

Athlone Institute of Technology
Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session
Friday 29th September 2017
14.30 – 17.00

AIT

Professor Ciaran O’Cathain, President

Mr John McKenna, Vice President Strategic Planning and Institutional Performance

Mr Eoin Langan, Dean of Faculty of Business and Hospitality

HEA

Dr Graham Love, CEO

Mr Fergal Costello, Head of System Development and Performance Management

Mr Tim Conlon, Senior Manager

Ms Valerie Harvey, Head of Performance Evaluation

Mr Mark Kirwan, Executive Officer

External

Dr Richard Thorn, Expert Panel member

Mr John Malone, Process Auditor

Context

AIT has demonstrated clear engagement with the strategic dialogue process and has demonstrated enhanced capacity for self-reflection and reporting on performance through the process. The institute’s strategy shifted mid-way through the process to focus on quality of the student experience rather than enrolment growth; but the institute has begun to increase enrolment numbers again. The level of engagement with benchmarking is positive. In addition to strong regional engagement and growth in internationalisation, the institution’s research provision has increased but there is a risk for AIT (and others) that this activity is reliant on international student enrolments and private funding streams.

Introduction

The HEA opened by welcoming the AIT delegation to the meeting and noted that it was the fourth strategic dialogue meeting to date. As their initial observation, the HEA remarked their view of how the sector has responded well to the challenges of providing quality education in an increasingly constrained environment, and it is important to sustain this in the future. An agenda had been prepared to inform the discussion. In terms of the strategic dialogue process as a whole, the HEA, for its part, considers that this has overall become an essential part of the HEA – HEI relationship, and for wider system performance and accountability. Given that a new cycle will commence shortly, the HEA will consider how this might evolve, and will seek views from the sector on how the process can be improved.

The institute noted it was satisfied with initial HEA feedback from this round of dialogue. AIT highlighted that it is the only institute of technology which is currently meeting the criteria to achieve Technological University (TU) designation. AIT stated that it is not currently pursuing TU designation with a particular partner institution, but is exploring the options it may wish to pursue once the TU legislation is published.

Quality of the Student Experience

In the context of maintaining quality, AIT explained it had reduced its student intake as the institute doesn't have the resources to maintain its quality assurance with increased student enrolments. However, student enrolments are up for the current academic year. The institute is aware of the large increase in undergraduate enrolments at other HEIs in its vicinity but this development is not impacting it directly at present. The institute is proposing to increase its enrolments from the east of the country. AIT is developing links with secondary schools located in commutable towns within close proximity of its campus. This strategy is to promote the institute to students who traditionally would have considered enrolling in Dublin based institutions.

In relation to international students, AIT highlighted it engages with 1,800 students in China and it anticipates that 10% of these students will complete their studies in the institute.

AIT acknowledged its mature student enrolments are down by 16% but considers this is probably due to the improved Irish economy and resulting employment opportunities.

The institute does have some physical capacity constraints but is at an advanced negotiating stage with the Department of Education and Skills for developing a STEM building which will help to alleviate some of this pressure.

The institute is proposing to expand its online provision but it has not yet proceeded with this as it is awaiting greater clarity on funding to support flexible learning. In the interim, the institute has developed an online strategy with some identified targets.

Having considered demographic data, AIT expects its student enrolments will continue to grow. Within five years, the institute envisages its student breakdown would be split approximately between 7,500 undergraduates and 1,500 postgraduates and the majority of growth is proposed on its part-time and online provision. AIT stated it is still committed to its Level 6 provision but demand is dwindling and further education (FE) providers are expanding in this space. AIT both competes and collaborates with FE colleges in its region. It has a good relationship with the Education Training Boards and a number of Memoranda of Understanding. The institute highlighted that nationally, communication on the FE sector needs to be improved as there is a misconception that if students' complete further education programmes, they will be guaranteed a place in a higher education institution.

International

AIT clarified that of its 14% international student enrolments, 9.5% of these are Non-EU. The institute is proposing to grow this cohort of students to 18% on the basis that its EU enrolments will remain relatively static but its Non-EU enrolments will increase. The institute does not want this cohort of students to surpass 20% of total enrolments as this might lead to displacement of more traditional AIT students. AIT also highlighted that a number of students who enrol through the CAO have international domiciliary and add to the 62 different nationalities currently enrolled at the institution.

The institute emphasised its international strategy is focused more on internationalising its campus as opposed to international student number growth. AIT reported that International students add greatly

to the campus life and they are very integrated into the community. Some of the institution's international linkages include – joint PhD supervision with international partners; strong links in Malaysia and through the engagement with 'Science Without Borders' programme, the institute is now partnering with Brazilian institutions with postgraduate provision.

Due to the student profile (60% are in receipt of a maintenance grant), the number of students taking up Erasmus places is a challenge, but AIT is providing funding and other supports to assist students to study abroad. For example, students are provided with the opportunity to study abroad for a week as a 'taster' and then undertake the role as student ambassadors to encourage other students to take up placements.

AIT highlighted that Ireland does not have a coherent strategy around international students and needs greater alignment of policy if it wants to be successful in this area. Ireland should adopt the approach being applied by Australia, whereby, the benefits of the country are promoted first and then their higher education institutions second. The institute has opened two marketing and recruitment centres in China and the next step will be to provide a joint Campus in China also. AIT is currently exploring different partners for this venture but it will provide a great addition to the institute particularly for student placements. Equally, THEA recently signed an agreement with the colleges in British Columbia Canada and AIT would like to expand on this relationship. From a cluster perspective, AIT had previously engaged with MU in attracting international students' but all four institutions have not partnered in this regard. AIT agreed that it was something which could be explored further.

Cluster

AIT explained that it has probably exhausted all avenues with regard to developing shared services and reviewing programme rationalisation in a cluster context. The institute currently engages with MU on the 'Frontiers' programme but views the engagement with the Regional Skills Forum as a more positive vehicle to identify skills requirements for the region. If clusters are to be successful additional funding needs to be provided.

As per the compact self-evaluation, AIT, with its cluster partners, has undertaken academic planning, shared enrolment data and developed intake projections and mapping exercises to enhance engagement with SMEs in the region. AIT was of the view that this demonstrates a significant level of trust and engagement between cluster partners.

Teaching and Learning

AIT reported it has a teaching and learning centre which is driving T&L innovation within the institute. AIT is adopting an incremental approach to improving its learning provision. This activity is currently not data-driven and if resources become available, the institute is planning to develop this aspect further. The institute has introduced a seven-week induction programme for students and a pilot programme of monitoring students whose attendance has dropped below 75% to assist with improving their retention rates. Furthermore, within three years of joining AIT, academic staff are required to complete a teaching and learning module.

AIT explained it has achieved the highest response rate in the sector to its Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) as students' input is incorporated into specific changes in institute operation; students can see tangible outcomes from the survey and are therefore encouraged to participate in the survey each year. The institute does benchmark results and compares performance, such as at faculty level. AIT is now proposing to develop the survey in order to analyse results at the programmatic level. The institute is also going to introduce a staff survey in early 2018. The unit

responsible for delivering this data is currently under-resourced and AIT emphasised that if additional resources were available, it could develop and incorporate the data further. The HEA confirmed it is in discussions with THEA about the possibility of providing some support funding to THEA to assist the sector in this regard.

AIT's Learning and Teaching Unit is collaborating with DKIT, IT Sligo, IT Carlow in the Technology Enhancement Assessment Methods (TEAM) project which explores ways to enhance practical assessment using digital technologies in Science and Health programmes.

Research

As per the compact self-evaluation, AIT stated that it has met and exceeded all objectives and performance targets for research and innovation for 2016 and over the course of the compact (2014-16). AIT has prioritised a focus on applied research and meeting/exceeding the criteria for becoming a Technological University.

AIT outlined it has three main research centres in materials, bioscience and software. It is currently 'buying out' academic staff teaching time in order to provide opportunities to pursue research interests. AIT outlined some of its external research linkages which include the Advanced Materials and Bioengineering Research centre (AMBER) it hosts with TCD and the links it has with DCU/UCC in applied cloud security research. In addition, AIT is a partner on the DOCTRID programme, which is one of the largest programmes in the world devoted to Autism/Intellectual disabilities research consisting of 20 other institutions across Ireland, UK & US.

AIT indicated that its Enterprise Ireland (EI) supported research centres are the two top-ranked centres in the country. However, many research grants require significant overheads which must be met within an institution's own resources. AIT's research funding is supported by other revenue-raising activity but past reductions in state funding mean the institute now using a greater level of its accumulated surplus to maintain its research provision.

The institute has also introduced a president awarded scholarship which is awarded annually to between 15-20 students. This scholarship is to encourage first-time researchers to pursue research in their chosen areas and to enhance the research culture across the campus.

The HEA confirmed the review of the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) is due to be published imminently. The review will recommend some amendments to the model to be phased in over the next three years and other potential new funding strands which will be contingent on the higher education sector receiving additional funding.

Technological University

The institute stated it is currently meeting the stated TU criteria and has been for a number of years. AIT is not currently pursuing TU designation with any partner institutions but views TU status as beneficial to both the institution and the region it serves. AIT noted that it does have other options and ideas that would benefit Ireland and its region, but the binary system and national policy makes these difficult to pursue.

Next steps

The HEA intends to circulate a minute of the meeting in late October. HEIs will have the opportunity to respond on matters of factual accuracy or clarification prior to the publication of the full suite of documents. It is expected that the aggregated outcomes from the sessions will inform the publication of a system level performance report in 2018.

Summary/ Outcomes

The outcome presented below is based on the key inputs of this process i.e.:

- the institutional self-evaluation;
- the review by HEA, and external experts;
- the strategic dialogue meeting between HEI senior management, the HEA, and external experts.

AIT has clearly identified its mission and has demonstrated high performance against its stated objectives. The institute is asked to consider introducing a greater level of stretch ambition and target setting in its areas of core strengths.

AIT is an active member of the MEND Cluster which has functioned well for the regions it serves. The HEA would encourage the institution and its partners to continue this engagement and consider leveraging the expertise and resources available to the cluster to achieve the individual and collective strategic goals.

The HEA welcomes the work being undertaken by AIT with regard to the internationalisation of its curriculum and campus. As the institution's research provision is partly underpinned by externally generated funding the institute is asked to continue to carefully manage its range of international and other partnerships to mitigate risk.

The institute should also continue its work in progressing its approach to the compact and setting of strategic objectives. For example, in some areas, the institute has noted its desire to do more, but referenced constraint of resources. While recognising that the system as a whole is highly resource constrained, it would be desirable that ambitions and goals are set in the context of available resources.