Athlone Institute of Technology

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

AIT has provided a very clear, concise self-evaluation report (SER) providing an update on all interim 2015 targets. There is very clear evidence of attention to the HEA feedback from the previous cycle. The published compact objectives are matched in the SER which is completed in full and colour-coded. The HEA particularly notes the following as positive features:

- In progressing from Cycle 2 AIT has reviewed its compact and has clearly identified three priority areas.

- The holistic and upfront analysis by the Institute of its own position and challenges was a particular strength. Applying this analysis to the system performance framework, as a second step, was a good approach.

- AIT go beyond a numbers-driven approach, and the metrics and data are used appropriately to inform the strategy

- AIT signals that it is choosing to prioritise improving quality and services over increasing student numbers.

The self-evaluation does raise the following issues for further discussion:

- The section on industry engagement and related research was good, but it didn't quite define this activity.

- There is a clear plan to grow research institutes. The connection from student experience to the research agenda could be discussed in more depth – as well as the scale of PhD programmes, possible partners and the quality of PhD formation.

- AIT is collaborating effectively with the MEND Cluster and the institute might consider how it could further leverage the cluster to address institutional strategic priorities such as research, engagement and others;

- The teaching and learning section requires greater depth of analysis such as:

  - More discussion of how the ISSE results can be used to improve activity and performance
  - Staff CPD – how this aligns to institutional needs and whether the current scale (10 participants) is adequate

- There were some gaps in risk analysis. AIT flagged risks around engagement and Springboard but did not show that it has a strategy to minimise such risk. While risks were discussed in relation to internationalisation, that discussion could be further developed.

- The prioritisation of seeking TU status as an independent institution could create risks for the Institute unless there is a process to facilitate that.

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

The Institute had two objectives under this heading, both of which have received a green rating. This is an accurate reflection of progress to end-2015. Significant progress has been made in relation to the MEND cluster.

The MEND cluster received additional funding of €287,000 for a specific project with the following milestones:

- Development and maintenance of FE and HE network

- Maintenance of FE–HE portal and investigation into the establishment of a national portal

- Academic planning process to be developed for the sector

- Mapping of SMEs across the region and developing systematic engagement with SMEs.

The MEND Cluster Project Plan 2016 is the basis of work planned by the cluster for 2016, and partners signed an MoU in December 2015. The MEND cluster partners have proposed that the compact targets for 2016 be replaced with the outputs set out in the Project Plan 2016, and targets for 2015 are reported in that context.

Both of the objectives have now changed from the original compact, and this reflects how the MEND cluster has developed. The goal of new progression routes and new pathways to be enabled by 2016 has become more focused.

Additional objective has been added to second objective in relation to possible roll-out of a national portal and the establishment of SME/agency/HE and FE Forum to identify and develop the optimal mode of systematic engagement. The success of the cluster can be attributed to the leadership and commitment by the four leadership teams.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

AIT produced a 2016 Draft Lifelong Learning Plan and its Access Strategic Plan reflects its commitment to widening participation at third level. There are three objectives under this heading and all had a green rating.

- Objective.1: Increase the number of non-standard learners engaging through Lifelong Learning. AIT is focusing on outreach initiatives to help mature students and lifelong learners in the region. So far, 857 lifelong learners have participated on dedicated part-time programmes offered by AIT both in the Midlands and on an outreach basis in places like Galway, Castlebar and Tullamore. AIT achieved its target with total of 1,200 part-time students registered as at March 2016.

- Objective.2: Participation in new AIT Engage Programme. The programme places heavy emphasis on volunteering and civic engagement in the wider community through links with organisations. AIT signed up to support the national Campus Engage Initiative. The target was achieved, with 200 active members trained in 2015.

AIT highlighted that the 50 per cent fall in the number of mature students was due to economic upturn. AIT continues to grow apprenticeship programmes along with links to industry.

Objective 3: AIT met its target in developing and providing support in the Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) programme. The number of courses provided for first-years increased from 17 to 23 in 2016.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

There are two objectives under this section, both of which are coded green.

- Objective 1: Increase participation and attendance at new students' induction. 75 per cent of students participated in various induction activities and 86.5 per cent of new students attended the first stages of new student induction. AIT's response rate on the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) for 2016 was 54.4 per cent, which is double the national average of 22.2 per cent. AIT achieved its target and will continue to focus on student engagement and support Level 6/7 provision.

- Objective 2: Promote excellence in Learning, teaching and assessment, thereby enhancing learning experience of all students. In its interim report, AIT set out three targets in this area. Progress has been made in staff member professional development but the interim target of 10 members graduating in 2015 was not – only 3 graduated with a Postgraduate Diploma in Learning, Teaching and Assessment. AIT noted that resourcing issues are hindering the achievement of this target. AIT's learning and Teaching Unit continues to offer opportunities for staff and there is continuing engagement with flexible pathways as a route to graduation.

AIT achieved its target in supporting staff in the use of Student Diary Pro for placement. The 2015 Programmatic Review resulted in the introduction of placement- or work-based modules with increased focus on the use of Student Diary Pro. AIT expects that an analysis of Moodle 2015–16 in 2017 will show an increase usage of Student Diary Pro on the placement modules.

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

AIT revised the targets during the Dialogue in 2015 and also revised its 2016 targets.

There are three objectives under this heading and all are coded green.

- Objective 1: Build critical mass around focused areas of core research capability aligned with regional needs and national research priorities. AIT had good performance in 2015 with an increase in industry collaboration. While the target was achieved in terms of increase in projects, companies and industry contribution in 2015, the Institute noted that 2016 performance is likely to be below what was previously achieved.

- Objective 2: Targets were exceeded in terms of delivering top quality postgraduate research and innovation. AIT noted at the September 2015 bilateral meeting that a pipeline of postgraduate students is needed and AIT is engaged in the Irish Research Council programmes; however, it is not securing the number of awards it would like. AIT revised its Cycle 2 targets and the progress report was adjusted to show these revised targets. AIT acknowledges that it should have been more ambitious with research targets. The Office of Research has completed its own strategic plan with the mission to be an RDI partner of choice for enterprise and also to build capacity in targeted research areas and to deliver a sustainable pipeline of postgraduate students.

- Objective 3: Improved knowledge/tech transfer to enterprise via commercialisation of AIT's research activities in the form of technology licensing to Irish-based companies and the creation of knowledge intensive spin-out companies. This target has been achieved, with six licences, options and assignments transferred in 2015.

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

All the targets under the two listed objectives were met and received a green rating.

Working with Enterprise Ireland, AIT supports the development of knowledge-based start-ups in the Midlands region – via the Midlands Innovation and Research Centre (MIRC) campus business incubator, and including the New Frontiers entrepreneur development programme delivered in partnership with Maynooth University.

AIT worked with the Department of Jobs, Innovation and Enterprise, Enterprise Ireland and other regional stakeholders in the development of an Action Plan for Jobs to support enterprise growth in the Midlands. Activities and developments during 2015 in relation to engagement with enterprise and community includes 14 New Frontiers Enterprise Programme Phase 2 participants and 57 other entrepreneurs supported the programme. AIT received €1.9m from Enterprise Ireland to deliver a New Frontiers Enterprise Programme over the 2016–2020 period, and this is expected to increase the Institute's annual contracted participant cohort from 12 to 14.

AIT is part of a consortium selected by Enterprise Ireland and ESA to establish and operate the European Space Agency's Business Incubation Centre in Ireland. ESA BIC Ireland will commence operations across four partner locations from June 2016. AIT is also part of a consortium led by TCD to build and operate an Irish LOFAR (Low Frequency Array) telescope at Birr Castle which will connect Ireland into international LOFAR.

AIT provides a broad range of knowledge-intensive innovation services to regional and national industrial clients, delivering results in a timeframe that matches industry needs and with a focus on start-ups and SMEs. Quantitative targets were set for the number of industry projects, companies supported innovation vouchers. The targets were exceeded. AIT continues to make progress in responding to the needs of SMEs – it is ranked second among 38 knowledge providers in Ireland for completion of Innovation Voucher projects.

AIT has a new gym which it claims is one of the best nationally; it is open to the community and has links with the Healthy Campus Initiative. The facilities are made available to Community Games each year and over 10,000 children participate in events in at the Institute. Because of its open campus commitment, AIT is planning to engage in an Age Friendly Initiative that is being developed by DCU.

6. Enhanced internationalisation

AIT outlined in its Strategic Plan 2014–2018 that its goal is to be 'internationally focused in teaching, research and knowledge exchange.' AIT had 3 objectives under this heading.

- Objective 1: to extend the internationalisation of the campus. The ambition was to achieve a 15 per cent target of full-time international students by 2020. Despite the economic downturn and the discontinuation of the King Abdullah Scholarship Scheme, AIT managed a 12 per cent cohort of international students in 2015which is on trajectory for the final target. .

- Objective 2: to further internationalise the curriculum of AIT programmes particularly in the Business School. The targets in this area were modest and appear to fall somewhat short of the major strategic aim outlined in AIT Strategy but even so progress was made. A module was designed and training implemented for study abroad, online provision was developed and one-to-one academic writing support provided. AIT was granted €26,550 in 2015/2016 to fund eight student traineeships, five teachers and three other staff members to take up Erasmus+

opportunities. AIT's initial target of 80 students undertaking an international placement, study or training abroad programme by 2018 has been set in its Strategic Plan 2014–2018.

- Objective 3: to develop mobile technologies to communicate with international students. The intention is to develop the use of flexible mobile platform (subject to availability of appropriate funding), to redesign the AIT website to be multi-language so that it caters for students from China and Brazil, for instance. AIT met this target as it is now part of Learn-on Campus which is a dedicated mobile platform in China. AIT noted that it will continue to develop mobile technologies in line with ICT developments and budgetary flexibility.

AIT has been successful in attracting students from China, India and Malaysia and continues to link with Chinese universities who are interested in commencing one semester academic and student exchange.

7. Institutional consolidation

AIT has three objectives under this heading, all of which got a green rating.

AIT's focus has been to further enhance the collaborative relationship with the partners within the MEND Cluster. AIT noted that it is difficult to establish a baseline in this regard as the cluster is effectively starting from scratch despite various pockets of valuable collaboration. The Institute achieved its target for this objective by implementing a plan for sharing and transferring student information across the cluster.

AIT met its target for building a collaborative platform for digital learning. The Institute developed a common technological platform to capture and stream lecture theatre activities in two lecture theatres in AIT as part of wider initiative to extend capacity in this area throughout the cluster. AIT is progressing in further developing technological platforms that will continuously improve the curriculum.

AIT's third objective is increased collaboration with further education to enhance coherence, access, transfer and progression. AIT's target was to conduct a scoping exercise which identifies and brings together the cluster's regional FE stakeholders and examines existing instruments and mechanisms for access, transfer and progression (ATP) from FE to HE. Targets have been met in relation to this objective. Progress has been made in establishing a regional skills forum.

A regional skills manager was appointed in April 2016 and a formal skills network has been established. AIT is working on developing a bridging/foundation programme with a number of FE providers in the region. AIT sets out to achieve technological university status and has recently submitted an expression of interest for consideration.

Additional notes

AIT reported a deficit position of €528,000 for its 2014/15 draft accounts and the Institute is projecting a deficit budget of €857,000 for 2016.