
Athlone Institute of Technology

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 4 Reflections on Performance

Self-evaluation report – institution overview

Institution overview:

Over the course of the compact period AIT has maintained its position as a strong institute of technology within its region. The institute announced a major change mid-way through the process to focus on quality of student experience rather than on growth in numbers – however the stated ambition did not immediately appear to be reflected in revised approaches to assess/enhance quality of the student experience. This change in policy may also reflect intensified competition with other HEIs in the region for students.

HEA data shows that AIT is particularly active in international student recruitment (among the highest in the sector), which provides an important degree of financial support for the institute, though with implications for its risk profile, and in research and knowledge transfer. The institution has managed to preserve its financial stability despite the cutbacks in state support.

AIT Cycle 4 Self Evaluation report has been received. All sections have been completed and the report provides a review of progress since the previous cycle. AIT achieved 17 of its 18 targets as set out in 2015. The institute failed to meet its target in increasing international student intake from a current baseline of 12% to 15%. AIT clarified that its figures include Erasmus and EU students. The institute takes the view that they are all international students and provided the following breakdown for 2016/17:

International Students	317 (8.6%)
Erasmus	150 (4.0%)
Total	467 (12.63%)

Mature students numbers have also dropped in the past two years.

In progressing from Cycle 3, AIT continues to focus on the three priority areas of:

- Student Experience
- Applied Research
- Fulfilling Technological University Criteria

In its reflection on targets, AIT agreed in March 2017 to engage with U-Multirank to extend its benchmarking to international HEIs. The Institute is currently benchmarking itself against other Institutes of Technology. In future, AIT envisage benchmarking themselves with additional datasets such as ISSE, exit survey etc.

AIT met most of its targets, notably in Research and Engagement with industry, despite financial challenges at the commencement of the compact due to cuts in funding across the sector. AIT has very good links with its research partners and collaborate with local companies in driving R&D.

The institute is progressing well in the Dublin/Leinster (Midland, East & North Dublin - MEND II Cluster). The move to fulfill Technological University criteria is at the forefront of the Institute's strategy. The HEA noted that seeking TU status independently could create risks for the institute unless there is process to facilitate that. AIT met with Regional Public Bodies and Industries in responding to new Planning Framework and their submissions emphasise the importance of TU.

AIT provides evidence that it is engaging closely with regional and national industry. It partners with other stakeholders in a broad range of actions across the Midlands Action for Jobs 2015-17. The expansion of the MIRC Campus business incubator will create more sustainable and diversified sectors of employment for the region. AIT's New Frontiers Programme continues to support start-ups.

AIT has shown improvement in this final report over previous reports in terms of clearly highlighting their successful target areas, progress and their future strategies.

Self-evaluation report - domain level reviews

1. Regional clusters:

Initial commentary:

AIT had two objectives which received a green rating. Significant progress has been made in relation to the MEND Cluster consisting of Maynooth University, Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology. An additional target has been added to the first objective: the review of the student records and administrative systems and agreement of protocols of the delivery of joint programmes, shared registration, and alignment of marks, standards and quality assurance procedures.

AIT is part of Dublin II Cluster/MEND Cluster. MEND Cluster received funding of €287,000 for following projects:

- Development and maintenance of FE and HE network
- Maintenance of FE–HE portal and investigation into the establishment of a national portal
- Academic planning process to be developed for the sector
- Mapping of SMEs across the region and developing systematic engagement with SMEs.

The MEND cluster enrolment analysis & projections 2016 gave each MEND partner data set for academic programme planning. AIT is reviewing and identifying courses for rationalisation. All four strands have been successfully completed and the final report submitted to HEA in April.

Pathways to Higher Education developed a portal to show programme entry, geographical locations of FE programmes, links to HE programmes and pathways from FE to HE. The data never existed before in one easy to use location.

National Policy Context:

The Institute continues to maintain its relationship with the MEND II Cluster partners while engaging fully in the Cluster projects.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

The MEND projects appear to be successful across the four HEIs. This is attributed to the commitment and leadership by the four leadership teams.

The Pathways to HE portal seems to be progressing well but more needs to be done in increasing student demand in certain programme areas.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning:

Initial commentary:

There are three objectives under this heading and all had green rating. As per the previous cycle, AIT is focusing on increasing the number of non-standard learners through lifelong learning by offering part time programmes. They also endeavoured to increase participation of under-represented groups through links with DEIS schools in the region and other disability related organisations (AHEAD, DARE, PWDI, HEAR etc.) The Institute is in the process of applying for University of Sanctuary status and commenced working on a Direct Provision Centre project to support asylum seekers.

There has been an increase in counselling resources in the past 2 years in line with ever-increasing demand from students with mental health difficulties. There has been an increase of 5% percent in the number of student with disabilities in 2015/16. There has also been an increase in flexible learners and Labour market activation participants (Springboard and ICT) but also, a significant drop in mature student numbers.

Part-time student numbers have fallen from 2015/16 to 2016/17, from 927 to 862 at undergraduate level and from 192 to 117 at postgraduate level. AIT's Lifelong Learning Unit has introduced a flexible payment plan to support adults who wish to return to college. There are also discussing preferential student loans for adults with local Credit Unions.

The LLU delivered its first e-learning certificate program showing an increase in delivering different programmes.

AIT continues to participate in the new AIT Engage programme. It is actively working towards University of Sanctuary, Gaisce and Green Campus awards for next year. The Institute is well engaged with its Student Union in the National Student Engagement Programme in collaboration with HEA, USI and QQI. Athlone Student Union won 2 awards in annual USI Student Achievements Awards Ireland held in April 2017.

The PASS Programme is progressing well and there has been an increase in students and support teams. 23 courses achieved, 10 offered on 26 programmes this year. AIT is reviewing 4 new courses for next year.

National Policy Context:

AIT is working extensively at improving participation, access, teaching and lifelong learning. The New AIT ENGAGE Programme and their work on Direct Provision Centre project shows their engagement with community and different diverse groups and demonstrate a good understanding of the needs of people in their region.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

AIT is still struggling to increase its mature student numbers after the drop in the last two years due to the economic upturn. The institute is strong in other areas of lifelong learning such as progression rates for Student Assistance Fund beneficiaries. AIT states that its new

entrants in receipt of any grant rate is 56% which is slightly higher than the IoT Sector rate of 55% (2013/14 data) and is significantly higher than the University sector at 35%.

The institute's increasing support for students with mental health difficulties is very positive especially at the time where there is push for mental health awareness across all sectors.

AIT has shown evidence of benchmarking performance against other IoTs and they are looking to U-Multirank for future benchmarking.

AIT was able to give student voice and feedback on their PASS Programme in their report.

AIT indicated in Appendix 1 a detailed list of activities in support of the application for University of Sanctuary status (Direct Provision Centre Project).

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience:

Initial commentary:

There were two objectives both coded green. The Learning and Teaching Unit continue to develop activities to increase participation and attendance. The ISSE response rate continues to be the highest in the country with 69% in 2017. This is achieved via partnership between the Quality Office, academic staff and Student Union. CAO entry offering for level 8 has increased since 2016.

Student participation in the Equal Access Survey dropped by 13% since last year, due to it being integrated into the on-line registration process in 2016 as a pilot. AIT subsequently confirmed that on review, this was deemed not to be a success and this year the survey is being incorporated into the I.T. session, and AIT is confident that this will result in higher participation in the survey.

AIT benchmarked ISSE indices against all the HEIs and can show that it is performing above the norm. The Institute continues to support provision at level 6 & 7 and continues to support the LADDER system.

AIT made progress against 2016 targets in promoting excellence in learning, teaching and assessment. 25 AIT & 15 external candidates were awarded Postgraduate Diploma in Learning, Teaching & Assessment by 2016. 51 staff members have completed at least one special purpose award at level 9 thereby increasing the number of staff with a pedagogical qualification.

The Institute's Learning & Teaching Unit was awarded funding by the National Forum of the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning for the "*What works and Why?*" Project which explored the use of technology in teaching. Further to previous reflections on performance, Moodle usage has increased significantly indicating that virtual learning is used across all academic areas to provide a blended learning experience for students.

National Policy Context:

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.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

AIT exceeded their targets in this area and demonstrated that they are professionally developing staff in order to meet students' teaching and learning needs. AIT references links, data and trends of their performance in the appendix. AIT Learning & Teaching Unit is instrumental in different activities and developments as outlined in Appendix 3 of the report.

AIT should update on the drop in the Equal Access Survey response.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation:

Initial commentary:

AIT had three objectives under this heading which were all coded green. AIT exceeded in all objectives. The Institute's progress against 2016 targets has been in line with strategic planning and demonstrates continued growth in industry engagement. The value of projects increased by 2% compared to 2015 and value of industry contributions increased by 6%.

Targets were achieved in terms of delivering top quality postgraduate research & innovation. The Office of Research completed its own strategic plan to build capacity in targeted research areas and deliver a sustainable pipeline of postgraduate students. AIT's postgraduate candidates have access to the Entrepreneurship & Creativity taught modules (5 ECTS credits) by agreement with Maynooth University. Postgraduates also can access advice and a repository of online supports and training from VITAE of which AIT is a member.

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 secured funding through Horizon 2020. Its Software Research Institute is coordinating and leading a €4.7m Horizon 2020 project under the Secure Societies initiative which runs until 2019. This is designed to improve ongoing awareness of the risk posed to business by cyber security attacks.

AIT is involved in a lot of research projects and activities including its Graduate Research Alliance coordinated by THEA (the representative body for all institutes of technology) and the MEND Cluster, shared by DKIT, Maynooth University, and DKIT. The number of PhD and postgraduate numbers have increased over the years. To maintain the pipeline of postgraduate researchers, AIT has introduced different initiatives such as the introduction of academic staff time release for research and staff registration at partner universities for PhD programmes via AIT's Staff Development Programme and AIT President's Seed Fund Programme. AIT operates a research seminar programme that facilitates cross-cutting researcher presentations and specialist guest lectures from partner institutes and industry.

AIT is involved in knowledge/tech transfer to enterprise via commercialisation of research activities in the form of technology licensing to Irish-based companies and the creation of knowledge intensive spin-out companies. This target has been achieved, with 13 licences, options and assignments transferred and 1 spin out company between 2014-2016, while commercialisation targets have been exceeded over the period.

National Policy Context:

Collaboration in sharing postgraduate research with Maynooth and cluster partners.

Strong knowledge transfer to enterprise and commercialisation of research activities in the form of technology licensing and creation of spin out companies.

Partnering with other institutions across Ireland, UK and US in DOCTRID programme

Critical evaluation and feedback:

One of the key areas for AIT relates to research and innovation. The Institute has very good links with their research partners nationally and internationally. Their research strategy is focusing on world class research in fulfilment of TU criteria. AIT works closely with its MEND Cluster in reaching their objectives.

In their last report, AIT noted that there was a need to engage with the Irish Research Council as they were not securing the number of awards anticipated. Their Horizon 2020 project shows that they can build on research targets and secure the funding they need, but more needs to be done.

5. Enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange:

Initial commentary:

All the targets listed were met and received a green rating.

AIT were awarded funding by Enterprise Ireland in 2016 for expansion of knowledge-based start-ups in the Midlands region – via the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC) campus business incubator.

The Institute received two Technology Gateway awards by Enterprise Ireland in Applied Research; Applied Polymer Technology & COMMAND – Connected Media.

The New Frontiers Programme delivered in partnership with Maynooth University supported 14 participant start-ups in 2016/17 and a €1.9m contract was awarded to AIT by Enterprise Ireland in 2016.

The European Space Agency (ESA) Space Solution Centre Ireland in which AIT is a partner (along with Tyndall National Institute, Maynooth University, the Irish Maritime and Energy Resource Cluster) was launched in September 2016 and operates across the four partner locations.

AIT continues to make knowledge resources available in a flexible manner to respond to the needs of SMEs. The institute completed 230 collaborations with 161 companies during 2016 ranging from Innovation Voucher projects, direct/contract funded projects to large Innovation Partnerships.

AIT partners with other stakeholders in a broad range of actions across Midlands Action Plan for Jobs 2015-17. AIT engages with County Councils in the region in the development of their 6 year local Economic & Community Plans.

AIT completed work on a pilot portal which maps company engagement and skills needs of SMEs across the Cluster region. The work was supported by HEA and based on 155 SMEs in the Biopharma & MedTech sector.

National Policy Context:

AIT undertook to increase awareness of its R&D facilities by showcasing and participating in events and summits.

The Institute partners with other stakeholders as set out in the Midlands Action Plan for Jobs 2015-2017. AIT engage closely with the MEND cluster which developed a pilot portal mapping company engagement & skills needs of SMEs, supported by HEA. The Institute works closely with the County Councils in developing 6 year Local Economic & Community Plans.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

Overall, there is considerable evidence that AIT is working closely with regional and national industry in reaching their strategic objectives. AIT gave a detailed Appendix 5 setting out the activities and developments in the last year.

6. Enhanced internationalisation:

Initial commentary:

AIT outlined in its Strategic Plan 2014–2018 that its goal is to be ‘internationally focused in teaching, research and knowledge exchange.’ AIT had 3 objectives under this heading with two targets met. The first objective was to increase student intake from a baseline of 11% to 15% by 2018. Currently, international students comprise 12% of the student population in 2016-17 (see reference in Institution Overview for how this is calculated). AIT was not able to reach its 15% projection due to a drop in Middle Eastern markets and a decrease in students participating in the Science without Borders programme which provided the Institute with a substantial number of Brazilian students.

The number of Erasmus students in AIT hasn’t increased much compared to other IoTs. There were only 6 Student Mobility for Placement (Traineeships) in 2016, a drop from the previous year. The Institute gave itself a yellow code on this target. AIT expects there might be an increase in both traineeship and student mobility of study in 2017. The institute has subsequently stated that it has a target of 80 students to go abroad on placement and study or training abroad. The students will not be classified as Erasmus, but it remains a significant development in fostering a culture of going abroad.

The Institute commits to strengthening relationships with existing partner universities in Europe, Middle East, Asia, Africa and North America. AIT is one of the institutes with significant numbers of Chinese students. The Institute has 6 Ministry of Education approved undergraduate programmes in China, one of the highest approvals of any Irish HEI. AIT launched an International Scholarship Programme during 2016-17 to support students on a 12 week unpaid placement or study abroad in a non-EU market. 20 students will receive this scholarship for placements in China, USA and Canada.

The AIT International Office and Learning & Teaching Unit collaborate on delivering awareness training programmes for students and staff taking placements in international markets. The AIT strategic plan sets a target of increasing the number of students undertaking an international placement, study or training programme abroad.

AIT will continue to develop mobile technologies to communicate with international students. The intention is to develop the use of a flexible mobile platform (subject to availability of appropriate funding), to redesign the AIT website to be multi-language so that it caters for students from China and Brazil, for instance. In meeting this target, it has now launched its new website with optimisation for multi-platform mobile devices, increased its social media communication with international students and is delivering an “English on-line” programme for Chinese students. AIT noted that it will continue to develop mobile technologies in line with ICT developments and budgetary flexibility.

National Policy Context:

The Institute is continuing to develop its campaign to internationalise the curriculum with particular reference to Faculty of Business. The Institute currently have one full time dedicated international programme.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

AIT has one of the highest percentages of international students compared to other IoTs and cluster partners. In the midst of intensive competition for international students, the Institute is securing a high number of students from China. Despite losing a high number of students from Brazil, they are looking at alternative countries to enable them to deliver on their internationalisation goals.

AIT has the lowest Erasmus student mobility in both study and traineeship in comparison with other IoTs which could be impacting their international numbers.

AIT acknowledge that they didn't reach their target in relation to international student growth. In light of this, the target student increase of 15% by 2018 might need to be reviewed.

7. Institutional consolidation:

Initial commentary:

AIT has three objectives under this heading, all of which got a green rating.

AIT's key strategic goal is to achieve TU Status. The Institute is fully engaging with its MEND Cluster.

AIT's focus has been to further enhance the collaborative relationship with the partners within the MEND Cluster. A working group was set up to examine the requirements for an effective, reliable and efficient system for student exchange for joint academic programmes – "Protocol for initiation, approval, management and implementation of joint academic activities within the MEND Cluster"

AIT met its target for building a collaborative platform for digital learning. The Learning & Teaching Unit continues to enhance the institute's learning analytics. The L&T unit is a collaborative partner on the Supporting Transition: Enhancing Feedback in First Year using Digital technologies Project. AIT is progressing further developing technological platforms that will continuously improve the curriculum.

AIT's third objective is increasing collaboration with further education to enhance coherence, access, transfer and progression. A Regional Education Forum was set up with agreed Terms of Reference for engagement with FE providers. A formal Network of Further Education & Higher Education providers was established for the purpose of collaboration on enhancing access, transfer and progression opportunities across the MEND region. The network consists of HE and Education & Training Board Partners from across the region, as well as participation from QQI and SOLAS.

National Policy Context:

AIT's strategic goal is to be a Technological University and fulfills the criteria with the exception of the requirement for merger with another institute of technology.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

AIT met with Regional Public Bodies and Industries in responding to the new Planning Framework and their submissions emphasise the importance of TU. They are working with the partners in MEND cluster in areas of Pathways to HE, Mapping SMEs enterprise and establishment of FE to HE.

8. Additional Notes:

- In their annual budget the institute has an accumulated surplus of €2.489m at the end of 2016. AIT received an increase of 6.1% in its 2017 grant allocation. This equated to an increase of €1,019,179 in funding.
- AIT responded to the Gender Equality profile. 53% percent of all staff are female and 43% are male. 56% thought that there is a gender inequality issue in Irish Higher Education
- AIT will work with U-Multirank to extend its benchmarking to international HEIs.