

Galway-Mayo IT (GMIT)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 16th September 2015

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

The HEA noted that on the basis of the compact provided, there was little evidence of self-reflection on past performance or learning to inform future performance. The targets are largely process driven rather than being outcomes-focused. A critical self-evaluation is missing. Overall there are some serious concerns around institutional performance, on the basis of the self-evaluation provided and the capacity of the leadership to address such issues.

GMIT acknowledge their performance to date but note that the lack of commentary is not reflective of the level of senior management time that has been devoted to strategic dialogue and broader strategic planning processes within the institute. They consider that the templates issued did not stipulate the need to include evidence of self-reflection. They noted that their ability to self-reflect is evidenced by the production of the self evaluation report for the EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme. They also highlighted several sector-wide issues around data definitions which need to be addressed. HEA clarified that the process of data definition and measurement was well established, and had been communicated to all institutions; however HEA indicated they would be happy to discuss future developments with any institutions. In addition, GMIT felt that the structure of the self-evaluation report wasn't conducive to reporting achievements and the HEA will reflect on this.

There is potential to add value to the region by pursuing TU status, albeit it is at a relatively early stage. GMIT stated that a compelling case can be made for the Connacht-Ulster Alliance and that weaknesses are best addressed through synergies arising from the coming together of three institutes. Work to date has focussed on institution mission and a project is in train with John Davies to look at the process, setting up thematic work groups across the CUA which will help in managing the change process. The HEA noted that there is a need to address underpinning issues within the institution, particularly the need to put it on a financially sustainable footing. The institute should then develop more integrated planning processes to address cross-institutional issues. A three year budgetary framework is being put in place between the HEA and GMIT. This sees the institute engaging in a robust internal academic planning exercise which involves the Registrar convening programme development meetings with each school executive to analyse their individual academic plans for the next four years, set targets and KPIs for each programme and review strategies to address retention issues where performance is below the national average.

In respect of the Transitions agenda, there are some concerns around entry level CAO points for courses. In some instance, engineering for example, the initial cut- off point stood at 140 points, which could be damaging to FE efforts, but points have since increased. GMIT dispute the correlation between entry points and achievement as this has not been well established.

They also note that while the Academic Council sets 140 points as the minimum entry requirement, the cut-off points are not reflective of the median points for a programme.

In addition, retention levels have remained in the 60 – 65% range for a five year period, which is of concern to the HEA, but the intention is now to work to increase retention rates to 70%, notwithstanding the definitional issues that arise. There is a retention project in place but GMIT don't see a direct relationship between points and retention; rather they are looking at programme and module specific issues too. In determining their own retention metric, the institution has traditionally used a metric relating to the percentage eligible to progress over the number registered on the programme. This demonstrates that first year retention rates over the past five years fall within the 66% - 69% range. Overall rates for the entire institute, under this metric, lie within the 75% to 80% range. Using the HEA retention metric, based on the non-presence of students on March 1st who were registered, full-time, new first time, in year 1 on March 1st census date in the previous year, GMIT achieves a 71% retention rate for 2014/15. In addition, a range of criteria that affect retention are examined and addressed in the School of Engineering Retention Plan.

GMIT note that there is a correlation between motivation and progression i.e. a student that registers on their CAO first preference course is more likely to progress. They also note a 100% attrition rate in engineering where the student has scored less than a "C2" in Leaving Cert. Maths. In order to address what is a very significant issue, an engagement and retention officer has been recruited to start in January. They will initially work with programmes where retention has been identified as a problem. A discussion document has been prepared for Academic Council to consider the need to change entry requirements to programmes where poor performance in Maths has been identified as a barrier to progression. In addition, all staff have been advised to discuss retention at every school/ department meeting scheduled. Above all, GMIT seeks to protect academic standards by putting supports in place. Understanding the attrition rates will be key and they are looking at this.

GMIT has delivered on the ambition to build FE alliances and participated in a seminar and workshop with 20 colleges from the western seaboard. Through this, they have mapped routes and opportunities and identified key objectives for both GMIT and the region. The heads of three ETBs will meet with the cluster in November, the subgroups will then meet in November to look at more in-depth mapping. Key to this is bringing the FE providers and the ETBs into the cluster discussion. Historically there has been a 5% intake, in line with national strategy, and indeed, it is often exceeded in places.

On level 6/7 there is a financial challenge to stay in that space and this has driven the move to level 8. GMIT consider that the HEA funding model drives this behaviour. The increased focus on level 8 is also a response to market demand. But GMIT remains committed to providing levels 6 and 7. It is worth noting that employers feel these graduates are missing, they would recruit good quality level six and seven graduates, if available. It is a requirement that all new level 8 programmes include and ab initio level 7 programme. The institute refers to this approach as developing "families" of programmes to ensure maximum student choice.

There are some concerns on data issues relating to flexible learners – Domain 2 ‘Participation, equal access and lifelong learning’ 674 was the correct figure based on HEA data definitions at the time. The new HEA data definition suggests a higher number as this includes exam only students, foundation and access numbers. GMIT will review with a view to restating the baseline and tracking progress from that. In addition, GMIT undertook to clarify the ‘socio-economic’ group target in the self-evaluation report.

On Springboard, GMIT has been successful in securing programmes in the areas of food, innovation and hospitality, but the external demand isn’t there, which is challenging. In order to drive up numbers on the Mayo campus, there has been an attempt to bring in a younger cohort which means that mature students, as a proportion of total students, is falling. This is accompanied by an overall decline in demand from mature students. The geographic location of Mayo campus means that the viability is always in question.

The HEA invited GMIT to set out their research priorities. Two centres have been identified: GMedTech and MFRC. The research strategy was reviewed two years ago. A VP research post is planned, pending the appointment of a new President. The intention is to build centres where good quality research is ongoing. The Marine and Freshwater Research centre is larger, has a network across 12 institutions and also partnerships with the Marine Institute. They have secured a number of innovation vouchers and industry alliances with students based in industry. GMED Tech is growing and building links with UCHG - over two years it has had over 200 unique contacts with enterprise and is more likely to grow in the engagement space. Having invested funding into three centres for three years, two are performing well, are building capacity and gaining funds. They are looking at innovation centre developments with EI, and may expand there.

Notwithstanding the above developments, in terms of performance at end 2014, serious performance issues have arisen in relation to research, particularly around student numbers and income. In terms of the target for external funding for research and innovation activities, €2.5m GMIT has revised this down to €2m, as advised at the interim meeting. GMIT recognises that the institute needs to prioritise two centres at a maximum and notes that collaboration in the context of the CUA and wider West/ North West cluster will be position them to address performance in the research area. In terms of pursuing PhDs towards attaining TU criteria, there are currently 36 staff undertaking qualifications. In cluster discussions with NUIG, there is an opportunity to engage a further 36-40 staff in PhD studies at NUIG. The trajectory is such that GMIT aims to grow to be increasingly research active, growing from 40 to 100 research active staff within four years.

GMIT is developing an internationalisation strategy to be published this year. From the feedback received, they clarified that the decision to reduce and consolidate a number of Erasmus bilateral agreements arose from a review of existing bilateral agreements that were outdated and not deemed to be delivering. They intend to address the balance between incoming and outgoing students and general performance in the area.

The EUA has been engaged to feed into benchmarking discussions. The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. GMIT has proposed the EUA IEP to its Academic Council as a way of supporting a review of their strategic planning processes. GMIT also makes use of the U Multirank survey to identify peer HEIs. On the academic side, externs are recruited widely nationally and internationally and that is a form of benchmarking too. GMIT also asked the HEA to share sector wide data, such as discipline-specific unit cost data. Graduate employability is another interesting measure. Employers regularly seek out GMITs graduates and there is potential for a longitudinal research data project, pending institutional resources.

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.

GMIT representatives:

Mr Jim Fennell, Interim President

Ms Bríd Prendergast, Acting Secretary/Financial Controller

Mr Michael Hannon, Registrar

Mr Gerard MacMichael, Head of Engineering