

## Institute of Technology Sligo (ITS)

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### 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 meeting. Consideration was also given to any points of clarification as provided by your institute at our meeting 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. The institute continues to develop the compact to include greater use of data, and to focus on particular priority areas. In its self-evaluation report, cover letter and meeting discussion, Institute of Technology Sligo raised questions regarding the value of the process. The HEA noted that IT Sligo has a long history of demonstrating strategy and of being responsive to its region, and that it is in a stronger position than many to be strategic and inventive. It was thus a concern that the self-evaluation submission did not convey the depth of strategic thinking, prioritisation and traditional strength of the institute to the extent that might have been expected. At the meeting, the institute re-stated its strategic objective and re-emphasised its prioritisation as set out in its self-assessment and explained that concerns arise from the particularly difficult funding situation for higher education at present. The Institute reaffirmed its commitment to robust strategic planning and delivery against objectives. The HEA believe that some of the issues raised by IT Sligo in the process are not as external to the institute as it suggests, although the Institute emphasised the limitations arising from being underfunded. As an autonomous institute, IT Sligo has to, and does, make strategic decisions that take account of the external environment.

IT Sligo and its partners are progressing the Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA), and IT Sligo has clearly made this its first priority, above the regional cluster. Yet it appears to the HEA that the regional cluster may contribute to CUA objectives, and of course to wider regional development. Equally, the CUA can contribute to the development of the cluster. Clarification on the current policy in respect of Clusters was sought by IT Sligo.

In summary therefore, IT Sligo has demonstrated very good progress against mission-coherent objectives through an analytical and probing self-evaluation report and use of other data sources. The institute needs to continue to develop its approach to benchmarking to assist in priority setting and self-evaluation. IT Sligo should have regard to the specific institutional feedback provided in this document and in the reflections on performance document in advance of, and in preparation for, the next round of compact evaluations.

## Minutes of Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3 bilateral meeting, 13 September 2016

### **In attendance**

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with two external advisors (Dr Andrée Surssock and Dr John Hegarty), 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.

### **ITS representatives**

- Mr Colin McClean, Interim President
- Mr Tom Reilly, Head of Strategy & Planning
- Ms Elizabeth McCabe, Secretary/Financial Controller
- Dr Jerry Bird, Head of School of Science
- Dr Brendan McCormack (incoming President – attending in an observational capacity)

The HEA welcomed Institute of Technology Sligo (ITS) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which it operates. ITS is commended on its strong progress and for its self-evaluation report that 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. The HEA makes the following observations on the institute's performance:

- In its self-evaluation report and cover letter, and in discussion, ITS raised questions regarding the value of the process. The HEA noted that ITS has a long history of demonstrating strategy and of being responsive to its region, and that the institute is in a stronger position than many to be strategic and inventive. It was thus a concern that the self-evaluation submission did not convey the depth of strategic thinking, prioritisation and traditional strength of the institute to the extent that might have been expected. The institute pointed to its identified strategic priorities and the prioritisation of domains in the self-assessment process. The institute explained that concerns arise from the current particularly difficult funding situation for higher education. The institute reaffirmed its commitment to robust strategic planning and delivery against objectives.
- Some of the issues raised by ITS are not as external to ITS as the institute suggests. As an autonomous institute, ITS has to, and does, make strategic decisions that take account of the external environment.
- ITS and its partners are progressing the Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA), and ITS has clearly made this its first priority, above the regional cluster. Yet it appears to the HEA that the regional cluster may contribute to CUA objectives, and of course to wider regional development. Equally, the CUA can contribute to the development of the cluster.

### **ITS opening remarks**

ITS indicated that it feels it is a strong and high-performing institution. It achieved a high ranking last time and hopes to maintain that positioning. In that regard, the institute had some concerns regarding the HEA feedback, for example in relation to the comments on ambition. ITS is quite clear that its

ambition is to become a technological university, working with its CUA partners. ITS considers that it is underfunded and limited by the ECF, and that it has to remain prudent, and has further additional pressures arising from the implications of the impending Cush report on fixed-term and part-time employment in lecturing in third-level education. The removal of flexible hours subsequent to a Department of Education & Skills/TUI agreement in May 2016 will also affect ITS, particularly if this change is not funded. HEIs are constrained in how they can react or take risks. ITS is also facing a declining budget surplus, demographic challenges in the region, and migration of students towards the east of the country. However, the institute noted that it continues to offer a range of provision at Levels 6, 7 and 8, and has become the first institute to launch a new apprenticeship programme outside the traditional craft areas.

## Clusters

ITS's responsiveness to the needs of its region is most important to it. The development of the CUA is therefore the priority. This position has been validated at institutional level by the recent internal consultation leading up to the next strategic plan. The TU agenda is thus aligned with the agenda for growth of the institute, and identifies the strategy and the areas where ITS wants to excel. There is a cluster aspect to this, in that ITS has staff upskilling to PhD level at Galway, there is a Wild Atlantic Way research programme, and there is an exercise to map the PLC programmes in the region. ITS has also invested with NUIG in a joint masters in regulatory affairs. But ITS also feels that there are differences between the city clusters and the regional clusters, and that there is a challenge in the size of the cluster and the geographical distances involved. Nor should the cluster be exclusive: ITS has and needs relations with others beyond the cluster. Another downside for the cluster is that the dedicated resources from the HEA for project management and the extra work involved are no longer there. Overall, ITS remains unclear on the purpose of clusters, but will continue to collaborate and respond to national policy once that clarity is there. More generally, the challenge is to find an educational model that will deliver for the region. The institute sees the CUA as the model, meeting the needs of the learner in their own location. The model is flexible, and can be adapted and adopted to suit the different partners' individual needs.

The HEA questioned the management of risk in relation to the concurrent pursuit of TU status and managing core business in the context of resource constraints. ITS responded that it has continued to support the bid in real terms – for example, given its stronger financial position, it was able to invest more in the project than other partners. The financial risk in the reality is that the system is underfunded, and this is a cause for concern, but the development of TUs is government policy. The partners have real plans under each aspect of the CUA. They have had conversations on strategy and risk, even considering the risk of a failed merger, but ITS is of the view that meeting the TU criteria is worthwhile and important in any case. So even if the TU process is not completed, there is value in striving to meet the criteria, and that reduces risk. ITS has the capacity and capability, and is delivering for itself and for the CUA group on that basis.

## Teaching and learning, transitions agenda, access

On teaching and learning, the HEA noted the positive developments in relation to retention and that ITS had already reached their final 2016 target. The aim was to reduce the non-progression rate by 4 per cent to 23 per cent. The mechanisms of peer learning and curriculum supports have worked well, but ITS will need to continue progress in this regard. On transitions, ITS reiterated awareness of its own capacity and capability. The institute is progressing the agenda and has demonstrated a

significant contribution. The institute also views workplace learning as important. There are challenges too: the institute has a complex student cohort, and meeting their diverse needs can be difficult. ITS also spoke about quality: the institute has analysed its ISSE results, down to programme level, and is sharing data within CUA. ITS is also looking for opportunities for wider comparison and benchmarking. The institute has significant numbers of work placements, and strong demand from employers for student placements. Graduate surveys and the strong demand for graduates in occupational health & safety and a number of the bio-tech areas are also indicators of positive student outcomes.

On access, the HEA commended the work of ITS. The HEA questioned whether the FE access strategy was delivering increased student numbers in the way it should, as there has been some decrease in numbers. The HEA also noted that the response rate to the equal access survey had reduced at ITS, and that the institute could usefully talk to its regional partners and CUA partners, who continue to have good results. ITS responded that 67 per cent of its student population is grant aided, compared with some universities which have only 33 per cent. It is thus understandable that it has retention challenges, but the institute is responding. But, again, any such work is resource-constrained. National databases would be very useful for comparisons and for identifying best practice, and would assist both the institutions and the HEA, provided data protection concerns can be addressed.

### **Research and development**

ITS reported that it has a significant and growing research endeavour. The current strategy aims to develop a research project pipeline from the regional development centre to the institute and region. The institute is currently working on the structured post-graduate mechanism for both masters and PhD levels. It established a contract research centre last year to make innovation vouchers more accessible. This has been successful, but the institute would like to see more innovation vouchers converted into innovation partnerships in the region. On the staff side, ITS has updated its definition of 'research-active'. There is also considerable activity at the CUA level, building the employment capacity of the region. The CUA partners are also working together on innovation and internationalisation. For example, ITS works closely with LyIT on innovation centres, new frontiers and technology transfer projects. However, although the partners work well together, there are some limitations due to the fact that they are three independent institutions.

### **Enhanced internationalisation**

Internationalisation is not a high priority for ITS. Where it may develop is in the form of institution-to-institution relationships; it will not be pursued simply as a way of increasing student numbers.

### **Further development of the compact process**

ITS looks forward to the next round, but feels that the model is faulty. The risk of losing funding is significant. It discourages risk and the pursuit of stretch targets. Additive money would be better than subtractive.

Furthermore, the system is not coherent, which makes working within it difficult. However, the process is still in its early stages, and it will be interesting to see how it develops. ITS is keen to ensure that its compact is aligned with its strategy, and intends to progress that in the near term.