

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

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 meetings. Consideration was also given to any points of clarification as provided by your institute at our meetings 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. There are areas of significant progress, including a strong regional and national contribution to enterprise development and nationally and internationally relevant research activity. The Institute is managing a range of complex issues at present. Of particular importance is the commitment to engage with Carlow towards designation as a technological university. The HEA notes the commitment of the Institute to continue to work towards the project in a planned and strategic way, having regard to the complexities involved.

The Institute faces a major challenge in addressing its financial basis. Although some of the issues in question predate the compact, it is essential that they all be addressed quickly. The Institute has not amended its compact to reflect the actions proposed but has agreed a three-year financial plan separately with the HEA to return it to a balanced budget position. Given the absence of reserves, declining cash balances and significant accumulated deficits, any deviation from this plan must be flagged immediately to the HEA. A sound financial basis is essential for all other aspect of institutional performance and it is critical that the financial transformation strategy is effective and is prioritised accordingly by the institute. The Institute is also maintaining its activities across a range of other domains, including student experience, research and development and internationalisation. Progress against the regional cluster has been slower than expected, but the Institute has made some progress in the local skills forum with IT Carlow.

In summary therefore, while there are certain issues of concern as identified by the HEA above, overall WIT has demonstrated good progress against mission-coherent objectives through a reasonably analytical and probing self-evaluation report and use of other data sources. The institute needs to continue to develop its use of benchmarking to inform priority setting and self evaluation. The institute is requested to address areas of concern as a priority. WIT should have regard to the specific institutional feedback provided in this document and in the reflections on performance document in order to continue to improve its overall performance in future cycles of strategic dialogue.

Minutes of Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3 bilateral meeting, 8 September 2016

In attendance

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with two External Advisers (Mr George P. Pernsteiner and Mr John Randall), met with the Institute's representatives as set out below. The meeting was chaired HEA Interim Chief Executive, Dr Anne Looney. A process auditor was also present at the meeting.

WIT representatives

Professor Willie Donnelly, President

Dr Derek O'Byrne, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar

Ms Elaine Sheridan, Vice President for Corporate Affairs and Finance

Dr Richard Hayes, Head of School of Humanities

Dr Neil O'Sullivan, TU Coordinator

Dr Peter McLoughlin, Vice President for Research, Innovation and Graduate Studies

The HEA welcomed Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which the process operates. WIT was commended on its progress and for a 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 respond to national priorities. While the Institute's performance continues to progress and the HEA expects that trajectory to continue, some concerns remain. These concerns should be addressed by the Institute's leadership to ensure that the Institute meets its full potential. The HEA's observations are set out as follows:

- The Institute has reported good progress in many aspects of performance.
- The Institute has continued to maintain its very high performance in research.
- The Institute is continuing to engage in the discussion with IT Carlow towards merger and TU designation.
- The Institute has not amended its compact to reflect the particular and difficult financial issues it faces. However, the Institute has undertaken a range of actions which it is hoped will bring its finances back to balance.

Financial context

The Institute indicated that its next compact will fully reflect both the financial difficulties of the Institute and the measures being taken to address those difficulties. The Institute also noted the ongoing engagement with the HEA in the development and implementation of a financial plan to address the current financial difficulties.

The Institute emphasised that this financial plan is focused on two specific areas. The first aims to increase student numbers, particularly in response to skills deficits identified by employers in the region. The second aims to improve retention levels and reduce first year drop-out (currently at about

20 per cent). Both of these measures would result in an increased ongoing income stream to the Institute.

The Institute also noted particular difficulties which exacerbated the current problems. These related to the deterioration of the capital infrastructure and to space constraints, particularly around labs. The Institute also expressed concern that the present funding arrangements for institutes of technology do not adequately provide for the research costs incurred by the Institute.

TU initiative

The Institute set out the progress that has been made in relation to the TU project, and noted the role of the Kelly report and subsequent facilitation which has taken place. The Institute considers that this work has been very important in setting a basis for the future engagement of the two institutions in the project and restated its commitment to the delivery of a new technological university for the region.

Teaching and learning

The Institute noted that it has undertaken extensive work to engage with local employers and industry to identify skills needs, and to align to the portfolio of programmes offered with those needs, and, as appropriate to develop new programmes. Many of the new programmes are being offered on a part-time basis in recognition of the needs of those already in employment.

In relation to the transitions agenda, the Institute has taken actions to reform entry points to provide undenominated entry points in the business area. The Institute also noted that there was a need to continue to consider the needs of students and that in some cases students actively sought denominated courses.

Research and development

The Institute noted that it has sought to be innovative in fostering a research culture, and that it has used its workload allocation system and other policies to encourage staff to take part in research activity. These measures have helped the development of a strong research culture within WIT; the Institute noted that there is a major challenge now to retain high quality staff.

The Institute also noted that the compact objective of developing a graduate school with IT Carlow has changed to become a more general discussion on a graduate school across the cluster as a whole.