

Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3 Reflections on Performance

Overview

Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT) has provided a detailed self-evaluation report (SER). There is very clear evidence of attention to the HEA feedback from the previous cycle resulting in a clearer articulation of the strategic priorities for the Institute. 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:

- A smaller and more coherent number of high-level strategic objectives were set out in the revised Draft Mission-Based Performance Compact submitted to the HEA in March 2016.
- The SER outlined how DKIT has delivered on its overall mission articulated within its three strategic goals and embedded within its strategic objectives. DKIT's revised compact has set 19 objectives with 51 KPIs. Of these, 40 KPIs have been colour-coded green, 10 amber and 1 red. The Institute has included an Appendix to the SER to include data sources, executive responsibility and benchmarks for the targets included in the revised compact.
- It is evident that DKIT is proactively engaging with its cluster partners, both at a cluster level and in ongoing bilateral relationships such as the development of the graduate school with DCU and the work on pathways and through MEND more generally.

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

- A major underlying concern is the financial position of the institution, but it is acknowledged that the institution has undertaken an internal review of all income and expenditure and is proposing to return to a break-even operating position by 31 August 2018.
- The HEA notes that DKIT has identified certain issues around access from under-represented socio-economic groups and would be interested to discuss this further with the Institute. DKIT subsequently clarified the data for the socio-economic groups is drawn from the Equal Access Survey Data and the reasons for the reduced reporting of this metric is as follows:
 - Mature students are a major cohort within the lower socio-economic groups. The numbers are reducing because of increased employment.
 - The EAS is a voluntary survey resulting in varying completion rates year to year which affects the figures reported.
 - Issues arise in how students classify between i.e. non-manual, skilled, semi-skilled and other groups etc.
- The HEA notes the strong research performance of DKIT in the research domain by comparison with other institutions in the IoT sector – it ranks fourth in the sector in contract research income metrics. The HEA also commends DKIT's identification of the need to set research ambition in the context of the difficult financial position, and the commitment to review and prioritise its activity. The HEA would be concerned however at the plan to increase research income from EU sources as a way of reducing the financial burden on the institute – in many cases, new contract research income can actually increase the overall financial burden. The HEA would welcome the views of

the Institute on its plans in this regard. DKIT subsequently clarified it is committed to its research agenda but research activity is never fully cost neutral. The institute recently undertook a research review which identified cost saving measures to the core grant by 35% up to end 31st August, 2016. The institute has consolidated and concentrated its research activities into prioritised research areas (Creative Media & Music merged into a single Creative Arts Research Centre). The institute has submitted four cross border INTERREG research proposals with a proposed yield of €8.6m.

- The HEA welcomes the success of the Institute in its internationalisation objectives, but notes that there is some level of disconnect between, on the one hand, the wider strategic objective of delivering graduates with awareness of globalisation and internationalisation and, on the other hand, the focus of this objective focus, which relates mainly to incoming students. DKIT might wish to reflect on this in future planning.

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

DKIT has four regional cluster objectives with five KPIs, all of which are marked green. This appears to be an accurate reflection of progress to end-2015.

Objective 1 is the development of a multi-faceted alliance with DCU. A key achievement was the development of the DCU–DKIT Graduate School, which was launched in October 2014. The Institute has recruited 29 additional Level 9 and 10 postgraduate researchers across the Institute’s prioritised areas and in partnership with DCU. These students, registered in DKIT, will receive a DCU award. During 2015, the link with industry was also strengthened through the work of the Regional Development Centre (RDC) at DKIT and through its partnership with INVENT at DCU, which resulted in the delivery of a number of projects in the area of enterprise and innovation. The Institute has indicated that its target for 2016 for the development and delivery of a joint taught master’s programme has been deferred.

Objective 2 is the agreement and implementation of a process to establish and support a sustainable and shared academic planning process and Objective 3 is the development of a regional approach to access, transfer and progression within the Dublin/Leinster II cluster. Within this reporting period, the MEND cluster finalised the programme of work for both areas. Progress appears to be steady and additional strategic innovation and development funding (SIDF) was awarded in 2015 on the basis of progress made.

With 11 advanced entry programmes (against a target of 7) for students with FETAC Level 6 Advanced Certificates, DKIT has also exceeded its target in relation the development of the NEFHEA Model for wider participation. DKIT will revise its 2016 target upwards to 11 to reflect this (previously set at 8).

DKIT states that the external factors that may impact on 2016 target delivery in this area include the financing of the Graduate School (operational costs) and the lack of detailed analysis of the challenges relating to progression from FE partners to DKIT.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

There are three objectives under this heading with nine KPIs. The Institute has presented a good knowledge of its catchment area and of its demographic profile and challenges. The regional cluster’s agenda plays a key role in enhancing participation and equal access within the region through NEFHEA

and the MEND cluster. Interim targets appear to have been met in six of the KPIs. Interim targets that have been met/exceeded include:

- Percentage of IOT Sector CAO acceptances
- Number of FT undergraduate enrolments
- Percentage participation by mature students
- Percentage participation by students with a registered disability.

The target for percentage participation by targeted socio-economic groups for entrants was not met (23 per cent against the base line of 25 per cent). Given the demographic profile of the region, the Institute acknowledges that it needs to better understand its performance in this area and determine how it could improve on these rates. It might be worth exploring this further with the Institute.

While the target for the number of part-time accredited learners was met, the Institute notes that its performance in part-time provision remains one of the lowest in the sector. In addition, the lack of provision of education and training to industry through the industry contacts in the RDC has been identified as a weakness that has not helped this strategic goal. The Institute states that this was addressed in 2015 through the internal reorganisation of these functions and in an effort to promote greater interaction, and that this has led to increased part-time accredited provision in addition to increased bespoke CPD provision for industry. A list of these bespoke programmes is included in Appendix 3. The Institute points to the Regional Skills Forum as further affording the Institute the opportunity to identify training and upskilling requirements for industry.

Despite the improving economic climate, there were 189 participants in the Springboard initiative 2015/16, against a target of 151. The target for 2016/17 was set before the Institute was awarded places for Springboard 2016/17 (124 places). Given the uptake and retention rates of approximately 78 per cent, the Institute feels that it would be prudent to reduce its target for 2016/17 from 120 to 95.

With respect to the apprentice numbers, DKIT fell slightly below target, enrolling 246 apprentices against a target of 272 for 2015/16. However, this does represent an increase on the previous year's enrolment of 189.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

All objectives in the revised performance compact match the self-evaluation report and the report is completed and color-coded. There are four objectives under this section, with eleven KPIs. Interim targets appear to have been met in eight of the KPIs. Interim objectives that have been met/exceeded in the following areas:

- Programme Boards continue to monitor and report on the effectiveness of learning, teaching and assessment strategies
- There is now greater emphasis on learner-centred strategies across all programmes within the schools, with much clearer assessment strategies being written into new programmes at the proposal/pre-validation stage
- 49 staff members have graduated from the MA in Learning and Teaching and the Certificate in Learning and Teaching
- The Certificate in Teaching and Learning attracted 20 external participants in January 2015

- 4 masterclasses, 21 professional development events
- 12 programmes offered in blended learning delivery modes
- 99 per cent awareness level of students of at least one support service available to them
- 1,141 students using the Student Learning and Development Centre.

Two of the targets that have only been partially achieved are in the areas aimed at enhancing student retention. Progression figures are monitored at a programme and Institute level and appear to be in line with sectoral averages. The progression rates for 2015/16 are not yet available and activities to support student retention have been identified and implemented, and this work is ongoing. The Institute reports that its Academic Council adopted retention as an enhancement theme in September 2015. The work of the Centre for Learning and Teaching and the Student Learning Development Centre are key enablers in helping students actively engage in the learning process. Through the work of the latter, the Institute has observed that the need for their service has intensified with demand being driven by second-, third- and fourth-year students. Further detail on work in this area might be provided.

The Institute has commented that in line with the transitions' agenda, a number of programmes within DKIT now offer a common first year.

The Institute uses the HEInnovate self-assessment tool to benchmark itself internationally on its performance in the area of entrepreneurship education. The Institute has outperformed peers in the areas of leadership and governance, entrepreneurship development in teaching and learning and pathways for entrepreneurs. DKIT is the subject of an OECD case study for its achievements in this area.

DKIT has provided some statistics on its ISSE results, which indicate that it achieved higher performance scores than the rest of the IoT sector in 8 out of the 11 indices. The Institute has identified areas for improvement – for example, DKIT offers a range of learning support services, but ISSE data suggests that the take-up of these is lower than expected. While the target for the Student Learning and Development Centre was met, in 2015 the Institute began planning a review of the impact of the Centre to be undertaken in 2016.

DKIT participated in a number of teaching and learning projects funded by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning and carried out in 2015:

- Supporting transition: enhancing feedback in first year using digital technologies
- Student success toolbox for flexible learners: supporting transitions from thinking about study to the first weeks
- Assessment for learning resources for first year undergraduate mathematics students.

These projects built capacity within the Institute and at the end of 2015 the DKIT bid for and is now leading a multi-institutional project entitled 'Technology Enhanced Assessment Methods in Science and Health Practicals'.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

There are two objectives and nine KPIs under this heading, seven of which are classified as green and two as amber. The amber KPIs related to the number of postgraduate research supervisors (47 achieved against a target of 50) and postgraduate research students (59 achieved against a target of

60). Staff development to PhD qualification is at 33 per cent, exceeding the sectoral average of 29 per cent for 2014/15.

External research awards for the calendar year 2015 totalled €2.61m, lower than the target of €3m (the Institute marked this as green by combining targets for 2014 and 2015). However, DKIT continues to perform well against its peers. In 2014/15, the research income per student was €1,174 against a sectoral average of €921 (HEA figures). DKIT rightly claims to be among the top three IOTs in terms of research income (behind WIT and CIT).

As funding for research has declined, the Institute began to rely on the recurrent grant to cover some ongoing research costs. The Institute is in the final stages of completing a review of all research income so that it can prioritise its research activities and seek funding from alternative sources, and so reduce the research cost burden to the Institute. The HEA would have a concern at the proposal that additional research income will be sought to reduce the burden on core funding; additional contract research income can in many cases be funded at a rate less than full cost, so increasing the overall financial burden on the institution.

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

There are two objectives under this heading, with nine KPIs, eight of which are classified green and one amber.

During 2015, the Regional Development Centre exceeded its target with an average occupancy rate of 82 per cent against a target of 80 per cent, and this also exceeded international benchmarks – the USA average is 76 per cent occupancy, while that for the EU is 78 per cent. The RDC supported 82 entrepreneurship/start-ups during 2015, against a target of 60.

The RDC runs the Student Enterprise Internship Programme which sees cross-faculty student interns promoting enterprising and creative activities to the student body.

The RDC performed well in its work on engagement with industry through applied research projects and on commercialisation and knowledge transfer. The RDC exceeded cumulative targets for licences, options, assignments (LOAs) of technology to industry partners – creating three new spin-out companies from the DKIT research bases, and meeting and exceeding targets for invention disclosures. DKIT is a partner with DCU in the DCU-led consortium under the national TTSI2 programmes. The target for research agreements was not met (34 out of a target of 40). The Institute states that there are no externally-funded TTO human resources to drive commercialisation and the Institute must fund this from existing resources while other university HEIs have received funding under the TTSI programme. DKIT has sought funding under TTSI3 and its activities in this area may be limited if this is no forthcoming.

The Institute also adopts a number of student enterprise initiatives including:

- Support/funding for five student interns
- A President's Award for enterprising students
- Student-led extra-curricular activities to support the development of an enterprise culture among students.

These initiatives reflect the broader studententerprise@DKIT programme that has run since 2007. In 2016 the Institute will explore the promotion of student-led enterprise society models based on best

practice internationally. Because of budgetary constraints, the Institute has decided to reduce the number of initiatives and will reduce its targets to reflect this.

The Institute continues to increase the number of students availing of work placements (761 in 2015).

6. Enhanced internationalisation

There are two objectives listed under this heading, with seven KPIs, all of which have been colour-coded green. DKIT has met its targets in this area.

To coincide with the inception of the Erasmus+ programme, the Institute conducted a review of all its EU bilateral agreements in 2014. All agreements were retained but recalibrated in an effort to address the significant imbalance in inbound/outbound exchange flows. Additional international exchange agreements were established for the purpose of developing exchange capacity within some additional academic disciplines.

DKIT students participated in a ten-day Erasmus intensive programmes on mobile gaming technologies (hosted at the University of Lodz, Poland) and sustainable energy development (hosted at Hochschule Joanneum, Graz, Austria).

DKIT states that it had the highest proportion on registered international students of any IOT in 2015, with 494 students registered from 12 countries. Challenges include the decision by the Saudi Arabian Government to change its funding strategy to fund only students enrolling in top international universities.

Fee income from non-EU students makes a significant contribution to the income of the Institute, and this is currently being used to help meet ongoing operational costs. In the longer term, the Institute hopes to use such income for the establishment of an investment fund for the development of strategic projects.

6. Institutional consolidation

DKIT confronted significant financial challenges in 2015. The Institute's draft financial results for the year ended 31 August 2015 showed a deficit of €1.3m which, when added to the previously accumulated deficit of €1.9m, meant that the accumulated deficit stood at €3.2m.

The Institute has developed its financial plan for 2015–2018 with a view to returning the Institute to a break-even position by 31 August 2018. The plan addresses some key reforms and development issues for DKIT and identifies both the immediate causes of the current difficulties and the major structural and provision issues which drive cost and absorb or limit income generation; these include:

- Improving performance in non-full-time accredited provision, thus increasing educational opportunities for part-time and flexible learners
- Reviewing approved programme schedules to ensure efficiency
- Developing a strategic plan for the School of Engineering to grow student numbers to meet future skills needs
- Restoring research projects to a self-funding position
- Review of pay and non-pay costs.

The Institute estimates that it will report a break-even position for the financial year end 31 August 2015, when accounting for the inclusion of the devolved grant.

Reduced income levels from international fee paying students could negatively impact on the Institute's financial position.

DKIT has introduced a degree of greater flexibility and transparency through the adoption of a centralised timetabling system for all lecturing staff for managing and recording workload allocation. This is a relatively new system, introduced in the last two years, and it has resulted in greater oversight and management of academic staff work plans.

The centralised timetable has also provided greater efficiencies in the use of teaching resources and facilities to include classrooms, lab facilities etc.

Additional notes

Regional clusters

The Institute has indicated that its target for 2016 for the development and delivery of a joint taught master's programme with DCU has been deferred.

DKIT has highlighted that some of its targets under regional clusters for 2015 have been incorporated into the MEND Cluster Project Plan 2016 (included in Appendix 2). For these reasons, the cluster proposes that the compact targets for 2016 be replaced with the outputs set out in the MEND Cluster Project Plan 2016.

DKIT exceeded its target in relation to the development of the NEFHEA Model for wider participation – with 11 advanced entry programmes for students with FETAC Level 6 Advanced Certificates, against a target of 8. It has now revised its target for 2016 upwards to 11.

Equal access and lifelong learning

Given the uptake and retention rates for Springboard courses of approximately 78 per cent, the Institute feels that it would be prudent to reduce its target for 2016/17 from 120 to 95.