding and staffing cuts imposed upon the Institute. The effects of these earlier cuts are now really impacting upon the quality of learning.

The national contract determines **workload allocation**. Financial pressures and directives require that academic staff are loaded up to the maximum contact hours, in as far as that is possible. IT Sligo has a process for staff allocation that begins around Easter annually. The situation is reviewed in August and September when student numbers in first and subsequent years are better known, to best ensure the most effective deployment of teaching resources across the Institute.

However our ability to "manage" this process is undermined when we learned in May of this year of a proposal made to the TUI by the Department of Education and Skills to reduce weekly teaching hours by between 5% and 5.5% from half way through the upcoming Academic Year. IT Sligo will lose c280 teaching hours per week, requiring the appointment of c15 additional staff. Whilst we await confirmation of whether this proposal will be implemented and how it is to be funded it will be very difficult to plan, in a strategic way, and recruit 15 new staff to be in place for January, particularly at a time whenever every other Institute could be embarked upon similar exercises.

Having made these general opening remarks to address the specific issues you have requested, I will now turn to give an overview on IT Sligo's performance against the compact targets.

IT Sligo is a successful, dynamic, innovative and ambitious Institute of Technology; ambitious for the Institute, our students and the Region. Our ambition is to achieve Technological University status.

Once again IT Sligo's self-assessment confirms that the Institute is performing well. Across the seven domains in the Compact four are all green indicating targets achieved or exceeded and only three have elements of amber (with only one objective shown as red).

IT Sligo's overriding strategic objective is to achieve Technological University status, and this is enshrined in Domain 7. For IT Sligo the title of Domain 7 is inappropriate; it does not describe our objective. We do not have an objective to consolidate, we have an objective to achieve Technological University status; if merger remains a requirement to achieve TU status we will do that as a means to an end, not an end in itself.

2015 was a year of progress towards this objective. A major milestone was passed when the CUA submitted its Stage 1 Expression of Interest in March and we were approved to proceed to Stage 2 by the Minister in November. Political and policy uncertainty and delays in providing funding to support us with this National Strategy objective have, however, limited progress.

Our "strategic coherence" comes from pursuing this ambition of Technological University status, a strategy which is both radical and true to our history. The TU criteria represent a road map for a successful Institute of Technology to raise its standards and performance to a higher level, improving the quality of learning and teaching, increasing the impact and scale of applied research and truly engaging with the region to ensure that the Institute is meeting all of the regions higher education needs.

Accordingly the Compact Domains No. 2 (Participation, Access and Lifelong Learning), No. 3 (Learning & Teaching), No. 4 (Research) and No. 5 (Engagement) represent IT Sligo's next level of strategic priorities after achieving TU status, as each of these contribute fundamentally to the achievement of our overriding objective of TU status and will help to define the unique characteristics of our TU; accessible, truly engaged with the region and leading in online and technology enhanced learning.

All objectives have been achieved or exceeded in Domains No. 2, No. 3, and No. 5. In respect of Domain No. 4 (Research) progress has been made but the ability to both access funding and to reduce staff teaching loads to enable them to engage in research are severely limited in an underfunded and understaffed system where staff:student ratios are outside of established international norms. In this constrained context IT Sligo established a dedicated Contract Research Unit to specifically target and provide support to the SME sector of the Region. This is proving successful and has made a substantial contribution to the achievement of our Innovation Voucher targets. The recent confirmation of matched funding from the HEA to support the development of our TU will provide a degree of assistance in investing in growing our research profile and impact.

I would like to draw particular attention to our three objectives (and their achievement) in Domain No. 5 Engagement, as I believe they exemplify part of what is unique to IT Sligo.

1. As an engaged, dynamic and agile institution we provide programmes of study that meet the employment needs to the Region and beyond. This is demonstrated through our leadership position in Online Learning where we develop and deliver company specific accredited programmes. We have over 1,800 online students, mostly in the STEM area. Our success to date means that we are now sought after by major companies seeking out assistance in areas such as biopharma, regulatory affairs, quality and precision engineering. We benchmark ourselves using the companies that we work with. Abbvie and MSD are two world class companies paying for our programmes.
2. The SME sector is particularly important in our region given the relative lack of FDI enterprises. Innovation Vouchers are a critical way for IT Sligo to engage with this sector and to provide it with research and innovation support. This is real and applied and has positive impacts for the 34 companies that we engaged with last year, impacts which contribute to the economic and social development of the region.
3. The Self-Assessment Template lists five major events that the Institute hosted last year; from ENVIRON 2015 to a Royal Visit, from Yeats 2015 to Fleadh Cheoil. Whilst with the exception of ENVIRON, these events may not be the typical events hosted by established research intensive universities these events are a critical part of the role the Institute plays in driving economic development in the North West. These events would not have happened in the way that they did without the Institute as only the Institute has the facilities in terms of auditoriums, carparking and IT infrastructure to host these events. These events make a substantial economic contribution to the Region and we will continue to maximise the potential of our facilities to do this.

Of the seven domains the two that would be on the third level of priorities for IT Sligo are No. 1 (Clusters) and No. 6 (Internationalisation); this is not to say that these are not important and we have objectives in both areas and again have achieved or made progress towards the achievement of the majority of them. In respect of the Cluster, we have and will continue to collaborate with partners in the Region, but for IT Sligo the CUA represents our most important collaboration objective. In respect of Internationalisation it is important that our students benefit from learning in a diverse environment and that more of our students benefit from studying or undertaking work placement abroad. We have modest objectives in these areas and are making progress towards them.

So to summarise IT Sligo is a high performing Institution with a very clear strategic direction. We aim to achieve TU status and in so doing create a distinctive TU based on our strengths of accessibility, engagement and Online and technology enhanced learning. We have made good progress against achieving our objectives, particularly noteworthy given the context of an underfunded system. We believe we could achieve much greater higher education outcomes for our students, the Region and the State if we were funded on a sustainable basis.

On a personal level I would like to wish you well in your imminent retirement. Whilst the funding climate has been particularly challenging for the Sector over the last eight years, IT Sligo has respected your commitment, integrity and honesty during this time.

Yours sincerely

Professor Vincent Cunnane
President of IT Sligo

PS The HEA have requested an Institutional Profile for 2017/18. As IT Sligo is currently in the process of developing its next Strategic Plan for the period 2016/17 to 2021/22 we are not in a position to provide this at this point.