Limerick Institute of Technology

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 4

HEI Self Evaluation Report

May 16, 2017

Limerick Institute of Technology Self-

Evaluation Report May 2017

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Introduction

In addressing the outcomes of the Compact it is critical that those outcomes are put in context and that it is recognised that the current funding situation, for LIT and the wider sector, is highly problematic and unsustainable. What is also becoming increasingly problematic are the 'opportunity costs' that LIT, and again the wider sector, are forced to incur. The purpose of the Compact was to allow the institutes to be more strategic in their orientation and to link to nationally agreed goals. The capacity of individual institutions to act more strategically and take a longer term outlook has been curtailed by their existence, literally, on the edge of sustainability. This is happening at a time when the sector must expand to meet inevitable student growth needs in the near future. It is essential therefore that the next round of strategic dialogue/compact discussions embeds that strategic imperative for growth at its centre and ensures that a fit for purpose technological sector re-emerges with the ability to have a transformational impact on regional development. To that end LIT has just embarked on a new strategic planning process, endorsed by Governing Body, which will greatly inform our response to the next round of performance funding. An extensive consultation process with our internal and external stakeholders is currently underway and LIT looks forward to engaging with the HEA proactively in that process.

In the context of the 2016 Compact return and the strategic imperatives thereof it is important to reference the HEA report on the 'Financial Sustainability of the IoT sector' which, for the first time, puts in a stark way the current crisis within the IoT sector. But in a wider sense we need to reflect that, since the economic crisis of the late 2000s, the funding of higher education has sharply and consistently declined. When the overall funding of the system is disaggregated however, it is apparent that the funding decline has been particularly acute for the Institute of Technology sub-sector. This can perhaps be best demonstrated by the following graphic which shows the total recurrent funding per student in IoTs falling below universities/colleges in 2007/8, and continuing in recent years on a downward trajectory. As is evident from this graphic, the total funding per student within the IoT sector has declined by 25% compared to 20% in the university/colleges sector. Had the total funding per student been maintained at 2008 levels, IoT sector income in 2015 would have been €232m more than is the case today.

For the Institutes between 2008-2015:

- The State grant fell by 35%
- Student numbers grew by 30%
- Core Staffing levels fell by 12%
- Total recurrent income per student contracted by 25%
- Total state income per student contracted by 50%

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- The Academic Staff/Student ratio increased from 12.9 to 17.1 – an increase of 33%.[1]

Total Recurrent Funding per Student[2]
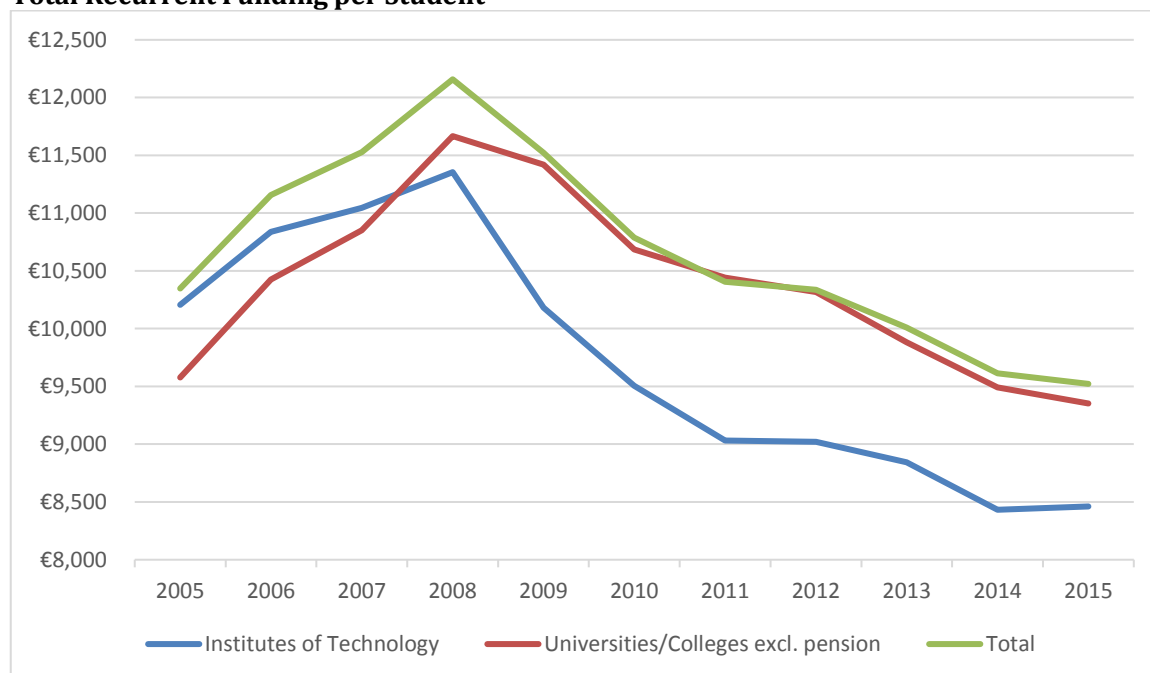
Whilst we can argue as to the absolute figures presented, the overarching conclusion is that the 3rd level sector is in crisis and that crisis is more acutely felt in the IoT sector than in the university sector. The welcome HEA review of the RGAM model will hopefully help correct this systematic anomaly to an extent but it will not necessarily lead to more funding of the sector as a whole. The lack of any borrowing capacity is also curtailing the IoT sectors ability to respond to students needs and growth projections.

There is also the frustration of knowing how to fix certain perennial problems that exist (whether this be access/retention, expansion of STEM activities and critical investment in educational infrastructure) but not being in a position to do so. We have been successful in raising expectations within underrepresented groups however we have not always been in a position to give such groups the necessary supports they need in order to realize their potential.

However to the case in point, this Compact Review clearly demonstrates that, within the context defined above, LIT continues to perform to the highest levels as a provider of education, skills, research, and innovation; as a partner and leader at regional level, as a go-to organisation for CPD and career opportunities; as an exemplar for industry interaction; as a growing centre for international students and, despite the issues mentioned above, a place greatly regarded by its myriad of stakeholders locally, nationally and internationally.

The reader may navigate through the submission as follows:

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[1]   Data supplied by the HEA.
[2]   Data supplied by the HEA.

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- We have included one page of narrative, entitled "Reflections", for each domain (except in the case of domains 4 and 5 which are combined). These reflections highlight some key points reported in the spreadsheet, but they focus mainly on areas where LIT is struggling to meet targets. Explanations and action plans are presented, taking account of any external factors that may hamper performance.

- These reflections also identify independent benchmarks that may have been used, many of which are international.

- The complete spreadsheet with detailed reviews of performance for each individual KPI.

- Please note that the first tab page of the spreadsheet is a summary overview of KPIs with colour coding, to allow the reader to clearly see those areas where LIT excels despite the obvious constraints as well as those areas where potential problems exist.

- A glossary with definitions as developed by Deloitte can be found at the back.

Reflections 1 – Regional Cluster

The Mid-West region is no longer characterised by a fragmentation of agencies, high unemployment and areas of social deprivation. Several steps have been taken, Limerick City and County Councils have been merged, Shannon Development and its functions have been absorbed by mainstream agencies (Shannon Airport, Enterprise Ireland, Failte Ireland). In addition, the Limerick 2030 Plan and Limerick Charter- Commitment to Cohesion and Convergence have been signed, a key feature of which is to ensure that the three HEIs have a joint presence in the city centre. The Mid-West Regional Skills Forum works closely with the Limerick for Engineering and the Limerick for IT collaboration initiatives.

Positive developments include the fact that Limerick was designated as the national City of Culture in 2014 and the re-development of Limerick city centre has commencing. Major jobs announcements continue to be made by IDA-supported companies, with LIT meeting with IDA itineraries on a weekly basis. The live register figures for Limerick have dropped below 12,000, from a high point of 21,160 in 2011, with month on month progress continuing.

A comprehensive mapping exercise across the Shannon Consortium has been completed, academic calendars are being synchronized and a joint BA between UL and MIC is offered on the CAO this year for the first time. The mapping of entry routes and enrolments from ETBs/PLCs into the three institutions is also complete, with all three partner institutions working together on a joint access offering for entry to HE. The agreed plan for the National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE) is progressing, encompassing all primary and secondary initial teacher education at MIC and UL. Approval has been granted for the appointment of a Director for NISE.

MOU-related achievements include the Federated Limerick Graduate School now being fully operational, with LIT having undergone a successful Research Review in 2015 for awarding of UL doctorate degrees under common regulations and doctoral training. LIT is delivering enterprise development programmes across multiple sites. All 3 HEIs are significantly contributing to the Limerick regeneration agenda. There is a strong shared services history and a track record of joint procurement yielding substantial savings. In terms of promoting the region, joint international marketing by the three partner institutions is underway. At the operational level collaboration by staff in all areas across institutions is developing both across education programmes and a range of other service areas.

See also detailed reports in Shannon Consortium Response to HEA Call for Submissions for Regional Clusters Funding Support and LIT Update on the Performance Compact March 2016.

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Reflections 2- Participation, Equal Access and Lifelong Learning

LIT is tracking its Compact targets at the upper end of SEG enrolments for matures and SWD, with very high number of students on SUSI. Space restrictions flagged over recent years are impacting LIT's capacity to accommodate growing CAO demand. Growth in undergraduate student numbers is on track but becoming more difficult to accommodate. Increased pressure on LIT support services has been reported again this year as students continue to struggle to finance their education. LIT's retention continues to suffer from the combination of campus environment and limited finance to support weaker students. For financial reasons, LIT has not been able to invest in a Student Retention System, a Student Placement Support System or a 'One Stop Shop' CRM system to respond, track and deliver student services. The loss to LIT students is:

➢ The delivery of student services across all campuses in a manner that is seamless, meaningful, and integrated with the academic mission of the institution

➢ Enhancing the individual student experience by providing professional services which support the holistic development of the person, thereby enabling all students to achieve their full academic and personal potential

➢ Engaging students with on-target messaging and personalised communication

➢ Provision of a platform which also allows the Institute to achieve measurable results in the form of an enhanced student experience, higher graduation rates, enduring constituent relationships, and reduced operational costs.

➢ The integration of all of the Institutes resources in the education and preparation of the whole student

➢ Equality and fairness, with inclusive provisions for an increasingly non- traditional student population.

LIT is the first institute in Ireland to implement a seamless transition from Further Education to Higher Education through an MOU with the Limerick and Clare ETB that leverages the close relationships between FE and HE. Having studied the Community College system of progression in the USA, LIT has moved away from discipline based links and progressed to a model of progression around core competency and transition readiness for HE. The HEA funded Threshold Concepts project supported our work with Limerick College of FE to bring about this changed approach. Flexible Learning growth remains a concern in 2016. because the planned recovery of Flexible Learning numbers was impacted by industrial action in September 2015. However, LIT is redeveloping its model of FL to address this area and to strive to progress our stretch target.

Reflections 3 – Teaching, Learning and Quality of the Student Experience

LIT uses independent benchmarks (ISSE, EU Graduate Barometer) of comparative performance nationally and internationally. In nearly all 14 categories in the ISSE LIT has outperformed the sector and national averages. Preparation for the workplace is one area being strengthened through the systematic introduction of a 3rd year work placement and increased work placements across all programmes. Active learning is already embedded as a key learning strategy and a distinctive feature of LIT's learning environment.

Student retention in First Year was targeted in the Compact by LIT and started to achieve the improvement sought. However, continuing cutbacks in support services and lack of investment in the learning environment are severely impacting student retention and undermining the institutes efforts. This measure disimproved in 2016 to 75.6% from 75.8% in 2014 and 78.6% in 2015. During the academic years 2012–2015 we have monitored first year student withdrawal through exit application forms. Each student is also contacted by telephone for follow-up. This methodology has helped LIT to identify personal, financial, course choice, health and employment opportunities as the main reasons why 144 students withdrew in 2013 and why 162 students withdrew in 2014. LIT addressed these issues in 2015 by providing scholarships or payment plans for socio-economically disadvantaged students and by improving programme information and student induction. Reported financial factors affecting the withdrawal of students have reduced from 14% to 6% across the past three years with those leaving to take up employment rising from 5% to 8%. LIT has commissioned an external audit of student retention in 2017 to reassess what is needed to support the targets set in the Compact. A student retention officer will be appointed and a student attendance monitoring system will be fully deployed in 2017.

The LIT Learner Retention Strategy has the rolling plan below in place to achieve the Performance Compact targets. This rolling plan is under review as part of the external audit of student retention.

Years 1-2:

1. Provide accurate and impartial pre-entry information, advice and guidance including accurate, honest marketing and publicity in a modern format.
2. Implement an institute-wide attendance monitoring system.
3. Commit appropriate and timely funding to the Student Support Services in recognition of their key supporting role in the retention of students.

Year 2:

4. Formally review student registration systems.
5. Formally review all LIT induction programmes and student support services, based on annual student feedback of induction programmes, student support services, retention, completion, progression and withdrawal information.
6. Formally review the Learning Support Unit's provision of flexible, responsive and accessible systems of learner support including study skills and English language support (for international students), based on annual student feedback of its services.

Years 4-5:

7. Provide staff development, and support staff CPD opportunities, in teaching, learning and assessment.
8. Provide well-resourced, high quality learning spaces that also address lifestyle and/or social requirements of students during their time at LIT.
9. As part of programmatic review, review and report on student retention initiatives undertaken with the Faculty/School, Department and Programme level, including how proposed curriculum, assessment and delivery changes will impact on student retention and the diverse needs of learners.

Reflections: Domains 4 and 5 – Research, Enterprise and Engagement

This appendix combines commentary on domains 5.4 and 5.5 and focuses on actions towards the achievement of objectives and targets as set out in the Compact. There were a number of positive developments in 2016 including successfully securing funding for TTSI3, New Frontiers and a number of research and development projects, nationally and internationally. This includes the "Superhomes 2.0" project in partnership with regional (Tipperary Energy Agency) and national stakeholders (ESB and ESB Networks), with a total project value of €660,000 and focused on Air Sourced Heat Pumps, that will dramatically improve the efficiency of retrofitted buildings in Ireland.

However, there continues to be two major obstacles that may hamper achievement of these targets:

1. Inequity of funding: even though our postgraduate research students are sharing facilities with and are covered by the same regulations as their counterparts in the Shannon Consortium, there is no provision in the RGAM for the IOTs to fund their research.

2. LIT has serious infrastructure deficits across all its campus operations. There are examples of valuable research equipment being housed in totally unsuitable spaces, posing risks to the researchers and their industry partners. This leads to suboptimal results and a reduced capacity to attract new projects.

   For this reason, we have labelled objective 5.4.1 as "orange", in spite of the impressive progress made already and the strong commitment from the team. Their commitment is outlined below across the three areas of Research, Enterprise and Engagement and it incorporates a range of external benchmarks.

LIT continues to make its facilities, campuses and partner facilities and key resources available to organise and host events of regional and national importance and impact. These include the launch of the Regional Action Plan for Jobs, The Startup Gathering, The Global Start up Nations Summit, International Cluster Conference, Young Innovators, Foroige Leadership for Life, Foroige Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship, Foroige Techspace, CoderDojo, Junior Achievement Ireland, ICT in Education, National Conferences in Enterprise/Sport/Education, Sporting Events etc. Such events are also often actively supported by LIT staff (academic and non-academic) and promoted via our communication channels.

A. _Research_ - _Key Actions:_

- LIT continues to make awards for Research with Delegated Authority at Level 9, under the IoTI Sectoral Protocol, as approved by QQI in 2015.
- In line with the National Higher Education Strategy and our MOU with the University of Limerick and Mary Immaculate College, LIT has taken a coordinated regional approach and collaboration on structured PhDs through the Federated Limerick Graduate School. UL is now the awarding body for research programmes at level 10 (students remain LIT-registered). This arrangement build on areas where LIT already holds delegated authority at level 9 and level 10. LIT's first level 10 awardees under this arrangement will graduate in 2017.
- Through the Federated Limerick Graduate School, LIT and our partners are finalising a Structured PhD in the Built Environment & Society.
- The provision of generic postgraduate research and supervisor research training programmes across the Federated Limerick Graduate School was implemented.
- LIT continues to support each research Centre and Group to produce its own Strategic Plan appropriate to its own stage of development and growth to enable them to build the scale and capacity to compete meaningfully not only in Ireland but Europe and with existing Universities (Ref. Shannon ABC Strategic Plan); and work to Internationalise these centres;
- We have aligned our Graduate Studies and Research Bursaries Call to Centres and Groups providing Scholarships to each centre and group;
- We have been successfully funded under TTSI3 for the next five years to support meeting our knowledge transfer research metrics in future HEA Compacts;
- LIT face very significant challenges in respect of the space deficit for our growing research activity which need to be addressed. The addition of further campus locations will help to partially alleviate this problem but there is still a significant need for infrastructural and capital development funding to support Research, Development and Innovation.

B. _Enterprise_ - _Key Actions:_

- LIT was awarded €691,900 to run New Frontiers over 5 years. New Frontiers is the Enterprise Ireland national entrepreneur development programme for high potential startups run locally at LITs Hartnett Enterprise Acceleration Centre on campus at LIT Moylish; One of the client companies on the 2016/2017 New Frontiers cohort is an LIT spin-out.
- LIT supports the Local Enterprise Offices in each county as well as Enterprise Ireland in the development of indigenous exporting industries and the IDA in the pursuit of foreign direct investment;

- LIT engages and supports a variety of other agencies in the region such as Paul Partnership, Ballyhoura Development, Innovate Limerick, ISAX and the Chambers of Commerce in Limerick, Clare and Tipperary including a partnership with Limerick Chamber of Commerce in driving Startup activity in Limerick City Centre and their annual regional business awards and Thurles Chamber in the Thurles Chamber Enterprise Centre and Clonmel and Tipperary Chamber of Commerce in Questum in Clonmel;

- LIT partners and collaborates with the County and City Councils in Limerick, Tipperary and Clare to help drive innovation and enterprise activity in each county.

- Pat Breen, Minister of State for Employment and Small Business officially opened Questum, an LIT research and innovation centre in Clonmel in partnership with Tipperary County Council. Nine companies occupied the centre by the end of the reporting period. The Tipperary County Chamber of Commerce also took office space in Questum and partnered with LIT in supporting businesses in the centre.

- LIT is implementing the National Strategy for Higher Education-Enterprise Engagement published by the HEA;

- We endeavor to meet our knowledge transfer research metrics agreed in our HEA Compacts;

- Enterprise Ladder: We continue to support the promoters of New Businesses through our enterprise centres and international linkages in line with The National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship in Ireland and the Research and Innovation Strategy for the Mid-West Region of Ireland and for the South-East, the work of the Entrepreneurship Forum, Innovate Limerick and Start-Up Ireland as part of the Action Plan for Jobs (APJ);

- We actively encourage enterprise clients to engage in Research and Development projects with LIT;

- LIT has 2 seed funds - the Enterprise Ladder Fund and the Ryan Entrepreneurship Fund for Tipperary to support those companies we work with during the very early stages of their start-up journey.

- We measure the impact of our Research, Enterprise and Development centres on job creation, job sustainability and economic impact and report on this annually; We will support Student, Local and National Entrepreneurship competitions. In 2016 LIT hosted the Enterprise Ireland All Island Student Entrepreneur Awards after LIT won the previous year as well as winning the Innovation and Overall Win with Engineers Ireland that year.

C. _Engagement_ - _Key Actions:_

- We are developing a Public Engagement Strategy for LIT and a new position of Development and Public Engagement Manager has been created to lead this activity within the Institute. This Strategy will be in place by end of 2017 and include specific metrics to measure the scale of engagement across the Institute.

- The Development Unit within LITs Research, Enterprise and Development section of LIT has a particular focus on working with partners, in the public and private sector, to ensure that the knowledge and information which supports regional development is shared through appropriate communications channels. This includes the use of case studies, presentations at conferences, use of LIT Social Media and relevant communication channels.

- We have engaged and supported a number of local, regional, national and international partners in the fields of social enterprise, sustainable agriculture, sustainable energy, youth engagement and rural development to secure significant funding via Erasmus Plus and Interreg Programmes to implement capacity building and support activities in the region. These projects involve extensive networking and communication with a wide range of stakeholders in the region.

- The Development Unit continues to be at the forefront of development and applied research activities relevant to the sustainable building sector and have lead the National projects focus on Build Up Skills and QualiBuild. These projects have been recognised at a European level as been best in class and work is on-going to secured further funding to transfer this knowledge and experience across Europe.

- Within Limerick we have partnered and continue to engage extensively on activities related to the following
  - Limerick Chamber
  - Innovate Limerick
  - Limerick Age Friendly City
  - Limerick 2030 Economic and Spatial Development Plan;

- LIT is represented on relevant Local Community Development Committees and Local Economic and Community Plans and contributes actively in relation to programme development, R&D opportunities and development of strategic partnerships e.g. Tipperary Youth Work Ireland, The Learning hub, Limerick Civic Trust.

- LIT is represented and engages actively in the Regional Skills Fora (Mid-West and South-East) and also the Action Plan for Jobs in these regions. This representation is at a senior management level in many cases, emphasizing the engagement with key stakeholders

- A dedicated resource supports the engagement with SMEs to develop and increase our activity in relation to Innovation Vouchers. This successful structure has ensured that connections between SMEs and Researchers within LIT are fostered, developed and supported. The LIT Innovation Voucher engages actively with SMEs, relevant representative bodies and other stakeholders to ensure that SMEs are aware of the supports which LIT can provide in this regard.

- We continue to enhance how we communicate and disseminate the activities within Research, Development and Innovation through journal publications, conference proceedings, websites and newsletters, e.g. RED/RDI Newsletter, Shannon ABC Newsletter; LIT Website; LIT Social Media Channels

- We report annually to Governing Body in the HEA Compact Format.

Reflections 5 – Enhanced Internationalisation

Significant ground has been made up by LIT in international student recruitment and transnational education, where targets were extremely ambitious compared with the baseline metrics and they have been achieved. We have also achieved our target for outgoing student mobility in terms of work placements. However, we have not met our target for study abroad (and the resulting metric of rebalancing incoming vs outgoing Erasmus students). The background to this underperformance and an action plan is set out below.

The LIT student profile is heavily weighted toward technological disciplines, and we also have one of the highest proportions of mature students. LITs programme design takes strong account of industry and active learning e.g. yearlong projects and professional body requirements. All of these are strengths which contribute to positive metrics elsewhere in this report. However, they tend to mitigate against students taking a period of study abroad. While there would be aspiration and goodwill toward international experience among many academic staff and students, the combined weight of the above factors leaves little practical room for this goodwill to crystallise into actual experience. Other obstacles include the inadequacy of Erasmus funding for the socio-economic group making up two-thirds of our student body.

Agreed measures to improve performance in 2016

1. Many EU institutions now offer programmes in English. LIT will seek out such institutions with relevant programme portfolios, and review our existing MOUs.
2. We have streamlined our academic calendar from 2015 and many more LIT programmes are semesterised, with exams taking place before Christmas.
3. LIT International Office is actively promoting a period abroad with our staff and students for the coming year.
4. Programmatic and course reviews are requested to include and promote international study where possible in programmes and this will be included in QA frameworks.
5. LIT supports opportunities for academic staff to build links with international partners which build confidence and facilitate outbound exchanges.

Reflections 6 – Institutional Consolidation

The metrics in the LIT compact in relation to the Institutional Consolidation domain focused mainly on the area of sustainability and viability, which are largely on track within LIT. The report on the IOT sector overall financial position was an excellent review which brought the issue into sharp focus. The report and the LIT response to it has been a particular focus for our governing body.

However, we have raised some caveats in our review since international best practice (e.g. HEFCE UK) would set higher benchmarks for reserves and non-pay ratios which would enable LIT to provide for necessary building fabric maintenance funding, capital investment and educational equipment replacements. We believe that this is a systemic issue for the sector as a whole which was reflected in the results of the Financial Sustainability report produced in 2016. The ongoing review of the funding model has provided an important opportunity for some of these systemic issues to be raised and addressed.

As part of the development of our overall plans LIT has completed extensive benchmarking nationally and internationally (UK, Denmark) to inform our approaches to a variety of issues. The continued lack of capital investment and the continued recurrent underfunding is impacting significantly on the student experience and on the institute's capacity to respond to industry, employment and regionalobjectives.

There is one metric where targets have not been achieved for the second year running, namely LIT's unit cost relative to the sector (highlighted as red). This calculation compares the LIT cost per undergraduate student with the corresponding national average cost. LIT's underperformance is largely related to the effect of the higher cost per student on the LIT Tipperary campuses and its effect on the overall institute metric. This was highlighted in the 2015 return and remains an issue in 2016, even though some positive progress has been made in 2016. it is clear that the combination of slower than expected growth in student numbers combined with a relatively fixed cost base has hampered this delivery of this objective. The launch of new programs on the Thurles campus in September 2016 in the area of Social Care and Early Childhood Studies will assist with this metric as well as the management of small cohort size issues across the Institute.

Context of 2016 Performance:

The overall funding in the IoT sector need to be addressed as a matter of urgency, both in terms of recurrent (RGAM) and capital/Infrastructural Investment. The current level of underfunding in LIT is €1,000 per student in LIT Limerick. The underfunding or unavoidable pays costs (arising from the implementation of the national pay agreements) in the 2017 budget is a significant risk to the performance funding metrics as well the overall Institutional sustainability discussion. This underfunding of the reinstated flex hour must be addressed, if it is repeated for the potential remaining flex hour in 2018 it will undermine Institutions significantly and further erode key services.

It has been clear for a number of years that substantial capital investment is needed to improve the student experience in terms of infra-structure, facilities and campus development. LIT's physical space constraints are now the biggest limiting factor to student number growth, particularly in areas where there is proven industry demand as set out in a number of surveys and regional employment statistics.

In that regard the call by the HEA in 2016 for proposals for capital Investment project which will improve both the quality and quantity of space and educational Infrastructure is very welcome and we look forward to the dialogue process which will follow the submission by LIT of a detailed implementation plan to 2021 of key infrastructural projects