

**Institute of Technology Sligo**  
**Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session**  
**Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2017**  
**14.00 – 16.30**

**IT Sligo**

Dr Brendan McCormack, President  
Mr Colin McLean, Registrar  
Ms Elizabeth McCabe, Secretary/Financial Controller  
Mr Tom Reilly, Head of Strategy & Planning

**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 John Malone, Process Auditor

**Context**

IT Sligo is in a relatively strong financial position with healthy reserves. The self-evaluation referred to tensions from performance/capacity to achieve targets being constrained by external factors such as funding, ECF, legislation, HEA and Brexit. In addition, it refers to challenges experienced internally over the period of the compact such as several changes in the Executive Team.

The institute is very clear that its main priorities lie in further developing the area of online provision and pursuit of CUA TU designation, with allied objectives of improving/growing research activity/performance.

**Introduction**

The HEA opened by welcoming the IT Sligo 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.

### **Strategy, growth and online provision**

IT Sligo has developed a new strategic plan in the past year and has set out its growth ambitions, over the next five years, growing from 6,000 students to 10,000. In addition, it projects a doubling of graduates from 1,550 per year to 3,000 and increasing the numbers of students online, from 2,000 to more than 5,000. The plan was approved by the Governing Body in June 2017. While it is recognised that it is overdue at this stage, it was not possible to progress earlier than this owing to changes at senior management level.

IT Sligo noted that it has reported on targets as agreed, but HEA came back with a wider perspective on the various compact areas. This was to enable individual HEI analysis, while also aggregating data at a system level. The institute was invited to describe the overall vision for the future, including the student mix, having regard to plans to seek TU status by 2022 and the growth levels projected. In the first instance, the organisational structure has been changed to allow strong departments to expand. It currently has 3,600 full time, 400 apprentices/erasmus and 2,000 online students. The primary growth area relates to undergraduate and post-graduate programmes delivered through online/blended learning mode. Based on trends over the last 15 years, full-time undergraduate enrolments on campus has not grown and is unlikely to grow significantly over the coming years. In addition, the funding moderator doesn't encourage significant growth in respect of the latter. However, the institute's strategy is to have a well populated vibrant campus, and intends to grow to an overall student population of 10,000 with an overall 60/40 online-blended/on-campus mix. A prime growth area relates to full-time undergraduate online provision, which is the subject of ongoing discussions with the HEA.

Data shows that 55% of students leave the region, despite the quality of offer. The institute considers that the university brand would be more attractive and would lead to a significant increase in demand from students to undertake to higher education study in Sligo. Technological university status is a means to try to address that the relatively low current demand for on-campus programmes. Growing online/blended provision seems to be a logical extension of successful activity to date. In this domain, IT Sligo has managed to penetrate both the traditional IT/ Business markets and also the more complex STEM market, via the use of online/blended laboratories. IT Sligo can report a surplus of €1.9M and the governing body intends to retain that.

In terms of growth areas, new HSS programmes have been developed, for example, building on the nucleus of staff in early childhood education and social care and new programmes in psychology. Other targeted areas include literature and writing, sociology, politics. The range of provision will be assessed again in the future in the context of the new TU. The challenges associated with online delivery were also discussed including the potential for a sense of isolation and lack of peer group on the part of students. Notwithstanding these challenges, IT Sligo feels that it has the experience to deliver something distinctive using online/blended delivery techniques for CAO entrants. Academic staff recognise the benefits to the learner and to the educators of this mode of delivery in many cases. It was noted that, in addition, if programmes were delivered using online/blended learning techniques to CAO entrants, this would attract a cohort that, for varying reasons, may not have been able to access/participate full-time higher education courses, allowing for cost savings while also changing how higher education is delivered.

In addition, IT Sligo continues to deliver at levels 6 to 9 based on industry needs. Often this takes the form of flexible online/blended provision and while ITS develops and validates the programme (with input from industry), in some cases industry also has an input to the delivery. The provision of online/blended learning programmes is demand-led (e.g. based on approaches from industry, such as programmes developed for Merck Sharp & Dohme, for the Insurance Institute of Ireland and for Google, eBay and Microsoft).

As part of the new organisational structure, developed to deliver the new Strategic Plan, there will be a Vice President of Online Development, who will manage business development managers to actively drive new business in the area of bespoke online/blended learning programmes.

### **Teaching and learning**

IT Sligo is reviving the staff centre for teaching and learning, which was down-sized due to cut backs in funding in recent years. It is also making available a LIN based module to all staff to support teaching and learning capability at the institute. A new Head of Education Development and a Quality Manager will also be recruited to assist with staff induction and academic development support. Retention has been an issue. While class sizes are relatively small, the academic standard of incoming students presents challenges to achieving the learning outcomes which leads to the consequence of which can be higher failure rates on some programmes. IT Sligo is analysing the data in this regard and has done some qualitative case studies – for example, in the BEng in Mechatronics. Communities of support have been developed, with improved monitoring of learners that keeps them engaged and involved in their learning. The intention is that targeted interventions, combined with reviewing the level of assessment on programmes, will lead to improvement in retention rates.

### **CUA**

In respect of the CUA's technological university application, the three Presidents and Governing Body chairs of LYIT, GMIT and IT Sligo have been meeting to progress towards the next stage of the process. At the request of the DES, the CUA met with the three non-aligned IoTs of AIT, DKIT and LIT. AIT and LIT have indicated that they will remain as standalone institutes, and DKIT are still reviewing the matter. It is worth noting that following a TUI directive to their members not to engage, it was noted that academic staff have recently agreed to re-engage in TU discussions.

### **Research**

As reported in its self-evaluation, IT Sligo's strategic objective is to grow applied research to both drive economic and social development in the region and also to meet the TU criteria. Reaching the 4% target in research, with respect to the current funding model is challenging. It is also increasingly difficult as the denominator (in calculating the 4%) increases as the level 8 intake increases. There are currently 70 postgraduate students, which represents 2.2% of all Level 8 to 10 enrolments. IT Sligo reported that it intends to grow this to 200 in order to attain the 4% target. It was noted that, the challenge of achieving growth in research needs to be balanced against delivering other (engagement and educational) needs of the region and IT Sligo state that it will not reduce its engagement with industry in pursuit of the level 9 and 10 research target.

There is also a requirement to upskill staff to level 10. Currently 29% have achieved level 10 and they are primarily in the STEM area. As reported in its self-evaluation, the 2016 target to increase the number of staff engaging in research has been met. IT Sligo is also exploring the issue of PhD equivalence and how best to grow areas of specialisation and expertise across the CUA partners. There are currently 9 research areas that could potentially be joined up into 4 large research groups. There

is identifiable crossover between ITS and GMIT in the precision engineering/ medical technology space, the former being an EI Gateway and SFI spoke and in environmental science research. IT Sligo has also developed contract research with various industry partners, through the use of innovation vouchers and innovation partnerships. There is a potential risk that Interreg funding will not continue when Brexit comes into effect. In short, the research domains are focused but the Institute also looks to develop research capacity and leverage scale and expertise with regional partners where possible.

### **Cluster**

In terms of the West-North-West cluster, IT Sligo has developed collaborations with HEIs in their region, including NUIG, GMIT, LYIT and also University of Ulster at Coleraine. As many of these collaborations were already underway, the Institute does not perceive added value from the work of the WNW cluster per se. For example, a significant education provision at national level is with NIBRT, an internationally recognised Institute in training and R&D for the pharmaceutical sector. This is not part of the WNW cluster, yet the collaboration is highly important to the biopharmaceutical industry. For such reasons, the Institute would not consider it appropriate that it confines its collaborations to partners within the WNW cluster. In any case, the institute has signed MOUs with local ETBs, and finds that collaboration is more likely at the individual college/school level. On the topics of progression from FE to HE, the Institute agrees that it is important to get it right for the region and that HEIs should work together. The experience of the Institute in the WNW cluster is that it is challenging to balance cooperation, collaboration, and competition between the partners.

### **Internationalisation**

IT Sligo currently hosts 350 full-time international students, 140 of which are under the Erasmus programme. Currently, there are 50 Canadians on a 2+1 programme and it is finalising a 3+1 agreement with one university in China. The primary ambition, however, lies in growing online/blended learning international students; currently IT Sligo has participants on online/blended programmes from 26 different countries. The Institute is currently reviewing the model developed by the Southern New Hampshire University which has 100,000 online students. The broader vision is to internationalise the institution and the student experience, and it has developed a strategy around internationalisation. The delivery of more online/blended learning programmes will require investment in updating laboratories, hiring instructional designers and allowing for new ways of working. There is a competitive advantage to being the early mover in this space but other Irish HEIs are entering this space rapidly.

### **Constraints**

IT Sligo consider that the current RGAM doesn't reward growth and nor does it facilitate the development of the appropriate supports quickly enough. The institute needs staff to develop and support its increasing offerings, but is constrained by the employment control framework. It made the case that the HEA should consider how to support institutions in growth scenarios rather than protecting those where the numbers are falling. Similarly, there is a need for equity in full-time and online funding support.

In terms of capital development, the institute hasn't pursued a PPP as it is of the opinion that this is costly to the exchequer, is inefficient in its execution and not a good use of public resources. IT Sligo plans to execute its capital development plans through leverage of its own resources balanced with exchequer assistance. A borrowing framework would be welcomed, and it points to the capital developments that the universities have achieved with EIB funding. The HEA confirmed that there is no update on this situation for IoTs.

## **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.

IT Sligo has demonstrated how it is restructuring in line with the vision and mission presented in its strategic plan, including ambitious growth, key staff hires and a greater focus on collecting and using institutional data in decision making.

Its growth ambitions have been clearly articulated, particularly in the area of online/blended learning provision, where it has invested significantly and achieved much success to date. IT Sligo is invited to consider the additional risks associated with the proposed roll out of online/blended programmes to the post-Leaving Certificate undergraduate cohort, alongside the benefits of such a proposal. It could consider how learnings from a pilot, could assist in this regard.

In addition, the institute is invited to consider the balance between building up areas of research specialisation and expertise, technological university requirements and pursuit of ambitious online/blended learning growth.

Overall the synergies presented in respect of collaborative work with CUA technological university partners are somewhat disappointing. IT Sligo is invited to consider how greater trust amongst the cluster can be fostered and supported; and how momentum can be maintained at cluster level.

In terms of internationalisation, the strategy centres on the diaspora and growing online provision and the institute has looked to successful models elsewhere. The value of the international brand is worth considering and while there has been significant investment, for example, in online delivery of STEM modules, the institute should remain alert to the probability of competition intensifying.