

Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 21st September 2015

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

The HEA has noted that while DKIT has provided a detailed compact, it is less clear on institutional priorities. The report itself is not providing the correct insight into an institution's strategic direction and progress which is of concern and the self-analysis of their performance is less detailed than might be expected.

The self-evaluation report, and the compact more generally, suffer from a lack of strategic clarity, with excessive detail on individual objectives and targets. The compact, as it stands, reads more like a work plan. The compact was drawn from 2011 - 2016 strategic plan; it will be necessary to review that and look at how it has succeeded or not in the context of the economic environment. A key consideration for the HEA will be how the institute can focus on reduced number of more high level strategic objectives that would better set out the strategic direction and intent of the institution. Overall, the balance of process and outcomes objectives should be addressed.

As the institute is currently engaged in the strategic planning process, the strategic dialogue experience has proved very useful. DKIT acknowledge that they are reasonably new to such an exercise and that they had endeavoured to report on the compact and detail provided in the first submission. It has not yet been possible to respond comprehensively to the challenge set out by the HEA of framing priorities in the context of broader institutional strategy, but they are working towards that.

DKIT were keen to note that institutional priorities have been set, but perhaps not communicated to the HEA. They noted the current priority as returning the institute to financial stability and there is a separate process in train with the HEA. While they expect to come in on budget this year, a deficit remains and that will be dealt with as a separate issue. They are on target to grow student numbers, in particular, first year fulltime entrants will grow by 100 and apprenticeship numbers are also growing.

In terms of research, health, ageing, renewables and energy are the focus. DKIT also has a track record in engaging with enterprise and industry since 1989. It is not possible to offer quality programmes at undergraduate level in the absence of quality research underpinning programme provision. Having entrepreneurial graduates is important too and work has begun with consultative partners, academic body, industry partners in their region. The graduate school linkage with DCU is established, delivering structured PhD programmes as well as research Masters. Further, the four cluster partners agreed an MOU..

DKIT note that an annual external review of their research performance is in place. Currently there is an ICT, Health and Ageing cluster, an Energy and Environment cluster and an Arts and Music cluster. As it stands, some centres are established while others are emerging, such as

regulated software. Metrics around publication and spin outs are in place and DKIT consider that they have set out a trajectory and indeed a new research strategy, aligned to the compact. They note their work in basic and applied research areas, both necessary to sustain the other. They remain cognisant of priorities, constantly tracking and refining.

The institute is also driven by a regional and engagement agenda. They are working with EI to look for a technology gateway with regional and enterprise interest. Overall, there is extensive evidence of work in the engagement space, with several tangible results so far. DKIT note that there is an absence of national data against which to benchmark but benchmarking could be done on an international basis. A small number of targets were only partially complete as at year end 2014, while other 2016 targets may not still be valid, in the sense that some are extremely close to being achieved at year end 2014 or have already been surpassed.

DKIT is using the Action Plan for Jobs and also the Regional Skills Fora to drive engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange. There are barriers to engagement, however, and DKIT activities in that space are largely self-funded. They have had success under the INTERREG programme and with funding from Intertrade Ireland. While progress has been made, it is challenging to leverage this for students. In terms of attracting Northern Irish students, they have looked to change "A levels" scoring and are among the first of the southern institutions to do this, but the environment remains challenging.

There appears to be a diverse portfolio of engagements and the HEA would welcome a clarity of mission. In particular there is a need to strike a balance between engagement and publication pursuits. The target associated with the delivery of a structured PhD National Institutes of Health Programme was not achieved. As in other places, some targets are not being met. DKIT needs to give some consideration as to the range of different targets and the level at which they are set.

The DCU pathways to graduate education is a positive development and to date 21 PhD students have registered in DKIT. The governance structures with DCU are in place and are well aligned, including graduate regulations. The student demand points towards a preference for a DCU qualification. While phase one is complete, phase two will be a challenge e.g. access to IREL, setting fee levels and access to training. Work on dual regulation funded under the Strategic Innovation and Development Fund is drawn on here.

The North East Further and Higher Education Alliance has been in place for a number of years now, working to develop links and improve progression. The direct entrants from FE are considered to be better placed for higher education as a result of their year in further education. The alliance is also looking at the access agenda in the wider cluster.

Access is key, given that a high proportion of entrants are the first generation to enter third level. Retention is more challenging when students come in from non-traditional backgrounds. Retention features as one of DkIT's quality enhancement themes and DKIT will concentrate on this. The aim is to benchmark with other institutions and seek to emulate other good practice. DKIT want to improve retention rates and are looking to Cork and

elsewhere as potential examples. Having brought in high numbers of non-traditional students, they need do their best to retain them.

The HEA advised that those targets associated with retention rates should be examined and perhaps renewed. The emphasis on access is welcome as are increases in the numbers of part-time offerings, but DKIT were asked to reflect on whether more could be done for target groups.

DKIT draws attention to being unable to provide more places through RCPL and RPEL due to budget constraints. RPL is straight-forward, but an assessment of experiential learning is more complex. It requires greater effort to put the portfolio together and can cost up to €350 per module which students could not afford. Such issues relating to RPL are applicable sectorwide. Notwithstanding this, the compact should address this more in depth.

It is also notable that DKIT's part-time/flexible numbers are still well below sectoral averages and targets would therefore seem unambitious. There are challenges in securing numbers on part-time, flexible programmes, despite a number of new programmes being introduced in recent times. As outlined in the recently published Regional Action Plan for Jobs, DkIT in conjunction with DCU and a number of other key stakeholders are exploring the development of a Digital Payments Cluster. They have also looked at a number of other IoTs to see where they have succeeded on flexible part time provision. DKIT has focussed on the geographical spread of course uptake, offering programmes in Monaghan, for example.

In its compact the institute projected that a Business Plan for the promotion and recruitment of DkIT to the international student market would be developed by 2014 however this has now been pushed out to 2016. The institute considers itself to be one of the top performers in the sector for attracting international students and, in this regard, they deem the development of a Business Plan for this area not to be a current priority. DKIT has largely met its enrolment targets but it is notable that in terms of internationalisation, incoming Erasmus numbers have fallen by almost a third. It is understood that a factor in this decision is the difficult financial situation of DKIT but the loss of income to the wider economy in Dundalk should be borne in mind as well as a range of lost academic opportunities. There are accommodation pressures too, PayPal and e-Bay are competing for accommodation and it is noted that Irish students are less inclined to travel. Diversity on campus is welcome, however, and the strategy will need to ensure a continued positive experience for the students that come here.

Several changes are proposed to compact objectives/targets and DKIT will revise the compact accordingly.

. DkIT is concentrating on meeting TU criteria as there are concerns around losing their position vis-à-vis other institutions with the emergence of a three tier structure. Public perception is very important here and it's a real challenge.

DKIT acknowledge that they are overstretched and challenged in many ways, financially in particular. One solution is to reduce priorities, but this is challenging as the offer is based on

regional needs and responses and consequent reductions or redirection of resources may make the institute less regionally relevant and therefore its very sustainability is threatened.

The real challenge relates to pay costs, of the budget available 80% is committed to pay costs. This means that the amount allocated per student for non-pay stands at €262, or €144 per student to spend on resources on equipment. The reality is that equipment, in some instances, is outdated or not working which has an impact on students but also on staff morale. The ability to continue to sustain a quality experience is going to be a real challenge. In contrast, in Northern Ireland universities decided to cap student numbers as a result of lack of funding. DkIT seek to avoid this option.

One final risk to the system is the lack of an MIS system, an Chéim requires about €14M and it has been suggested that IOTs should address this, that is not feasible.

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.

DKIT representatives:

Mr Denis Cummins, President

Ms Ann Campbell, Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar

Ms Irene McCausland, Vice President of Strategic Planning, Communications and Development

Mr Peter McGrath, Vice President for Finance & Corporate Affairs

Dr Gerard (Bob) McKiernan, Head of School of Informatics & Creative Arts

Dr Tim McCormac, Head of Research

Dr Moira Maguire, Head of Centre for Learning and Teaching

Mr Ger O'Driscoll, HR Manager

DKIT requested that the following be added to the agenda:

1. Impact of funding cuts on quality of student experience
2. Reporting/Data Analytics