

Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)

Cycle 3 Outcome

Performance funding in full will be released in respect of the 2017 budget allocation.

In assessing performance, we have relied upon the self-evaluation report submitted by your institute, the reflections on performance document prepared by the HEA, and the discussion at our recent strategic dialogue meetings. Consideration was also given to any points of clarification as provided by your institute at our meetings or in related correspondence.

The self-evaluation report, and subsequent discussion at the bilateral meeting, have shown that progress can be demonstrated across all compact domains. AIT continues to develop the compact to include greater use of data and to focus on priority areas, including the student experience, applied research, and fulfilling the criteria for designation as a technological university. The institute is good on research and enterprise engagement, and is seeking to expand its community engagement links.

However, the HEA has some concerns regarding the prioritisation of strategy away from student number growth towards the quality of the student experience. While the reprioritisation by AIT is both important and warranted and while AIT has improved its data gathering processes and is seeing improved ISSE engagement, the overall coherence and evidence of the application or use of the data to improve the institute's performance and student experience should be better presented in the self-evaluation. At the discussion, AIT identified a number of initiatives they have commenced to improve teaching and learning which are very encouraging. It is important that such objectives and measures are incorporated into future compacts and are clearly stated from the outset.

In summary therefore, while there are certain issues of concern as identified by the HEA above, overall AIT has demonstrated good progress against mission-coherent objectives through a reasonably analytical and probing self-evaluation report and use of other data sources. The institute is using benchmarking to inform evaluations and needs to continue to integrate this into future compacts and evaluations. The institute is requested to address areas of concern as a priority. AIT should have regard to the specific institutional feedback provided in this document and in the reflections on performance document in order to continue to improve its overall performance in future cycles of strategic dialogue.

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Minutes of Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3 bilateral meeting, 6 September 2016

In attendance

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with two external advisers (Mr George P. Pernsteiner and Mr John Randall), met with the institutional representatives as set out below. The meeting was chaired by HEA Interim Chief Executive, Dr Anne Looney. A process auditor was also present at the meeting.

AIT representatives

- Professor Ciarán Ó Catháin, President
- Dr Joseph Ryan, Registrar
- Mr John McKenna, Vice President for Strategic Planning
- Mr Eoin Langan, Head of Business School
- Ms Mary Goode, Projects Officer

The HEA welcomed Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which it operates. AIT was commended on its progress and for its self-evaluation report, which provides evidence of reflection on performance and identification of issues arising. The HEA is aware that all higher education institutions are operating in a challenging financial environment, while continuing to respond to increasing student demand. The system has demonstrated that it continues to provide high-quality higher education and to respond to national priorities. While the institute's performance continues to progress and the HEA expects that trajectory to continue, some concerns remain. These concerns should be addressed by the institute's leadership to ensure that the institute meets its full potential. The HEA's observations are set out as follows:

- The HEA welcomed the revised method of reporting and the more reflective approach to the process.
- In its self-evaluation report, AIT set out a student recruitment strategy including a stated intent to adopt slower growth and to maintain and enhance institutional quality.
- The HEA is concerned that the strategy of slower growth may not necessarily deliver higher quality. It is important that quality objectives and measures are incorporated into future compacts and are clearly stated from the outset.
- The institute has achieved most of its interim targets and, where performance is behind target, provided an explanatory context. It is clear that local engagement by the institute is a strong feature of its performance.
- The HEA welcomes the commencement of benchmarking and looks forward to further development.

AIT opening remarks

AIT opened the discussion by noting that it has engaged and listened, and welcomed the HEA's response to the institute's recent self-evaluation report. AIT outlined its approach to risk, and its inclination to be strategic and to accentuate the positive, even in an environment where it is challenged to make choices on the basis of the resources available. AIT approaches the compact process by looking at opportunity costs, carefully considering the plans and proposals it submits to the HEA and government, and the likelihood that they will be realised. AIT sees some risks remaining in areas such as international education, where some markets are closing but others are opening up. AIT is working with Enterprise Ireland to identify and pursue opportunities, and also looking at a joint institute with the Chinese government.

AIT is of the view that, in an era of very constrained resources, the balance between quality and growth is important, and in this compact the institute is moderating its plans for further growth, in order to focus on quality. Data collected by the institute indicates that, as a result, it will not be able to keep pace with employer demand for graduates. However, the institute is of the view that employers would prefer good quality graduates to greater numbers of mediocre ones, and that the institute can provide quality education only in the context of slower growth in student numbers.

Teaching and learning

Teaching and learning is a priority area for AIT, and the institute considers that its performance demonstrates this prioritisation. The external evaluations of teaching and learning are positive. AIT's results in the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) are good. The institute achieved a 54 per cent response rate and positive feedback. It also uses the feedback well – staff are actively involved in analysing the survey results and share experiences in areas such as student-faculty interaction. The HEA queried how the systems are used to disseminate and act on this feedback and, while AIT described a good system for the collation of information from the virtual learning environment and for monitoring and tracking of results, more information on the application of the findings and subsequent outcomes would be welcome in future self-evaluations.

AIT is also aiming to increase the number of staff with pedagogical qualifications by 25 per cent over the lifetime of the plan. The institute is slightly behind target at this point. AIT also referred to other actions to enhance teaching and learning, such as engagement with the National Forum and the Learning Innovation Network, a first-year experience programme on trial with Maynooth, examining the expanded use of Moodle and student feedback through the virtual learning environment and diary pro, and examining the use of technology to track and demonstrate engagement.

Enhanced internationalisation

Internationalisation is important to AIT. The institute has been careful to build a multicultural approach into everything that it does so as to integrate students. HEA queried how AIT monitored the student experience of international students, how it identified challenges or issues, and how it addressed them. AIT said that the process was based on a range of staff, including the international officer, being available to listen to and address student queries and issues. The institute's strategy is to continue to grow their international numbers. It is hoping to increase the number of Erasmus students, both incoming and outgoing.

Further development of the compact process

AIT looks forward to the new performance framework and the next cycle, and is interested in continuing to make the process useful both for the HEA and for the HEIs. AIT has enjoyed being involved in the process, but all institutions are subject to a lot of monitoring and reporting requirements, so capacity is a challenge. The experience of strategic dialogue seems of more benefit to institutions than some other initiatives. AIT sees the overall process as useful. It has sharpened focus on strategic planning and how it is implemented. However, it has some concern regarding the alignment of different processes nationally, and the resulting burden on institutions.

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AIT sees a value in the dialogue process. It finds that benchmarking against peers nationally has been of more benefit than doing so internationally. It is attempting international benchmarking based on the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) outcomes.

On staff development and experience, AIT sees the need for work on transfer patterns of academics between IoTs and universities, and considers that this should be a national concern. The academic contract also needs to be addressed, to provide the flexibility that institutes need to respond to student needs. AIT also expressed a concern over capital depreciation which is not being provided for in funding allocations.