

**Limerick Institute of Technology  
Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session  
Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2017  
14.00 – 16.30**

**LIT**

Professor Vincent Cunnane, President

Mr Jimmy Browne, Vice President, Corporate Services and Capital Development

Dr Liam Brown, Vice President, Research, Development and Innovation

Mr Terry Twomey, Vice President, Academic Affairs and Registrar

Ms Marian Duggan, Joint Head of Faculty of Business & Humanities

Mr Donnacha McNamara, Joint Head of Faculty of Business & Humanities

Mr Paschal Meehan, Joint Head of Faculty of Applied Science, Engineering and Technology (ASET)

Mr Barry Coleman, Data Analytics & Contracts Manager

**HEA**

Dr Graham Love, CEO

Mr Fergal Costello, Head of System Development and Performance Management

Mr Tim Conlon, Senior Manager, System Development and Performance Management

Ms Valerie Harvey, Head of Performance Evaluation

Ms Sarah Fitzgerald, Higher Executive Officer

Mr Mark Kirwan, Executive Officer

**External**

Professor Catherine Harper, Expert Panel member

Dr Richard Thorn, Expert Panel member

Dr Trish O'Brien, Process Auditor

**Context**

The institute has demonstrated clear commitment and aptitude to the process with strong self-reflection of performance throughout the duration of the compact. The institute has a high level of regional engagement across both civic society and industry. The institute has continued to maintain a positive budgetary position but has highlighted the impact funding constraints are having on performance. The institute has demonstrated strong performance in areas such as engagement and access and has successfully leveraged collaboration with the Shannon Consortium to its benefit and that of the region.

**Introduction**

The HEA opened by welcoming the LIT 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.

LIT reported the process to be a positive engagement for the institution. However, the context of an underfunded higher education system cannot be overlooked when setting and evaluating institutions' compact performance. The institution emphasised the gravity of the situation by highlighting that if its enrolment numbers decrease by only sixty students, it could experience financial difficulty. The majority of compact targets set by the institute were achieved and it is responding to all aspects of its regional needs. The lack of a borrowing framework is frustrating for the IoT sector as it is inhibiting institutions' development and is impacting on student experience. LIT emphasised that it's physical capacity and capital activity has reached a breaking point and it can't continue to function at its current level without additional capital investment. The HEA needs to be an advocate for the sector and articulate the issues which are impacting on institutions.

### **Strategic Planning**

LIT explained it operates a multi-campus across a number of different counties. At its Tipperary campuses (Clonmel & Thurles), LIT has managed to increase enrolments. The institute is developing niche programmes (e.g. strength & conditioning and health sciences) to support student numbers in Thurles, meet demand in the region and make the campus sustainable. The institute has reviewed its curriculum and has removed programmes which it views as unsustainable or provided by other institutions in the region. For example, the institute removed its accountancy offering as others offer similar programmes. There are also enterprise centres aligned with both the Clonmel and Thurles campuses. These centres function as regional resources and collaborate with stakeholders such as County Councils to assist with attracting people and industry to the region.

The HEA queried the new strategic planning process and how the institute combines and addresses different complexities. LIT explained that Limerick is a complex city with an integrated education system where people work together. LIT operates within the Shannon Consortium and the three new institutional presidents are committed to growing the 'Shannon' model to meet the needs of the region. The current model is being reviewed to enhance its governance function, such as how it might be developed into a legal entity with an independent chair. LIT explained it engages with external stakeholders to assist with prioritising ambitions and ensure the institute's plans are meeting the needs of the region. For example, the institute takes a leading role with both 'Limerick for IT' and 'Limerick for Engineering' to identify the attributes industry requires in graduates. LIT incorporate these findings when developing bespoke programmes for industry. Along with flexible programme delivery, this will be a key component of programme development in the coming years and will aid the institute with differentiating its programme offerings from other higher education providers. As part of its new strategic plan, the institute is mindful that it must prioritise the areas it wishes to develop as some areas of provision will evolve more slowly while others will be prioritised. The institute has adopted a vertical and horizontal approach to its strategic planning, whereby the horizontal planning focuses on institute wide activities such as the student experience and staff development and the latter focuses on the high-level strategic goals for the institution.

The institute has had no major capital developments since 2004 but the institute has acquired a 35-acre site which is beginning to raise staff expectations on how the institute might grow and develop. Furthermore, LIT is exploring the possibility of drawing down funding under a Public Private Partnership collaboration to replace the eighteen prefabs currently utilised as teaching space.

## **Student Enrolment**

While LIT feels its ability to grow is limited by a number of factors including campus capacity, the Institute has managed to marginally increase total enrolments (including the proportion of students in the critical STEM area) over the particularly challenging years covered by this Compact Agreement. Industry still requires Level 6/7 programmes but there is a higher demand from students for Level 8 programmes. The institute has successfully grown arts and humanities enrolments, particularly given the strong reputation of the Limerick School of Art and Design and has introduced new programmes in areas where it has identified demand, such as in social care.

LIT stated that retention is an ongoing challenge for the institute. 68% of the institute's undergraduate students are in receipt of a maintenance grant. The majority of these students require supports which are very resource intensive. As per its performance compact self-evaluation, LIT highlighted that its IT-based retention support systems require investment and this lack of investment has impacted on vulnerable students. However, this is not the only solution as this cohort of students also require additional tutorials, staff support and peer mentoring, all of which come at a cost. The institute has identified a system which would be suitable but currently does not have the funding to purchase it. In the interim, it has developed its own in-house system and has recruited a retention officer. LIT introduced an 'app' for its international student cohort to gain some feedback on their experience and reported the feedback has generally been positive. The institute has put in place a retention strategy but stressed that 'access' needs to be tied to retention as they are both intimately related.

LIT outlined that it is going to redevelop its flexible and blended learning model. The institute views this approach as a direct action to assist with counteracting the decline in student numbers on some of its programmes. For example, in engineering, the institute is providing some of its programmes fully online, but for other programmes, it is adopting a blended learning approach. This will complement the institute's ability to deliver programmes flexibly while meet industry needs. Equally, there is a disparity between the employer demand and student demand for engineering in the Limerick region. To meet this variance in demand, the institute is concurrently developing its apprenticeship provision.

LIT highlighted that industry requires Level 6/7 graduates but the increase in student demand is at Level 8. The institute confirmed it will continue its commitment to its Level 6/7 provision but opportunities from these programmes need to be better promoted nationally.

## **Research**

Through its national centre for bio-technology, LIT is proposing to increase its STEM research provision. The institute receives funding through Enterprise Ireland's Technology Gateway fund to undertake research in this area. Furthermore, LIT highlighted that it proposes to develop its manufacturing research under the banner of digital manufacturing. The Limerick School of Art and Design has also been successful in winning research funding along with the institute's Social Science and Humanities Department, under the banner of their collective research centre which is undertaking research on national issues such as migration.

LIT acknowledged that the number of its staff undertaking PhDs has reduced, but the institute has put in place a strategy to address this. LIT also clarified its reported number of staff undertaking a PhD was skewed as it includes non-academic staff. The institute highlighted the difficulty its staff members have in undertaking research as they are contracted for between 17 and 19 hours of teaching per week. LIT has introduced a facility to provide staff with the opportunity to buy-out some of their teaching time and this should lead to increased research activity. LIT is encouraging all staff members who complete a PhD to be reflective of their research experience and to encourage other staff to engage in research. LIT emphasised that changes to the higher education funding model will assist

research development as a core activity within the institutes of technology. Overall, the institute's provision is centred on delivering programmes at Levels 6-9 on the National Framework for Qualifications, but the institute is collaborating with other partners in the Shannon Consortium to develop further offerings at Level 10.

### **Regional Cluster**

As per the HEA's commentary on the self-evaluation, the Shannon region has made substantial progress with tackling unemployment and social deprivation and the Shannon Consortium has played a central part in that progress. LIT reiterated that the three new presidents are committed to the project and hopefully this commitment will enable the consortium to develop and continue to serve the needs of its region.

LIT suggested that any new cluster configuration should be based on the following principles: -

- There should be no hierarchical level of esteem as each institution provides a unique contribution to the cluster.
- Specialisation or sharing programme provision does not work well as some students will not travel to attend a higher education institution. Specialisation should be a core element encapsulated with the delivery of each institution's programme. Where possible there should be complimentary provision. For example, both UL and LIT provide a programme in Mechanical Engineering but the offering is very different. UL's offering is much more theory focused while conversely, LIT's offering has a skills and industry readiness focus.
- Each region should be treated separately and have the freedom to develop to meet and serve its particular regional requirements. If the Shannon Consortium is to be successful in the future it will require additional funding and support for additional staff.

### **Capital Funding / Borrowing Framework**

The lack of capital funding and development is a major issue for the institute. LIT stated it requires at least an additional €1,000 per student to develop its infrastructure. LIT is hopeful the revised funding model will take account of the capital position of the majority of the institutions. The HEA acknowledged the challenges the sector has faced in funding capital development and will continue to advocate on behalf of the sector, however, it does not envisage a large increase in funding levels and institutions should continue to operate within their budget and resources.

LIT confirmed it would be open to availing of a borrowing framework if it was available to the institutes of technology. The borrowing framework would enable the institute to grow and develop and help raise staff ambitions. The institute has identified projects and land which could be developed, particularly to increase student accommodation which generates additional revenue which could be used to service its borrowings.

### **Links with Further Education**

LIT reported it has a strong relationship with the two Education Training Boards in the region. These relationships enable the institute to develop transitional links, where both Leaving Certificate and further education students can progress seamlessly on to higher education programmes. As per its performance compact self-evaluation, the institute has moved away from discipline-based links and progressed to a model of progression around core competency and transition readiness for higher education.

## **Technological University Process**

The institute confirmed that for the next five years it proposes to continue to develop the institute to meet regional needs and will not seek to be a member of consortia pursuing TU designation. However, after this period, the institute will seek to partner appropriately if it is beneficial for LIT and the region more generally. The institute confirmed it does not currently propose to seek TU designation as a standalone institution. LIT explained it will continue to serve the needs of its region and it is committed to meeting the TU metrics as part of that mission.

## **Next steps**

The HEA intends to circulate a minute of the meeting in late October. HEIs will have the opportunity to come back 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.

LIT is working to develop a new strategic plan and has committed to high levels of ambition. The institute has performed well in delivering on its compact to date and is encouraged to continue to carve out the niche it has identified for itself regionally and nationally, such as in engagement across the arts, civic society and industry.

LIT has reflected on the operational context of an underfunded higher education system but has managed to maintain a balanced budget to date. As the funding environment is unlikely to improve significantly in the short term LIT should continue to manage its resources carefully and prioritise the quality of its student experience.

LIT's work with its partners to deliver for the Shannon region is commended. The institute's plans to seize the opportunity to build on past achievements following recent changes in leadership is welcome. The HEA would encourage the institution and its partners to continue this engagement and consider leveraging the expertise and resources available to the consortium to achieve their individual and collective strategic goals.