

**Letterkenny Institute of Technology**  
**Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session - Agenda**  
**Monday 11<sup>th</sup> September 2017**  
**11.00 – 13.30**

**LYIT**

Mr Paul Hannigan, President  
Mr Billy Bennett, Registrar  
Mr. John Andy Bonar, Head of Development  
Mr Henry McGarvey, Secretary/Financial Controller  
Dr Seán Duffy, Head of School of Tourism  
Mr Michael Margey, Head of School of Business  
Mr Denis McFadden, Head of School of Engineering  
Dr Gertie Taggart, Head of School of Science

**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  
Mr Liam Ryan, System Funding

**External**

Mr George Pernsteiner, Expert Panel member  
Dr Trish O’Brien, Process Auditor

**Context**

LYIT’s financial situation has improved significantly this year returning to a break-even position. The improved situation is attributable to the very active work by the institute to increase student numbers (38% increase between 2011/12 and 2016/17) and the increase of 180% in the same period in part-time provision. In addition, the Government has ring fenced €3 million for the Killybegs campus over 4 years.

LYIT is entering a new phase of strategic planning to ensure that a replacement for Strategic Plan 2014-17 is in place early in 2018 – learning captured through this phase of the strategic dialogue process will be an important element in shaping the successor strategic plan.

**Introduction**

The HEA opened by welcoming the LYIT delegation to the meeting and noted that it was the fourth strategic dialogue meeting to date. As their initial observation, the HEA remarked on 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.

LYIT took the opportunity to make a written response, prior to the meeting, setting out areas of clarification.

LYIT has used this process to align with reporting on its strategic plan. The challenge lies in communicating progress via a written document and it is only right that it is balanced with the dialogue process. The institute is very conscious of setting stretch targets and can report that most have been met which represents significant progress.

### **Participation**

LYIT was congratulated on its substantial enrolment growth, particularly at level 8, and at a time when others have not been able to grow that level of provision. It is acknowledged that this growth has underpinned the sustainability of the institute. LYIT explained that it looked at growth planning in terms of a 5 year cycle, moving from 3,000 students approximately (3,053 FT and 320 PT) to 4,000 students currently (3,062 FT and 896 PT) and with further ambitions to grow to 5,000 students (3,500 FT and 1,500 PT). This was a challenge in a region that presents flat demographics. The plan involved looking at each academic school, its current level of offering and then setting challenging targets accordingly. All programmes were to be turned over in that time period, so the aim was not merely to increase the number of programmes, but rather revise the content to ensure that they were up to date. The institute as a whole was driven by the objective to grow its way out of the recession.

It is clear that the majority of the growth has taken place in part-time provision which is underpinned by a new model for part-time and lifelong learning. Processes for approval of minor and special purpose awards have been streamlined. The financial model saw a partial return of income generated to academic schools and a central contribution to overheads, which offered some encouragement to staff involved.

As per the HEA's commentary on the self-evaluation, LYIT is in a fairly unique position as a border institution and is continuing to engage in cross border initiatives. Following a review of the flow of students from the Donegal region to FE and HE in Derry, it was found that large numbers are crossing the border in order to do up to 2 years in FE/HE in Northern Ireland. As a result, LYIT has now entered into formal collaborative agreements with North West Hearing Clinic (NWHC) in Derry, developing four programmes on the basis of a 2+2 model.

On future growth projections, regionally, school leavers have been declining. Currently, 40% of school leavers in Donegal (2,500) come to LYIT. It is worth noting, however, that the demographic trajectory set for Donegal and surrounding hinterland will grow by approximately 50,000 in the coming years and a lot of this growth will take place around Letterkenny. Industry engagement means that people can now see tracks through the college and into employment and parents can see that opportunities for their children to remain in the area.

### **Teaching and Learning**

The increasing connection with local business was discussed and its contribution to programme development, namely with a view to upskilling and providing employment opportunities for graduates. For example, 70% of students were on part-time programmes last year delivered by, for,

or with industry. LYIT has made fundamental changes to how programmes are designed, with a parity of esteem between academic staff and industry in co-designed programmes. There is flexibility in delivery, an element of work-based learning and additionally, teaching is informed by working with industry and staff are very bought-in to that process. There are currently five senior managers with Pramerica undertaking a Masters at LYIT.

The HEA notes that lifelong learning is becoming a crowded space, both nationally and internationally. LYIT discussed the concern that learning is a social process but still see higher education provision moving increasingly online, perhaps with a 70:30 (online: face to face) split. The demand is borne out by the fact that it has been approached by GM in Limerick to train staff.

LYIT states that the higher education sector would benefit from a revised HR framework. LYIT lost a lot of staff in 2012 owing to the employment control framework and cutbacks. As a result, staff had to take on more responsibility and additional hours to compensate. The lack of funding for the sector stems, in part, from the way in which higher education is seen as a cost, not an investment. Outcomes and opportunities created should be considered. For example, LYIT has the highest economic impact in the country, graduate retention is significant (50% of students come back for further study and 50% are in employment in the correct sector of employment) and LYIT is one of the biggest employers in the region.

## **Research**

As per the self-evaluation, the core of LYIT's research strategy was agreed by Academic Council in September 2016. In terms of research ambitions, the institute notes that it can take a generation to grow research and the alternative is to buy it in, or collaborate. Upon reflection of its position in the landscape, the institute considers itself to look to the West-North West cluster and also to Northern Ireland. It is currently involved in a UU-QUB lead research grant worth €30m, of which, €4.7m is coming into LYIT. The institute has also developed a dynamic around data analytics, involving UU and incorporating areas such as wireless sensors, renewables and advanced manufacturing. The challenge is to create a research office internally to manage this as it grows in a distributed fashion.

Collaborative research programmes such as INTERREG are important in building capacity in the research space, but LYIT is clear that collaboration has to be financially viable in terms of overheads. The institute considers itself to run a lean organisation and are able to reinvest some overhead in capacity building. It is worth noting that the current tranche of funding under INTERREG is ring-fenced, but post this round, funding is not certain.

With respect to the ROI, NUIG is the university to which LYIT looks. In terms of developments in relation to structured PhDs, the institute continues to work with cluster partners and has discussed with Deans of Graduate Studies a proposed a model for cluster collaboration whereby students would do a 2 year research masters with two supervisors from different institutions, the arrangements for which could be reversed for PhD level. This is a model that could extend to the cross-border cluster. In the context of balancing scale/capacity with responsiveness, the institute is clear that it cannot do everything and it has to make choices across research, engagement, all-island agenda, student number growth etc. LYIT remains conscious of its limitations and obligations and tries to balance those. Capacity and physical resources often present as difficulties. Collaborations with UU and QUB remain important, notably as they are located only a short distance away and they are already involved in the co-supervision of PhD students, and Brexit will see a return to a focus on the border.

### **Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA)**

The partners (LYIT, GMIT and IT Sligo) have been working on the CUA proposal since 2012. The consortium considers that there is real value in the technological university brand. The partners also consider that they can make a significant contribution to the region by making flexible learning options available and bringing in mature students. Work builds on a shared history of projects and working together e.g. Lónra. Industrial action on the part of TUI members ceased in May 2017, so work has since progressed.

### **Killybegs campus**

The Killybegs campus is operating under a revised financial plan and LYIT can report that the institute as a whole broke even in 2015/16.

### **Internationalisation**

As set out in the self-evaluation, there is an international strategy with regional educational partners, but achieving the compact targets for fee paying students has proven challenging. LYIT reports that it has traditionally had a very low number of fee-paying non-EU students, at 1, 2, 0 respectively over the last three years. It has since grown from single digits to 50+ fee paying international students, focussing on key markets. A dedicated resource has been assigned to do this and the cost was recovered within a year.

### **Cluster**

On the cluster, they have put in place a system of rotating chairs. LYIT has led on a few cluster pieces and considers itself to be a full player in the cluster. LYIT asked that the reflections document be updated to reflect this. At presidential level, there is a steering group and there are two nominees at the operational group level. The aim is to share proposals for new programmes and the institute has been involved in several projects submitted to the National Forum for Teaching and Learning. LYIT notes that there is some confusion in terms of trying to reconcile the work of the clusters and the regional skills fora.

In terms of what has happened that could not have happened outside of the cluster, LYIT notes that shared academic planning has led to sharing proposals for new programmes in order to avoid duplication. Routes of progression within the institution have been mapped and students made aware of same. The HEA set out high level objectives for clusters around pathways and academic planning and LYIT considers that it has achieved those. The mechanism for further engagement is via a project manager; it was necessary to reduce to this level and manage within resources.

The HEA noted that the new system performance framework is due imminently and that it will not look very different to the current iteration and that this should facilitate planning. It is likely that governance and accountability will feature more strongly in the new version.

### **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.

LYIT is congratulated on significant enrolment growth. It has systematically redeveloped academic programmes, shown a responsiveness to industry needs and successfully grown its part-time and lifelong learning provision, which is no mean feat given its location. The institution has ambitious plans for further growth which are both credible and vital to underpin the future sustainability of the institute.

The primary role of LYIT as a provider of undergraduate education in the North West is acknowledged. Additionally, the institute discussed some research and knowledge transfer initiatives underway with national and cross-border partners. The latter will come under increased strain in the context of Brexit. LYIT is invited to consider a re-focussing of research strategy, setting out where the institute is headed in the research space, having regard to institutional capacity, what is time and stage appropriate, what is aligned with the cluster and the structured PhD programme with NUIG, and having regard to the need to meet TU criteria, etc. Equally, LYIT is invited to consider how greater trust amongst the cluster can be fostered and supported; and how momentum can be ensured both at TU and cluster level.