Institute of Technology Sligo (IT Sligo)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

The Institute of Technology Sligo has provided a clear self-evaluation report providing an update on all interim 2015 targets, as requested. The self-evaluation report is completed in full and colour-coded. The Institute has achieved most of its interim targets and provides context on areas where performance is behind trajectory. Some particular strengths of the current self-evaluation were:

- IT Sligo has made considerable progress towards the achievement of its objectives. The institute is in reasonable financial health and has achieved a balanced budget (being one of only five institutes to do so).

- In line with the stated intention to achieve TU status, IT Sligo reports that it is consistently seeking to raise standards across all domains including teaching and learning, research and community/enterprise engagement. Next level priorities also include progressing access and research agendas.

- Sligo is also growing its significant flexible online provision, where it continues to be a national leader.

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

- The Institute has set as the overarching priority the achievement of TU status, with its partners in Letterkenny and GMIT, and the stage 1 application has been considered by the HEA and approved by the Minister.

- The HEA would be concerned (from a national policy perspective) that in its pursuit of this objective, the ITS might reduce its focus on the cluster partnership. It also seems that this may in fact be inimical to the TU aspirations given that the cluster might provide opportunities to make progress faster than would otherwise have been possible in respect of certain areas – for example, in research and staff development.

- There is a tension in some of the commentary on the compact between the fact that the Institute is in a relatively strong financial position and its expressed view that its capacity to improve performance is inhibited by financial constraints. HEA accepts that of course Sligo must be realistic about its financial resources, but would consider that there might be a greater opportunity to reflect on performance and ambition than is presented in the submission.

- In respect of transitions, IT Sligo reports that its mean and median CAO entry points are relatively low and consequently it does not believe that it would be appropriate to revise entry requirements. IT Sligo also refers to the financial implications of removing any specialised or successful programmes. HEA would welcome further discussion on this.

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

Member institutions of the West/North West regional cluster include NUI Galway, GMIT, IT Sligo and LYIT.

IT Sligo has three compact objectives under this domain, for all of which the targets have been achieved.

IT Sligo reports progress on the West/North West regional cluster: governance structures are in place, two programme managers have been appointed, and there is an agreed academic planning process and regular meetings of Steering and Operations groups. A Head of Research Group has also been established.

Progress has been made in relation to engagement with the FE sector and ETBs. MoUs have been signed with LYIT and Donegal ETB. A high-level regional HE–FE planning group is working to develop regional pathways. Further MoUs and programme mapping is planned with ETBs. A number of new formal collaborations are listed, including one across the cluster with the NFT&L, where four collaborative projects have been funded.

Joint academic planning procedures have been agreed and a large programme mapping exercise across all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes has been completed. Mapping of civic and research engagement activities across all disciplines has concluded.

Finally, a transfer system is now in place across partner and FE institutions providing better progression opportunities. Policies relating to recognition of prior learning are in place between IT Sligo, LYIT and GMIT, but so far not with NUIG.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

IT Sligo has two compact objectives under this domain, for both of which the targets have been achieved.

IT Sligo states that it has increased its overall WTE student numbers and has surpassed the target for end-2015. Full-time undergraduate numbers have fallen, however, which the Institute links to a reduction in the number of CAO-aged students in the region. IT Sligo expect that this trend will be reversed in the next five years, with an expected increase of 9 per cent among the cohort. The number of online students has almost doubled since 2012/13 from 930 to 1,843 in 2015/16. IT Sligo has exceeded its target in this respect.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

IT Sligo has three compact objectives under this domain, for which the Institute reports one target achieved, one target partially achieved, and one target unclear.

The first objective is to deliver high quality T&L via the virtual learning environment (VLE) and in collaboration with other providers. This is manifested in the reduced rate of non-progression, which has fallen from 27 per cent to 23 per cent as of March 2016. IT Sligo attributes this improvement to peer mentoring programmes and targeted tutorial support to programmes with high attrition rates. Although the end of year target has been achieved, IT Sligo have indicated that they would like to improve on this further. The Institute has expressed its desire to re-establish its T&L unit and increase learning supports should further funding be made available.

The second objective was to increase the number of academic staff with postgraduate qualifications in T&L from a baseline figure of 7 to 12 by end-2015. Currently, 11 staff have obtained the qualification. Although this is a modest objective, it may be difficult to reach the intended target of 20 by end-2016.

The final objective in this domain is the development, with the Connacht Ulster Alliance (CUA), of a joint Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy which is ongoing.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

The Institute has four compact objectives under this domain, for which the Institute reports two targets achieved, one target partially achieved, and one target not achieved.

IT Sligo has established three strategic research centres, as per its targets. No information is given in the report on the activities of these centres but, according to this assessment, IT Sligo has met its KPIs and funding for a three-year period has been confirmed. Although the report states that the decision to establish a fourth centre has been deferred, IT Sligo still expect that this will be established and generating funding by the end of the year. It seems an ambitious target and without further detail on how it will be achieved, it is difficult to determine if it is feasible.

The Institute endeavoured to increase its research income to €3m at the end of 2016 from a baseline figure of €1.1m. Research Income at the end of August 2015 showed a small increase of €2.1m (compared to €1.9m the previous year). The Institute acknowledges that its original figure is now a stretch target, given the funding climate, but hopes that the recent establishment of a Contract Research Unit, aimed at provide research and innovation support to SMEs, will help raise capital. No further information on potential sources of income is provided.

IT Sligo's number of level 9/10 research students has slightly decreased from a baseline of 72 to 71 by the end of 2015, which is some distance from the target of 100 by the end of 2016 – this target was marked red.

The final objective under this domain was to increase the number of research performing staff, with proposed indicators to include the number of level 9/10 students supervised, the number of peer-reviewed publications and the number of successful research funding applications. No figures have been provided for this objective and Sligo IT indicates that it is revising this target.

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

The Institute has three compact objectives under this domain, for which the Institute reports that all three targets have been achieved/exceeded.

IT Sligo has set itself a target of confirming two new agreements annually to provide company-specific training. It succeeded in doing this in 2014 and has done so again in 2015. Abbvie Sligo (plus five indigenous SMEs) have engaged Sligo IT for a range of Level 6 online programmes. Bristol-Myers, Squibb (BMS) also has a number of biopharma Level 8 and Level 9 programmes throughout 2016. This is an objective against which Sligo IT has been particularly successful, and which will help augment the Institute's links with industry in the region.

The objective of increasing the number of EI Innovation vouchers has been achieved again this year; the target has been exceeded by 4 and the target of 35 by the end of the year seems more than achievable.

6. Enhanced internationalisation

IT Sligo has modest targets in this area but appear to be making reasonable progress. Of its two targets, it reports meeting one and partially meeting the other.

According to its self-assessment report, the number of international students at IT Sligo is down and the target for end-2015 was not met. However, when numbers of Brazilian students are discounted, there is a modest rise in international student numbers. Figures from the HEA suggest that IT Sligo has in fact already reached its target of 250. Confirmation of actual international enrolments should be clarified.

Targets for outward student placements also appear to have been achieved (according to HEA figures), though the Institute notes that this particular objective has been challenging. A new Business/

International Marketing programme with French/German/Spanish, which they hoped would provide a large number of outward students, has not recruited as well as expected.

7. Institutional consolidation

IT Sligo's ambition is to achieve TU status as part of the CUA. Within this overall domain, four key objectives have been identified:

- Signing of CUA MOU (in 2012) and submission of collaborative proposals to the HEA (baseline) – achieved

- Mainstream online QA student survey across the CUA – partially achieved

- Report on feasibility of online exams management system with CUA partners – partially achieved

- A common learning, teaching and assessment strategy – partially achieved.

In March, the CUA submitted its Stage 1 application to the HEA seeking designation as a TU. This was approved by the Minister in October and the CUA progressed to Stage 2. A further application for funding to continue the work of the CUA was made in November. The HEA postponed the decision on funding until end Q2 2016.

A working group for the online student survey was established in 2014 and an online pilot survey was rolled out in GMIT and LyIT in 2014/15. Following the successful pilot, the full survey was rolled out across both institutions in 2015/16. IT Sligo plans to roll out the survey in 2016/17.

A scoping of an online exams management system was commissioned by the three CUA institutions. While key processes were articulated, financial constraints prevented them from proceeding to tender and product development in 2015. Nonetheless, the project gave rise to a collaboration between GMIT and DCU and a system was piloted in 2015/16. There is a plan to review the system with the intention of mainstreaming (across the CUA?). No further targets were set.

A CUA document on learning, teaching and assessment was developed prior to 2015, which has led to a draft document on 'CUA LTA visions, principles and strategy'. Plans to convene a cross-institutional working group to commence work on this strategy have been delayed because of a TUI directive. A common RPL policy has been developed and an online RPL portal has been piloted. In addition, a Level 9 staff training module has been developed and successfully delivered.

Additional notes

IT Sligo reported a surplus position of €2,009,000 for its 2014/15 draft accounts and is projecting a surplus budget of €10,000 for 2016.