HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

Institute of Technology Carlow
Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session
Thursday 14th September 2017
09.30 – 12.00

IT Carlow
Dr Patricia Mulcahy, President
Mr Cormac O'Toole, VP Corporate Affairs
Mr David Denieffe VP Academic Affairs
Mr Declan Doyle VP Development and Research
Ms Maebh Maher, Head of Faculty Business and Humanities
Dr Karen Hennessy, Head of the Wexford Campus
Dr David Ryan, Director of the Office of Institutional Planning and Research

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
Ms Sarah Fitzgerald, Higher Executive Officer
Mr Mark Kirwan, Executive Officer

External
Dr Andrée Sursock, Expert Panel member
Mr George Pernsteiner, Expert Panel member
Dr Trish O'Brien, Process Auditor

Context

IT Carlow has demonstrated a strong aptitude for the strategic dialogue process, providing extensive data and information to supplement its self-evaluation reports. It has maintained a strong financial position over the compact period, with very high engagement in lifelong learning as a key factor in achieving that position. It has benefited from, and been responsive to, strong demand for higher education in its region. IT Carlow note that success also stems from their focus on strong governance, strategic planning, risk management, resource management, quality enhancement, building research capacity and international profile, and engagement with a broad range of constituencies.

Introduction

The HEA opened by welcoming the IT Carlow 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 international panel congratulated the institute on a well-presented, intelligible and thorough report, on its national and international benchmarking and on its engagement with the process. IT Carlow reported that it will embark upon a new planning process from January 2018 and will continue to align the compact to institutional strategy. IT Carlow took the opportunity to make a written response, prior to the meeting, setting out areas of clarification.

Student enrolment numbers, Access targets

IT Carlow has made a comprehensive submission, a remarkable feature of which is sustained enrolment growth. The HEA invited IT Carlow to discuss this.

On level 6, there has been a gradual decline up to recently, when levels increased once again. While it has retained its level 6/7 CAO offers, student demand is centred on level 8. Skills needs in the region also largely call for level 8 and 9 provision, as demonstrated by Springboard programmes awarded. The focus of the programme this year has been on upskilling those in employment, and IT Carlow can report that courses filled quickly and were in high demand. The institute remains keen to retain its presence in level 6 and notes as set out in the compact self-evaluation, it has worked to expand non-standard entry routes and flexible learning opportunities ensuring that it leads in the lifelong learning space.

IT Carlow is distinguished by its level 8 growth, largely constituting higher diplomas, including those related to upskilling and track changing. For the purposes of the TU, the institute wants to grow STEM areas, but also Health & Social Science and early childhood education. IT Carlow noted that courses in civil engineering and construction still haven't recovered to pre-recession levels, a finding echoed by Engineers Ireland.

Facilities

IT Carlow consider that its STEM facilities may constitute older stock, but they remain of a high standard. A recent series of cross-institutional academic, research and professional support service peer reviews was very complimentary of the facilities   Lifelong learning ensures that they are used all year round to the greatest effect, the campus is operational and full to capacity to 6PM, then it transforms to cater to part-time students and fills again. The primary obstacle to further growth is thus capacity.

IT Carlow has secured €6m in capital over 17 years, it has put in €25m of its own resources and intends to invest a further €11m. The institute has bought over 40 acres of land to date. This generates a surplus of the order of € 800,000 each year with the aim of re-investing it. Student facilities have benefited, along with reserves being put towards construction of the Dargan (research) centre, aerospace engineering building, the Haughton building, a new 1,000 seater teaching facility and both the planned extension to the learning resource centre and development of a 30 acre sports campus in 2018.

A priority now is for a dedicated science and ICT building. Once they are in place the campus will be. in a position to plan for its next phase of growth.

Investment is informed by participation in regional skills fora, action plans for jobs plans, and more generally, being engaged in its region. Outlay is leveraged off core grant, or very certain funding

streams; long-term commitments are essentially based on core grant numbers. The lack of a borrowing framework is a major constraint in terms of regional development, particularly given IT Carlow's financial track record.

Teaching and Learning

As per the compact self-evaluation report, IT Carlow notes that it has undertaken a robust self-evaluation and peer review process in 2015/16, with a systematic evaluation of its professional operations and services to be completed by 2018, to ensure that it is ready for the Institutional Review in 2018/19.

IT Carlow emphasise that it has always prioritised teaching and learning to enhance the quality of the offering. As a reasonably young institute that has been in existence since 1970, it has seen a lot of retirements in recent years. As a result, it has recruited many new staff, and note that of the academic management team and professional support services staff, 26 of 32 are recent hires[1].

IT Carlow is required to recruit at assistant lecturer level, so that presents challenges in terms of attracting talent. If recruitment is not successful, then it can raise the grade offer. IT Carlow currently employs about 200 associate lecturers, many of whom are working full time outside the institute and who are both a significant boost to its capacity for teaching as well as offering a direct link to industry for learners... In ICT, data and engineering areas, recruitment is particularly difficult as graduates are often in a position to find well paid employment in industry

At the beginning of the process, 18% of staff had a level 10 qualification and weren't all research active. Now the institute has 33% staff at level 10 and 13.6% pursuing those qualifications. As reported in the self-evaluation, a specific module in research supervision is available to staff. There are now 100 people on the MA in Teaching & Learning. The institute is moving towards a requirement that all new academic appointments must possess or undertake an MA in teaching and learning

The institute emphasises the absolute focus on quality on ongoing quality enhancement all aspects of the staff and student experience. The management team and structure support this; the recent appointment of a Director of Institutional Planning and Research has been a testament to that. This will provide for an informed strategic planning process and a strong focus on quality enhancement, although the institute notes the lack of dedicated funding in this regard.

Research

As per the HEA's commentary on the self-evaluation, IT Carlow's research strategy is underpinned by meeting TU criteria and this has resulted in an increased emphasis on growing research activity, which traditionally has not been a particularly strong feature of the institute. Having regard to the limited level of funding available, it is making progress in building research capacity. There are now five centres of research and enterprise in the areas of gamification ICT, Agri-food Environment, Product Design & Innovation, Engineering and Health Sciences.

The institute's research strategy has three pillars, relating to facilities, funding and faculty. Having invested in the Dargan research building, the institute was subsequently able to build teams which allowed it to apply to different and newer areas, such as multidisciplinary HSE applications. The teaching load of new centre leaders has been reduced to free them up to collaborate on research e.g.

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[1] IT Carlow has clarified that since 2012/13, the period of the compact, of the academic and professional support services management team, 26 of 32 are either new appointments, new appointments to newly created posts or new appointments through the internal movement between different management posts.

a 4 hour reduced load to allow for preparation of an EU funding application. About 35% of faculty are now research active and the institute has introduced a President's Fellowship/ Associate Supervisor scheme to further build capacity. It is important to recruit staff who have a research track record.

On the development of structured PhD programmes, the structured component has modules across one or two years (generic skills, methodology, data analytics) and allows students to graduate with a special purpose award in that area, and then the research phase follows on from that. Supervision is rarely on the basis of a single-mentor, but rather on a joint basis or by reference to supervisory teams. IT Carlow has been very successful with the IRC employment-based scheme, where it has had a 75% success rate. IT Carlow was congratulated on its research strategy and supports for staff development and leadership in the regional skills fora.

Cluster/ TU/ Landscape

IT Carlow is committed to the TUSE project but considers the wider cluster arrangement to be somewhat problematic. While there are some projects with Cork, Tralee and others that work well, IT Carlow, doesn't find any great unifying factor in the current format. As it is located in south Leinster, it could feasibly move into the Maynooth/ DCU cluster; that fits its geographical draw and relationships. In addition, it already has regional gateway EI funding with AIT and others. However, the institute also retains a strong affinity with the south east region (for example through the skills fora as noted in its self-evaluation) – it recognises that this pulls it in different directions but is happy to continue to accommodate that.

The institute presented a map of the boundaries of the current cluster, the regional skills fora etc. which evidence the lack of reconciliation nationally between various policy initiatives. There are so many opportunities and a frustration in not being able to leverage them all due to capacity constraints.

As set out in the self-evaluation report, IT Carlow considers that it has met or exceeded all its agreed 2016 targets except for two related to the merger and TU designation. The TU project with Waterford was designed to allow for the development of a multi-campus south east technological university. This would give the TU a north and south pole HEI that will provide a coherence and cohesion, to draw in talent and investment. IT Carlow could pivot towards the north east and Waterford could face south.

There is no university in its region which IT Carlow considers to be a deterrent to students staying in the region, while neighbouring universities continue to grow. The TU represents a new type of institute for the south-east. The new TU MOU has been ready for a year at this stage, but has slowly progressed through governing bodies, having regard to the changes in Chairs and Presidents since the project began. Government legislation is also well overdue, but it welcomes the funding of € 1.5M allocated by the HEA to date.

 Recent work with Carlow College has seen IT Carlow host postgraduate researchers on site and it remains open to conversations in this regard as well as in other areas of possible collaboration. Due to the institute's position and strong engagement with various entities in the region, such as the southern cluster, the institute is now in a strong position to strategically select key projects focus on key partnerships.

Internationalisation

The national international education target of 15% is very high and the institute notes that in order to meet this target, Irish numbers would have to fall. There is a lack of joined-up national thinking. Education Ireland will go to south India in two weeks to promote Ireland as a destination, including Hyderabad but the Department of Foreign Affairs won't issue visas for Hyderabad. The institute

pursues internationalisation but chooses carefully where to aim for. As set out in the self-evaluation, IT Carlow has concentrated on the Middle East market, with 74 registered students in 2015/16.

IT Carlow accepts "Junior Year Abroad" liberal arts students from the USA who take STEM modules.

Next steps

The HEA intends to circulate a minute of the meeting in mid to 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.

The leadership of IT Carlow should be commended on their achievements to date. In a time of constrained funding, the institute has been managed very well, grown substantially, accumulated a surplus and earmarked same for reinvestment. They have worked hard to the benefit of their students and their region to take up available opportunities.

The institute also demonstrates strong self-awareness, and uses data (drawn from a range of sources, like QA, finance, and institutional benchmarking) to inform priorities, and to measure progress in performance.

IT Carlow now presents at a point of transition whereby there is a need to decide future direction and more importantly, what will define it. Until now, it has pursued many avenues of growth e.g. student enrolment, research, international students. It will become increasingly challenging to continue growing across the full range of activities, without having regard to a clear mission and strategy, such as striking the balance between teaching and research. The next strategic plan will be important in making that step-change; setting out choices, goals and its position in the context of the higher education landscape.