Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) has provided a clear and detailed 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 institution 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:

- LIT is fully engaging with the Strategic Dialogue process. LIT's compact objectives are strongly woven into its 2020 Strategy and thus its 2015 Interim Strategy Review.
- Across its compact, LIT is making strong progress on the objectives it has set for itself. Where there has been less progress than originally envisaged, plans to address this are clearly outlined.
- The self-evaluation is comprehensive with all sections including 'reflections' as well as reporting on compact targets.
- The Institute set out its concerns and challenges in a balanced way – such as in respect of declining infrastructural capacity and research equipment which are constraining its work in the Shannon region.
- LIT uses benchmarking throughout its compact (as appropriate) and is very 'self-aware'. This approach is also reflected in its Interim Strategy Review (Introduction, p.5). For each objective, the appropriate senior staff member responsible for its execution is identified.

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

- LIT hosts seven enterprise centres (including a number from Tipperary). Overall how is this business and industry relationship leveraged and how does it impact on the resource challenges mentioned elsewhere?
- LIT is well woven into the community, so partnering and clustering seems to come naturally to it. However, it would be interesting to hear more about the leveraging of these relationships locally, regionally and within the cluster.
- Plans for the National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE) do not seem to be moving forward.
- On internationalisation it would be useful to hear if there are plans to develop the curriculum at LIT to be more outward-looking.

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

LIT has set itself five objectives under this section, all of which it has coded green. It is an active member of the Shannon Consortium for which it has now been agreed that the Mid-West Regional Skills Forum will form the external advisory board. Undergraduate provision across the cluster has been mapped and a Shannon Consortium Programme Portfolio Facilitator has been appointed to advance inter-institutional programmatic collaborations, the first of which is the construction

management programmes. Further up the NFQ, the development of a structured PhD in Built Environment and Society is under way across the three institutions. LIT's strong collaboration in the Shannon Consortium reflects its clear commitment to its region, and with other HEIs in the cluster it plays a clear role in plans to regenerate Limerick – through the Limerick Charter, for example.

LIT reports that its Art and Design Teacher Education programme has been integrated into the new National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE). It also advises that, as part of its work on shared services, the Shannon Consortium Procurement Network has successfully transitioned into the Educational Procurement Service which is recognised by the Office of Government Procurement as one of the new national procurement strategy hubs. In its reflections, LIT notes that the SIDF-funded Thresholds Concepts project to support transitions from second level is currently the subject of a proposal to SFI.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

The Institute has set itself four objectives under this section, one of which (on flexible learning) it has partly coded amber. It also cautions that previously flagged space restrictions are constraining its capacity to accommodate growing CAO demand. In addition, it's planned 'One Stop Shop' CRM system for student services has been shelved because of financial constraints.

Positively, LIT reports that it has either met or exceeded its targets for equity of access. It is also undertaking very good work in the area of progression between FE and HE. Building on its achieved compact targets, it has signed MoUs with Limerick and Clare ETBs and is applying a progression model based on the community college system in the USA.

While LIT is behind on its flexible learning targets (industrial action in September 2015 being cited as the main reason), it is building staff capability to deliver flexible learning in a number of ways, including a Shannon Consortium online staff development programme and through the appointment of an educational technologist. It is slightly behind in its apprenticeship targets.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

LIT has set itself six objectives under this domain, three of which it has coded green, one amber and the remaining two a mix of green and amber (reflecting differing progress on some sub-components). It embraces an active learning philosophy in its teaching, learning and assessment, which is also reflected in its Interim Strategy Review (p. 17). Active learning methods account for 65 per cent of learning assessment, exceeding even its 2016 compact target of 60 per cent.

The Institute makes strong use of both national (ISSE) and international (Trendence previously EU Student Barometer) benchmarks to validate its educational offering. It scores well in the ISSE survey; one area identified for improvement is the level of work placements (coded amber in self-evaluation) and LIT plans to address this through its programmatic review process.

With regard to retention, LIT's undergraduate completion rate now stands at 81.81 per cent, up from 81.48 per cent last year. In light of the fact that the 2015 target was 84.15 per cent and the 2016 is target 84.35 per cent, LIT has coded this red. Its first-year completion rate now stands at 78.6 per cent, up significantly from 75.84 per cent last year. Despite this progress, it is shy of its 2015 target of 80 per cent and has thus coded it amber. The 2016 target for first-year completion rates is 80.25 per cent. LIT clearly recognises that it needs to enhance its retention rates and is undertaking proactive work on the ground – for example, reviewing reasons for exits, improving programme information and

inductions and providing scholarships or payments to students from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. It has detailed its explicit LIT Learner Retention Strategy in its Reflections on Cycle 3 (p.6).

LIT advises that 90 per cent of its graduates are in employment, in further education or are volunteering six months after graduation, exceeding its 2015 target of 88 per cent. In addition, a higher proportion of its graduates have remained in the region. While progress on the development of uniform standards of shared services in LIT's campuses across the region has been coded amber, a reasonable explanation has been provided (LIT has reviewed systems nationally and internationally and their identified preferred model – from British Columbia Institute of Technology – is a slightly slower process for technical and support contract reasons).

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

LIT has five objectives under this section, four of which it has coded green and one amber. It has combined this section and the next on its accompanying 'Reflections' commentary. It reiterates (as with its report last year) obstacles to the achievement of targets in this space, namely:

- Inequity of the RGAM for supporting IoT postgraduate research students
- Infrastructural deficits that are rendering equipment risky to users.

It is citing these issues as the reasons for coding its research student enrolment target amber. LIT states that it has 98 research students (against a 2015 target of 100) yet also notes that its SRS gives the figure as 87, explaining that 11 are 'frozen'.

In terms of its ability to offer research degrees, LIT has been granted QQI delegated authority at Level 9 across all of its research areas. In addition, UL's Academic Committee has approved the awarding of UL doctorates by LIT. The federated Limerick Graduate School meets regularly and has implemented strategies for joint generic training programmes for research students across the three institutions. As noted in Section 1, the institutions are developing a structured PhD in Built Environment and Society. It is worth noting that LIT's Interim Strategy Review points to the Shannon Consortium regional cluster as its preferred approach for realising its research ambitions, instead of merging with other IoTs further afield – i.e. Technological University designation (ISR, p.25). Lastly here, LIT is on target for the development of its postgraduate research supervision capacity, meeting its 2015 target for 20 per cent of staff to hold PhD qualifications.

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

LIT has set itself four objectives in this section, all of which it has coded green in its Cycle 3 self-evaluation. That said, its 2015 graduate output is stated as 1,624 against a target of 1,675 and down from 1,818 in 2014. The stated reason for this decline is that more postgraduate students are staying on to PhD level: this may be worth teasing out in more detail.

LIT has comfortably exceeded its targeted numbers of start-ups and entrepreneurs supported by its enterprise centres. It is worth highlighting in this context that, according to its Interim Strategy Review (p.7), LIT hosts seven such centres, some of which came in with the integration of Tipperary Institute. It had targeted 50 active collaborations with companies for 2015, and now reports that there are 47 new collaborations and a total of 109 current projects involving external partners. LIT has participated in the recent OECD HEInnovate Review.

In relation to meeting its TTSI metrics, LIT reports that it has more or less done so. It expects to meet the LOA target in 2016 because it has several Innovation Partnerships coming to fruition. The outcome of its joint application with UL to the TTSI3 funding call is expected during summer 2016.

It is clear that LIT is active in civic engagement in the region – for example, in Limerick's bid to become 2020 European City of Culture. It appears that there is no compact target for civic engagement yet this is covered in the reflections commentary. In keeping with its regional focus, LIT's Campus Masterplan 2030 has taken into account the Institute's role in the revitalisation of Limerick City.

6. Enhanced internationalisation

LIT has set itself five compact objectives for internationalisation, four of which it has coded green and one red. While it has achieved its target for intake for non-EU students and accordingly coded this as green, it points out that the unexpected loss of Science Without Borders will impact on its 2016 target. It is trying to mitigate this by expanding into other markets like Malaysia and Canada and is forecasting 100 enrolments in 2016 (against a target of 120).

As with last year, the Institute has fallen well short of its target for outbound students for study (8 against a target of 30) and the associated ratio vis-à-vis inbound students. It has appropriately coded this target red and provides two main reasons for the shortfall:

- Two thirds of its students receive SUSI support and Erasmus funding is insufficient to encourage such students to study abroad.
- LIT has a high proportion of students in technological disciplines and a high number of mature students, and for both of these cohorts, taking of a study year abroad is difficult.

On the positive side, LIT's targets for international student placements and international staff mobility have been met. Also, its target for transnational education provision has been well exceeded with 105 Chinese students (against a target of 50) currently studying in TNE agreements in the Institute.

7. Institutional consolidation

The text of LIT's compact in this section refers mainly to the integration of Tipperary Institute. It is worth noting that ring-fenced funding for this previously agreed with DES/ HEA was due for expiry at the end of 2015. LIT's has five objectives relating to institutional consolidation (with a focus on institutional sustainability and viability), four of which are coded green and one red.

LIT's failure to meet its target for unit cost per student is ascribed to the higher cost per student at Tipperary Institute. LIT advises that the time needed to drive greater efficiencies at Tipperary means that its 2016 target for this metric will not be met.

While the Institute meets its other targets for financial management (supported by the development of an Institute-wide resource allocation model), in its reflections it issues strong warnings about the financial and capital infrastructural deficits in the IoT sector. It advises that its international benchmarking of relevant ratios deepens its concerns.

LIT's draft 2015 budget (as per the HEA figures) advises of a deficit of €682k after a capital spend of €830k funded from reserves. This compares with a surplus of €15k (after a capital spend of €883k) in 2014.

Additional notes

LIT reported a deficit position of €130,400 for its 2014/15 draft accounts and is projecting a surplus budget of €61,000 for 2016.

Transitions

In section 1, LIT refers to its Thresholds Concepts project to support transitions from second level. It does not appear that there is further information on the transitions agenda.

Workload management – In its Reflections introduction, the Institute notes that timetabled workload management systems are based on academic contracts, RGAM staff utilisation measures and external audit.