

Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT)

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 HEA acknowledges the progress the institute has made in developing its links with industry to underpin the development of its curriculum; the continued implementation of its access agenda, and in particular the improvement of access routes from further to higher education; and the institute's revised international strategy aimed at growing its international student cohort and internationalising its campus. The HEA notes also the continued strong alignment of the compact with the institute's mission, and the prioritisation of resources across the compact in accordance with that mission.

The HEA notes that Limerick Institute of Technology in the past collaborated strongly with the Shannon Consortium, and expects this to continue in order to secure and enhance the benefits flowing to the region.

In summary therefore, LIT 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 is commended for its use of benchmarking. The institute intends that future benchmarking will be both national and international. LIT 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, 15 September 2016

In attendance

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with two External Advisers (Dr Andrée Sursock 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.

LIT representatives

- Professor Vincent Cunnane, President
- Mr Terry Twomey, Vice President, Academic Affairs and Registrar
- Dr Liam Brown, Vice President, Research, Enterprise & Development
- Mr Jimmy Browne, Vice President, Corporate Services & Capital Development
- Ms Maria Kyne, Joint Head, Faculty of Applied Science, Engineering & IT
- Mr Paschal Meehan, Joint Head, Faculty of Applied Science, Engineering & IT
- Mr James Greenslade, Head, Faculty of Art & Design
- Mr Donnacha McNamara, Joint Head, Faculty of Business & Humanities
- Ms Marian Duggan, Joint Head, Faculty of Business & Humanities

The HEA welcomed Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which it operates. LIT was commended on its strong 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. The HEA made the following observations on the institute's performance:

- LIT continues to perform very well against its agreed compact and demonstrates strong coherence of activity, closely aligned to its mission. The HEA notes that the institute is in a process of transition, with the very recent appointment of a new President and a new governing body, it will engage further with the institute on any proposed changes to the compact or the institute's wider strategic direction.
- The HEA notes that the institute is currently reviewing the level of resources it can dedicate to engaging with its cluster, having regard to general budget constraints. Based on its past success in this area, and to continue the momentum achieved through the Shannon Consortium, the HEA encourages LIT to continue to actively engage with its cluster.
- LIT has shown good capacity to deliver on its objectives, and the HEA acknowledges that, if funding levels were increased and a borrowing framework introduced for the IoT sector, the institute has identified areas and priorities in which it could expand its provision.

LIT's opening remarks

The institute welcomed the HEA feedback on its self-evaluation report. The institute views the compact process as valuable, with a positive impact on the institute. However, the institute noted that the process is being undertaken in the context of an underfunded higher education system, which has contributed to the institute's underperformance in achieving some of its objectives. LIT's core mission is to produce skilled graduates who can serve industry demands in the region. The institute is also facilitating major social change, as 70% of its students are grant-aided. The institute is channelling most of its resources into enhancing the experience for students. The institute is aware of the need not only to attract students into higher education, but also to support them throughout their time in higher education, and has introduced a number of initiatives for improving retention rates. The institute also expressed concern that there appears to be some mission drift by the university sector, in which universities are beginning to provide courses which were traditionally provided by the IoT sector.

Risk management

LIT emphasised that a lot of its risks, such as funding, are outside of its control, but the institute is taking steps to mitigate those risks that are within its control. The institute is performing well on access, engagement, and teaching and learning, and is serving its region well. LIT does not expect research to become a major part of its activity, but the institute is very committed to being research-informed, with particular emphasis on industry focused applied research with the ability to apply research to support regional development.

The risk management function of the institute is developing, and it currently has a risk register which is reviewed three times a year. In the context of constrained funding, the institute is seeking to incentivise certain strategic behaviour, such as growing its student numbers, but the majority of LIT's students are enrolled on STEM programmes, where the institute faces physical capacity (both quantity and quality) issues. The institute is addressing this problem by seeking to further develop its campus. This capital development plan (Campus 2030 – Our Places is fully integrated with the Limerick Economic and spatial development plan

On the basis that funding levels will not significantly increase, the HEA queried how the institute prioritised areas for expansion. LIT is constantly engaging with industry to establish what skills are needed and arranges its programmes to meet these needs. If demand for a programme dwindles, it may be discontinued, and the resources deployed in areas that are in demand.

As the institute is in the process of opening up its campus to the city of Limerick, one of the biggest risks is that it will raise expectations in the city without having the capacity to meet these expectations. The institute considers it essential that the institute, and the state more generally, meets these raised expectations. LIT has achieved a high standard of programme delivery in the past, and the institute is concerned that it may be unable to continue delivering to these standards with reduced levels of funding.

Regional clusters

The institute has had a long and successful engagement with the Shannon Consortium, but it is now reviewing this relationship. The consortium was originally underpinned by SIF funding, but as this has come to an end and with the underfunding of the sector in general, the institute is finding it difficult to allocate adequate resources to it. The main beneficiary of the Shannon Consortium has been the

Limerick region, but an incentive is required if the institutions are to continue to actively engage with it.

LIT expressed the concern that clustering may drive homogenisation of the programmes offered by the member institutions and that this would be to the detriment of the sector. The HEA clarified that the aim of establishing clusters was to encourage institutions to engage with one another in order to reduce the duplication of programmes in their region.

The main benefit of the consortium is felt on the ground, as it requires people from different institutions across the region to work together, and this is useful for the people involved. However, cluster activities don't attract significant funding, and institutions have to prioritise activities that generate funds. If the government wants high-functioning clusters, the institute is of the view that more funding is required; any funding available at present that is not earmarked for cluster activities will be used to develop the institute's core functions, such as access, and teaching and learning.

Overall, LIT will continue to be responsive to the region it serves, and will further strive to meet the criteria for TU designation.

Engagement with enterprise and the community, and embedded knowledge exchange

LIT reported that it is regularly in discussion with industry in its region about the possibility of employers providing funding and access to equipment for its students. Industry is willing to cooperate, but one of the main stumbling blocks is that some of LIT's facilities are in prefabricated buildings and industry is reluctant to provide equipment that will be located in these buildings.

High-quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

The institute's research strategy is in line with national strategy, and it could do more, but is constrained by the lack of available funding and the need to upgrade its capital infrastructure.

LIT raised the issue of funding if it were to collaborate with one of its cluster partners to deliver a joint PhD. Under the current Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM), the funding for PhD students transfers to the institution with which the student is registered, and this makes it difficult to divide the funding between institutions who are offering a joint PhD. The HEA noted that the RGAM model will be reviewed, and that it will consider such issues, but also pointed out that not all institutes of technology agree with the research element of the RGAM being changed.

Enhanced internationalisation

LIT had set itself an ambitious target of growing its non-EU student numbers. To offset the reduced numbers of its 'Science without Borders' students, the institute has transferred its recruitment efforts to alternative markets such as Canada and Malaysia, and it is confident that it will perform well against this target.

The institute has developed its international office to lead the internationalisation of its curriculum. The experience the institute can offer to its international students is restricted by a lack of campus accommodation.

As most of LIT's students (70%) are in receipt of a SUSI grant, it is difficult to encourage students to pursue overseas placement, because of the expense involved, but the institute has set funding aside to address this.

Future development of the compact process

The framework is currently being reviewed for the next iteration of the strategic dialogue process, but it is not envisaged that there will be extensive changes. The HEA envisages that institutions will be more selective and prioritise the areas in which they are strongest.

With regard to the process, LIT emphasised that it needs to be undertaken on an annual basis, and the institute will continue to report under the identified domains as part of the national strategy for higher education. It is important that the intangibles of the student experience are not lost in the process, and these aspects should also be taken into account in assessing the performance of an institution.

LIT considers that it has achieved the majority of its targets. It is of the view that if institutions are encouraged to pursue stretch targets, they need to be empowered to recruit additional staff and provided with the increased funding necessary.

In assessing an institution's performance, the HEA must take into account the fact that the institution is operating in a reduced funding environment. LIT continues to perform soundly with regard to financial performance, however the constrained financial position is impacting on the quality and quantity of appropriate teaching and learning space. The Institute is strongly of the view that the continued constrained funding will impact negatively on the financial position of the Institute and the quality of the student experience.

AOB

The institute noted the following other issues:

- The institute considers it important that the respective missions and programmes of the IoT sector and the university sector continue to be clearly differentiated.
- A forum needs to be established in which the HEI leaders engage more directly in discussion of national issues affecting the sector, such as IR issues.
- LIT is planning on restructuring its programme provision, and to recruit 15 academics to support this. LIT is aware that a new Delegated Sanction Agreement is currently being finalised, but would appreciate notice of its introduction as soon as possible, as it needs to establish if it can proceed with these appointments.
- LIT expressed a concern that, if funding is made available under PRTL1 6, most it may be allocated to the large research centres to the detriment of research in the IoT sector. LIT emphasised that this needs to be addressed.