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# Waterford Institute of Technology

## Strategic Dialogue Cycle 4 Reflections on Performance

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### Self-evaluation report – institution overview

*The period of this compact has been highly challenging for Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). The institution has had to address ongoing problems of governance, together with a financial crisis, and a difficult project to undertake a merger with IT Carlow with a view to becoming a Technological University. While some progress has been made on governance, the financial crisis is becoming worse annually, and the merger with IT Carlow has not progressed. The institute notes the work underway for a new strategic plan to address these issues and sustain the future of the institution.*

#### Institution overview:

WIT have provided a self-reflective response to the concluding strategic dialogue report covering the period 2014-2016. The institute is in the midst of an extremely challenging period. Declining state funding coupled with a reduction in student numbers has impacted on the financial stability of the institute. WIT reports that “Changes in leadership, changes in the composition of the governing authority, and various controversies have contributed to unsettling internal instability.” The institute finds itself in a unique point in its history “where never before have the demands on and expectations of the Institute nationally and locally been so considerable, while the Institute’s ability to respond has been so constrained.”

2016 has been a particularly difficult year for the institute, and this is reflected in the self-evaluation provided. The institute has a financial operating deficit and has been forced to draw down on its financial reserves to manage this deficit. In 2016, WIT presented a financial stability plan to the HEA to return the institute to an operating surplus within three years. The institute is working with the HEA and external experts to implement the financial stability plan.

WIT has responded to the reflections on the strategic dialogue process 2015 (which stated that a lack of support data was supplied to verify the self-evaluation) by providing comprehensive back-up appendices for all data provided. WIT have also been more critical and self-reflective in the assessment of its performance against its objectives, and has evaluated many areas where further progress is needed. This is responsive to last year’s feedback, where objectives were stated as achieved without any supporting data.

Overall of the 19 objectives WIT set for itself, 13 of these are reported as achieved and evidence has been provided to substantiate this. There are 6 objectives reported as having made progress but not fully achieved. The institute has returned no targets as not met (or red).

WIT has particular strengths in its research performance and industry engagement. Targets set to achieve substantial research funding were met, with a significant proportion from international sources. It is building on these research achievements to

enhance its internationalisation strategy by fostering international research collaborations, and its teaching and learning capacity through internationally shared modules in its structured PhD programme. WIT is further leveraging the expertise it has gained through its research; such achievements include an eLearning project to expand its flexible learning provision for industry (DELAROSE).

The Institute brings an international perspective to the needs of its region and to its efforts to meet those needs.

There have been successes in outreach access programmes to attract students into third level. Student retention has also been a focus of the institute, with more common entry routes, transfer options and student supports provided.

Objectives in the cluster have been achieved largely through, for instance, the national platforms of the regional skills fora and the action plan for jobs, both of which WIT actively participates in, and through other means.

Overall the Institute positions itself as a leading HE provider tasked, as its priority, with delivering on the regional needs of the South-east.

## Self-evaluation report - domain level reviews

### 1. Regional clusters:

#### Initial commentary:

WIT set four objectives for its participation in the southern regional cluster, with CIT, ITC, IT Tralee and UCC.

The four objectives in relation to regional clusters are: a) create a formal regional cluster between the named institutions; b) improve student pathways; c) shared academic planning; and d) meeting the criteria for technological university designation. Objectives a) to c) are evaluated as achieved. Objective d) is assessed as substantial progress made and returned as amber.

#### a) Create a formal regional cluster

The cluster has made considerable progress in the three-year period. WIT acknowledges that the cluster is not operating as was originally intended, and point to geographical spread, and the tandem focus of WIT and ITC on technological university designation, as challenging. Notably other members of the cluster have not designated this objective as achieved in their self-evaluations.

Key areas of progress for WIT are through the national structures of the regional skills fora and the action plan for jobs. WIT actively participates in these fora with its cluster partners and this has been the mechanism for many joint cluster initiatives. Synergies between the regional skills fora facilitate WIT's participation in both the South East and the South West fora.

#### b) Improve Student Pathways

WIT has used the regional skills fora as the platform to maintain and enhance relationships between other higher education institutions (HEI) as well, of course, to develop further WIT's responses to industry skills needs. WIT has also initiated enhanced links with further education (FE) providers across the region, establishing over 20 FE links agreements and an Education Training Board (ETB) region agreement.

#### c) Shared academic planning

The initial compact objective was to have achieved an operational review of academic planning with a view to identifying collaborations. This target has been surpassed. Building on work done by WIT as part of the WINSS programme, the South East RSF and APJ facilitated the cluster in shared academic mapping in the context of skills needs in the biopharma sector.

#### d) Criteria to be designated as a technological university

WIT state there are multiple criteria associated with Technological University designation and has chosen to focus on the criterion associated with the recruitment of graduate students in their self-evaluation. Given their specific institutional research strengths, this should be an area of institutional focus. WIT reports that it had not achieved the 4%

research student numbers in the period in question but has made progress towards the target; in an environment of declining undergraduate student numbers, WIT has grown its research student cohort towards this benchmark.

National Policy Context:

The national policy context of the regional skills fora and the regional action plan for jobs has impacted positively on the cluster objectives. They have provided a structure through which shared academic planning has been honed. It may be useful for future compacts to consider the extent of engagement with government-led objectives and the coherence these initiatives have brought to the cluster when establishing targets for subsequent cycles.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

The original compact aims for WIT in the southern cluster remain as stated in its compact. Considerable progress has been made, albeit , in some cases, through other national policy objectives and external influences of the regional skills fora and the action plan for jobs.

WIT has engaged with the cluster and positive recognition should be their improvement of student pathways and their significant engagement with the further education sector. WIT's response to regional needs through its Springboard submissions is also acknowledged.

## 2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning:

### Initial commentary:

There are two objectives identified in this category: a) Continue to make available lifelong learning and flexible learning opportunities to the learner population; and b) Continue to provide a series of coordinated supports to learners and potential learners to meet both their academic and personal development needs: in particular, to build upon the existing Early Intervention Programmes (EIPs) to foster engagement with hard-to-reach groups.

Objective a) is returned as amber, indicating considerable progress is required. The institute achieved 16% for the 2016/17 academic year though its objective was to achieve 17% of their total student numbers through on part-time provision. Part time student numbers have grown over the compact period (though have fallen in the last year); however, this has been in the midst of a significant drop in undergraduate full-time numbers, so, while percentage targets appear achieved, it is as a result of a drop in full time numbers and not the planned growth in part time provision. WIT reports that it is moving more into the online provision space, and had hoped to have this further developed by 2016.

Objective b) is reported as achieved. Reported targets are in excess of those set. WIT is actively providing for the region and reaching out to members of the community who would traditionally not have participated in higher education. The success of programmes in this area is notable and the community impacts have exceeded targets by 50%. This could be an interesting case study for HEIs in other regions.

### National Policy Context:

Increased retention is a priority focus for WIT. In an environment of decreased demand for WIT provision, increased attention has been focused on retaining their students. A specific initiative “Right Programme Right Student” has been developed to assist students in choosing the right programme of study for them. This is applied through more common entry routes and the ability to transfer between programmes.

### Critical evaluation and feedback:

The self-evaluation in respect of increasing the targets for the percentage of part time students has been open and honest. In the metrics set WIT has achieved the target, though in the wider context of increasing part time provision it has not, and WIT has been upfront about this.

WIT has modified the targets linked with their Early Intervention Programmes (EIP) over the course of the compact to reflect on achievements. In line with these revisions the programme has still exceeded the targets.

The success of the EIP programme could be an interesting case study for increasing

participation in higher education.

WIT has responded to previous concerns regarding a lack of support data to verify the evaluation by providing back up appendices.

### 3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience:

#### Initial commentary:

There are three objectives in this category: a) to continue to develop the programme portfolio in areas that are relevant to sustainable economic, social and cultural development with a view to increasing the capacity of higher education in the region; b) to develop research programmes in particular continue to develop doctoral (Level 10) and research master's (Level 9) offerings; and c) expand the flexibility of the programme portfolio through supporting broadening entry for the first year cohort. The first two objectives are evaluated as not achieved but institutional progress made and the third objective is reported as achieved.

The first objective set a KPI of total student numbers, and in metric terms this was reached in 2015 (8,155). The institute have responded to prior dialogue feedback which noted this target was previously reached and in a climate of growing demand for higher education was set too low. Enrolments at WIT have been dropping over the duration of the compact and the institute is taking strategic action to address this.

- WIT will move to generic entry in a number of disciplines;
- The Institute has prioritised the further development of its FET links programme;
- The Institute continues to enhance engagement and interaction with applicants in line with their "Right-Student Right-Course" philosophy (including through the website and various other publications and guide books);
- WIT has re-designed its Schools Visit programmes and CRM system to better engage with applicants in a more targeted manner. This includes a new student ambassador led initiative, a deepening of regional engagement and a drive to widen the visits programme beyond the South-East region in a more targeted manner.
- The Institute plans more targeted interactions with career guidance teachers and organisations

The second objective b) is evaluated as not yet achieved. WIT was just 0.1% short of its end of 2016 target to have 4.1 per cent (195 FTE students) involved in research programmes in the last cycle of strategic dialogue. The institute has reported a downturn for the final period of the compact, achieving 3.5% of research students in the total cohort. It should be noted that WIT's research masters numbers are on an overall downward trajectory, reflective (in WIT's view) of the diminishing market currency of research masters, while it should also be noted that PhD numbers continue to grow.

|                            | 2012/13 | 2013/14 | 2014/15 | 2015/16 | 2016/17 |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Masters Research (Level 9) | 84      | 75      | 67      | 61      | 56      |
| PhD (Level 10)             | 75      | 99      | 112     | 140     | 148     |

The third objective in this category is evaluated as achieved. The initial compact final objective for this category has been revised from a general target to implement

programme flexibility to a specific objective to achieve board denominated entry in at least two schools. This has been achieved in the schools of business and humanities, and is planned to be expanded to the engineering, science and health sciences schools. The institute report some increased demand in the common entry programme, however, overall WIT undergraduate enrolments have been in decline over the period of the compact - though the Institute points to its strong performance relative to other Institutes of Technology.

National Policy Context:

WIT have developed common entry routes for both their business and humanities schools in line with the transitions agenda. Currently, the Institute offers broad entry options in Business. The Institute's Liberal Arts programme is also a generic programme with multiple options. The WIT level 7 programme in Science is also generic. Further common entry routes in line with the transitions agenda are planned.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

The institute responded to feedback from the previous cycles of dialogue and have provided more robust responses to this category. The initial KPI of increased student numbers does not appear to capture the full level of effort in this space.



#### 4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation:

##### Initial commentary:

There are four objectives in this category: a) support and develop high quality research of national and international standing; b) support and develop high-quality research of national and international standing (bis); c) value and support research career development; and d) develop a graduate school. All four objectives are evaluated as achieved.

The first two targets a) and b) Support and develop high quality research, are measured in terms of monetary value of research contracts and international collaborations. WIT has a track record in securing research funding, and overall has achieved its final target in attracting €42m for the compact period. It was noted that the target was achieved post analysis of the 2015 self-evaluation, and should be stretched in line with the achievements. WIT have not revised the target and report in line with the original goal of €42m, being surpassed by 25% at €55.5m, which was known last year.

A detailed breakdown of this funding is supplied in response to last year's feedback which concluded more information on the research achievements is required to fully assess strengths and weaknesses. The proportion of funding from national sources accounts for 96% in 2016 with only 1% from EU sources, this is a significant turnaround from prior years, where EU funding represented over 20% of funding achieved.

WIT notes however, that the external factors impacting International/EU research income are complex. The apparent drop in income from EU sources was reflective of an end in one ERDF funding cycle and enhanced competition for H2020 funding. Draft data for 2016/17 points to a percentage of approximately 45% from EU/International sources for WIT, which is more in line with previous figures. This draft income data reflects WIT's success in attracting funding from both new ERDF programmes and our enhanced experience of H2020. It is also worthy of note that Brexit offers considerable risk. For example, WIT has had considerable success in attracting Ireland Wales INTERREG funding in the past. This important funding source will cease from 2021 onwards. WIT continues to perform well in attracting EU research funding notwithstanding.

WIT has identified strategic research areas in ICT, biopharma and advanced manufacturing and has cultivated successful research centres and industry collaborations around these areas.

Objective c) has been modified from the original compact which aimed to have career structures in place for researchers and research related PMDS rolled out. The self-evaluation reports that significant accomplishments have been made in the development of the HRS4R agenda and achievement of the EU logo in 2014. There are still areas for improvement, for example PMDS for researchers has been introduced as a pilot in the largest research centre, and is not reported as extended to all researchers. WIT have reported many next steps in their advancement of the HRS4R agenda, notably the establishment of an office of research integrity & ethics, and appointment of a research integrity officer.

The fourth objective to establish a graduate school has been modified, and adapted into cluster provision of generic skills and structured PhD provision, as was previously reported. An appendix detailing the structured PhD framework is provided.

National Policy Context:

WIT is a research active institute and is the highest performer in many research metrics across the IOT sector, and in the national research context.

Researcher careers and the National Framework for Doctoral Education feature prominently in the compact.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

Research is an institutional priority for WIT and has been central to its agenda for many years. The Institute has performed strongly in research largely due to the investment of its own resources and despite inequities within the funding structures (whereby, for instance, PhD students in universities attract more funding than PhD students in IOTs). The Institute has a legacy of success in both national and international research programmes that continues. WIT's success in attracting international funding—and the contribution that funding continues to make to the Institute's bottom line—in particular is noted.

## 5. Enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange:

### Initial commentary:

There are three objectives in this category: a) further strengthen links with industry and enterprise agencies as part of the continuing development of the knowledge region by moving toward a sectoral model of engagement with stakeholders; b) prioritise the translation of research for societal and economic benefit; and c) enhance our contribution to the economic, social and cultural development of the region through the expansion of partnerships and alliances across all our activities. All three categories are evaluated as achieved.

The first and third objectives has been achieved—through the work associated with the three Technology Gateways established in WIT; through ongoing and widespread industry placement programmes; and supplemented and strengthened by the establishment of the regional skills fora and the action plan for jobs structures. Links with industry and enterprise are coordinated through the research and technology transfer office.

Commercialisation targets set in objective b) have been exceeded. These targets are measured by Enterprise Ireland, and WIT participates in a technology transfer consortium with AIT, IT Carlow and MU.

### National Policy Context:

The national policy structures for implementation of the employment (APJ) and skills (RSF) agenda have facilitated WIT's success in achieving its objectives in the engagement section.

WIT hosts three national Technology Gateways and these have been an important vehicle for industry and enterprise engagement in WIT. WIT's engagement has been further strengthened and supplemented by the national policy structures for implementation of the employment (APJ) and skills (RSF) agendas.

### Critical evaluation and feedback:

WIT has provided their technology transfer office performance metrics and future targets, which are measured by Enterprise Ireland as concrete indicators of their engagement success. It is useful to see their future targets, and gives a clear picture of the planned engagement growth, some specific examples such as names and brief descriptions of the spins outs could add further to the evaluation. WIT has subsequently clarified that it recently launched co-funded PhD programmes with industry which will support six students in the immediate future.

## 6. Enhanced internationalisation:

### Initial commentary:

There are two objectives listed in this category: a) Further develop the international environment to a critical mass of international students. Support the international learner to manage the regulatory, financial and emotional challenges of living and studying in a new cultural environment. b) Grow the international research profile by diversifying the funding base further, particularly through the development of international strategic collaborations.

The first objective is reported as not achieved, and the second as achieved.

The KPI for the first objective is the number of international students. SRS data indicates a drop in international student numbers, with a significant dip from 2014/15 to 2015/16 when the Brazilian students under the Science without Borders programme left. The target of 327 full time international students was set in the context of the Science without Borders programme; the discontinuation of that programme was outside WIT's control and was not anticipated. WIT reports that in 2016/17 the actual number is 218, which lower than the SRS data indicating 247 full time non-EU students. There has been a drop in the number of Chinese and middle eastern students studying at WIT.

WIT is focusing on new markets (North America) and new structures to attract international students (joint degrees). The institute is still significantly below the 15% benchmark, and the percentage of international students has dropped from 9% at the start of the compact to 6%.

The objective to build international collaborations through research is reported as achieved. WIT has a strong track record in securing research funding. The financial target set to achieve € 8m in EU research funding has been exceeded at €8.4m. The international collaborations associated with this funding were greater in the earlier years of the compact. In 2014/15 there were 86 international partnerships, in 2015/16 there are 17 reported international collaborations. The performance is strong and the target has been achieved, but the current declining trends present a less positive indication for future performance. Draft figures show that over €4million in EU/International funding was leveraged in 2016/17.

### National Policy Context:

WIT references the national target of having 15% international students, and is working to address this.

### Critical evaluation and feedback:

WIT have provided a comprehensive response to their internationalisation compact objectives. The EU funding target was reported as achieved in the reflections on last

year's compact, at €8.6m, however the final reported achievement is €8.4m.

## 7. Institutional consolidation:

### Initial commentary:

There is one objective in this category: to contribute to the development of the region through the creation of a multi-campus TU through the consolidation of WIT and ITC. This category is evaluated as progress made but not achieved.

The TU process for the South-east has not achieved what would have been expected at the start of the compact. However following the Kelly report and the process of re-engagement the joint project is back on track. WIT reference the HEA funding to support the process, and that it will be used to support collaborative projects across and between all levels of both Institutes, while developing a unitary vision for the Technological University of the South East.

### National Policy Context:

There is a commitment from the leadership in both ITC and WIT to make a joint submission for a Technological University of the South-East region within a three-year timescale. The uncertainty in the absence of the technological universities bill is referenced as a challenge.

Collaboration in the regional skills fora and the action plan for jobs is also referenced.

### Critical evaluation and feedback:

Waterford IT and IT Carlow remain committed to progressing to Technological University designation. Progress has been somewhat restricted due to external factors previously mentioned. WIT and ITC should however continue to progress together where they can and be prepared to move when the opportunity arises. More details on the planned collaborative projects to achieve TU status would be useful.

## 8. Additional Notes:

WIT have modified some metrics in line with developments over the life time of the compact. Many of these modifications have been the setting of more tangible metrics to achieve what were board initial targets.

One notable change under the research objectives is the move from the original compact objective to establish a graduate school with IT Carlow. This has become a focus on generic modules for structured PhDs to be delivered in conjunction with national and international partners. WIT adds that it has continued to develop its PhD framework over the period of the compact. The development of this structure is reflective of the Institute's many partnerships both internationally and nationally. For example, WIT is actively involved in two current SFI centres, SSPC2 and CONNECT. A key element of these centres is the training of PhD students within these networks. WIT has successfully presented its PhD Framework to an external panel for validation in 2016. As part of this Framework WIT has validated (Academic Council sign off in June 2017) nine Generic Skills modules for delivery to students. WIT states its intention to explore how these modules can add value to PhD students across the wider IOT sector and to partner institutions.