Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

- The self-evaluation report submitted by Waterford Institute of Technology is coded green with the exception of the objective to improve student pathways. A number of areas including internationalisation and participation, equal access and lifelong learning have been subjected to adjusted targets and have exceeded these targets. A further increase in the targets set by the Institute may be appropriate in these areas.

- WIT are to be commended for exceeding their targets. However, increasing mature student numbers should also be considered as part of the Institute's objectives in the category of participation, equal access and lifelong learning.

- The target student figures included under the Institute's objective to increase internationalisation at WIT focus on students *coming to* WIT rather than on students from WIT *going to* institutions abroad to gather skills, experience and specialisations. A review of the breakdown of student's targets in this category would be useful in this regard.

- A further increase in the targets set by the Institute may be appropriate in these areas. Given that the report on WIT's financial position includes a note on growing CAO numbers and on the need to increase student retention numbers, strategies that are currently in place should be both maintained and developed.

- There have been positive developments in the reduction of the number of programmes available and in a review of exit and entry points to programmes in computing. The number of CAO programmes being offered has reduced from 43 in 2015 to 41 in 2016. A more detailed review of the impact of these developments on students' first employment destinations and on employment in the region would be useful – this would help ascertain if the single entry to level 8 programmes in computing and the developed exit routes would benefit students outside of programmes in computing.

- Reporting on TU designation is coded green. The Institute is too commended on its successful submission for funding of €1.45 million for the development of a business plan as part of stages 2 and 3 of the TU designation process. Reengagement between WIT and Carlow IT is acknowledged; and, given the pause in the development of this process, this objective should be coded amber rather than green.

- The self-evaluation report point to the bedding down of cluster thinking across the Institute. Progress has been made in this regard through collaborative projects developed in the main between WIT and UCC and in particular with Tyndall at UCC. WIT continues to build on its past successes in research, as seen in the accumulation of €55.5million in research funding which is 25 per cent ahead of target for the period 2012/13 to 2015/2016. However, the report does point to the difficulties posed by the scale of the cluster and by the high number of institutions within the cluster. In the light of this, the aim to develop a graduate school should be coded amber and adjusted towards the development of a multi-campus graduate school focusing on the generic skills modules already developed.

- Shared learning and experience is identified as a forte of the cluster and this is highlighted by the Institute's engagement with the regional skills fora, which is bringing coherency to the cluster. WIT may also wish to consider Springboard numbers in relation to this strength. WIT submitted 25 proposals to Springboard of which 9 (36 per cent) were funded, representing 100 current enrolments.

- A number of the categories coded green require further detail. While it seems targets have been met, the breakdown of student numbers and funding is not specified in sufficient detail to confirm the appropriate level of coding.

- Student numbers continue to grow and there is ongoing development of shared learning experiences across the cluster. Structure development for learning is mainly focused on establishing a graduate school and the delivery of shared generic modules. Strong emphasis has been placed on the development of shared academic planning, while the report also refers to the difficulties of scale and the number of institutions places on cluster development.

- Considerable focus has been placed on WIT's engagement with regional skills fora and research mapping across the Southern cluster. More specific detail would be useful in both instances but particularly in relation to the regional skills fora and how engagement with it impacts on the Action Plan for Jobs in the region. Engagement with the fora is cohering the cluster and promoting more joined-up thinking in certain areas. This is more evident in the self-evaluation reports submitted by other cluster members, but also impacts on WIT.

- The financial context for the institute is also very important. The Institute is viewed as financially vulnerable by the HEA in that it is carrying an accumulated deficit and running a sizeable ongoing deficit (c. €2.5 million on turnover of c. €90 million). The Institute is benefiting from relatively high research income, which is providing cash flow basis to support ongoing operation. This is not related to compact goals or objectives – the Institute should reflect on this.

Self-evaluation report - domain level review

1. Regional clusters

WIT identified four objectives in relation to regional clusters: a) create a formal regional cluster between the named institutions; b) improve student pathways; c) shared academic planning and d) meeting the criteria for technological university designation. The objective to improve student pathways is coded amber, while the other three are coded green.

a) Create a formal regional cluster

WIT's institute objective to create a formal regional cluster between the named institutions is acknowledged in the submitted compact as part of the Institute's history and strategy to engage and collaborate with regional, national and international partners.

Progress towards this target is noted by the Institute as operating 'extremely well' and focusing on the three pillars of internationalisation, research and the use of digital technology. The example provided of a cluster-driven project was funded in 2014 under the National Forum for Teaching and Learning. This project was led by IT Tralee and dealt with digital supports for transitioning international students into the Irish higher education sector.

Other examples of cluster collaboration provided by WIT include the signing of an MOU with Tyndall and Teagasc in the area of smart agriculture. Further detail on this MOU would add to the evaluation here.

The Link Team notes that an SFI cluster proposal has been submitted. Particular details relating to planned research outputs and anticipated skills development that would feed into the Action Plan for Jobs would be useful in highlighting the impact of cluster thinking as it translates into action in the region.

The Link Team notes the development of other collaborative projects with CIT and UCC and the extension of the Technology Transfer office and the New Frontiers Entrepreneur Development Programme in collaboration with ITC. Further detail in relation to the target of evaluating the effectiveness of the governance framework for the cluster by the end of 2016 would be useful here.

b) Improve student pathways

The institute's aim to improve student pathways is coded amber while it was coded green in cycle 2 self-evaluation. A review of access/progression arrangements at each institution has been completed. Member experiences have been shared in order to facilitate a movement towards a single access/progression approach.

Movement towards the target to review pathways profile based on new academic developments by the end of 2016 would seem to be developing. However, more detail on the new academic developments in place would be useful in providing a more precise evaluation.

The Institute regards the geographical scale of the cluster and the number of autonomous HEIs it includes to be inhibitors to the development of a single access/progression pathway across the cluster, which in any event is being supplanted by cluster-wide shared learning experiences. A similar point is made by the other cluster members in relation to regional cluster development in general.

c) Shared academic planning

Shared academic planning across the cluster is noted by the Link Team as coded green; and with the development of a shared set of modules to support graduate structures, the Institute is making some progress at level 9 and level 10 degrees.

The Link Team suggests that the objective to establish a graduate school should be revised to move towards the development of a multi-campus graduate school structure delivering shared generic modules across the cluster.

More detail in relation to the structure of master's degrees by research would be useful in evaluating the impact of the relationship between shared academic planning and the development of skills and jobs in the regions.

Skills fora in the region have been established and managers have been appointed. Mappings for the South West and South East regions are being developed and moving towards completion, and industry employment partners are being identified.

Appropriate responses are being developed across the cluster and management of information across the cluster has also resulted in the embedding of WIT personnel on the skills fora.

WIT notes that this has created conduits through which cross-cluster cooperation can operate to support economic, social and cultural development and the Link Team notes that engagement with the skills fora for the region is lending itself to the development of cluster cohesion.

The Link Team notes that cooperation through shared learning and experience seems to be undergoing a prioritisation over more specific cross-cluster arrangements. Also, more emphasis is being placed on research and graduate school development than on the development of cluster activities at undergraduate level.

Research mapping is almost complete and is the area showing the most explicit evidence of cluster development and cooperation. A number of collaborative projects are being developed and the Link Team notes the submission of a proposal for an SFI centre in precision dairy. Technology transfer has also undergone some development, most significantly through a consortium involving WIT, ITC, MU and AIT. The relationship between Tyndall at UCC and WIT continues to develop and is contributing to the cluster's objective of building on existing success in entrepreneurship.

The Link Team notes that the self-evaluation report points to the complexity and geographical scale of the cluster as an inhibition to cluster development and that shared experience and learning is seen by the Institute as a way of negotiating these difficulties.

d) Technological university status

Reporting on TU criteria, the Institute marks the objective of meeting the criteria for technological university designation as coded green. In a context where the process is at the point of reengagement between the two IOTs, the Link Team suggests this should be coded amber with a view to reviewing progress in 2017.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

There are two objectives identified in this category: a) Continue to make available lifelong learning and flexible learning opportunities to the learner population; and b) Continue to provide a series of coordinated supports to learners and potential learners to meet both their academic and personal development needs. – in particular, to build upon the existing Early Intervention Programmes (EIPs) to foster engagement with hard-to-reach groups.

Both objectives are coded green by the Institute, but there was a lack of further detail on progress. The Institute subsequently provided some further detail, indicating a new appointment in this area and noting the ongoing commitment of the Institute to this work. It would be helpful in future self-evaluations if more robust metrics of progress could be provided.

WIT has exceeded the target of 17 per cent growth in lifelong learners. The current percentage reported is 18.7 per cent. This has been achieved through collaboration with key partners in areas of institutional excellence including Teagasc, the Irish Prison Service, IMDA and Skillnets.

The Link Team suggests that relationships with these partners are already established; and while a new strategic approach is mentioned, no details are provided.

Details of the flexible learning opportunities being offered are not provided here. Without further detail the code green is difficult to confirm. While the target has been exceeded, the strategies and opportunities being made available require further elaboration to confirm how appropriate the code green is in this category.

The 2015 self-evaluation end target relating to the enrolment on revamped part-time portfolio commences is not elaborated upon here. Some follow-up on this target would be useful to provide greater insight into the success of the portfolio. The WIT profile for 2016 indicates that there were

150 part-time learners and 50 full-time learners in 2015/16 on Foundation, FETAC Cert and FETAC Advance Cert programmes/apprenticeships.

At levels 6, 7 and 8 WIT reports 950 part-time enrolments out of a total of 7,300 enrolments. Of these, 220 are categorised as 'occasional' leaving 730 enrolments at Diploma/Cert (300), Ordinary Degree L7 (250) and Honours Degree L8 (180). The WIT profile submitted indicates there are 100 enrolments on Springboard, but no detail is provided on this figure in the self-evaluation report.

EIPs have also been expanded to include an additional 75 new entrants via the Learning for Life Programmes and 25 via the new Library Programme. This brings the total of families experiencing a direct impact to 65, exceeding the end of year target of 45 by 20.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience:

There are three objectives in this category: a) to continue to develop the programme portfolio in areas that are relevant to sustainable economic, social and cultural development with a view to increasing the capacity of higher education in the region; b) to develop research programmes in particular continue to develop doctoral (Level 10) and research master's (Level 9) offerings; and c) expand the flexibility of the programme portfolio through supporting broadening entry for the first year cohort. All three of these objectives are coded green.

The Institute reports on its continuing development of programmes aligned with the aims and priority areas identifies in the South East Region Action Plan for Jobs.

WIT has exceeded the end of year target of 8,155 of total students enrolled by 97. Recently launched programmes have been identified as contributing to this rise but the spread of the increase across these programmes is not provided. Also, details of the number of part-time, mature and flexible learners on these programmes would be useful to have, as more detail here would provide more detailed insight into the Institute's engagement with the South East Region Action Plan for Jobs.

The delivery of core training for the Prison Services is also being reported on here and has been reported upon in other categories.

A tender to deliver training to the early childcare sector in the region is mention but no further detail is provided.

The report mentions Springboard and upskilling but again no further detail is provided. THE WIT profile for 2016 indicates there are currently 100 Springboard enrolments. Further information on the institute's engagement with Springboard would aid in confirming green as the appropriate colour code here.

WIT is just 0.1 per cent off its end of 2016 target to have 4.1 per cent (195 FTE students) involved in research programmes. The development of the graduate school is reported on again and while the Institute continues to develop programmes in areas of critical mass, no further detail is provided.

In relation to flexible learning, the number of level 8 programmes has been reduced to 41 from 43 in 2015. A review of the School of Science has led to the development of one entry point to programmes in computing with potentially six exit routes. Progression agreements with colleges of further education negotiated since 2013 have risen from 2 to 21.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

There are four objectives in this category: a) support and develop high quality research of national and international standing; b) support and develop high-quality research of national and international standing (bis); c) value and support research career development; and d) develop a graduate school.

While the same objective is submitted twice, this is consistent with the original compact, and each objective is measured against a different performance indicator.

▪ 'Support and develop high quality research of national and international standing' is measured against the 'cumulative value of research contracts signed on research support unit (RSU) supported projects'

▪ 'Support and develop high quality research of national and international standing (bis)' is measured against the 'development and Implementation of national and international collaborative research strategies'.

All four categories are coded green. As mentioned earlier the objective to develop a graduate school should be adjusted to take into account the development of generic skills modules across the cluster and the development of a multi-campus mode of delivery.

a) and b) Support and develop high quality research

WIT had targeted an increase in cumulative research funding of €42m for the period 2012/13 to 2015/2016. In fact, WIT surpassed this target by 25 per cent to reach €55.5m, so it should probably now raise its target. Having said that, however, funding in 2016 was down to €10m from €15m in 2015, which suggests a slowdown in the pace of accumulation.

The report lacks further detail on the breakdown of this funding that would enable particular strengths and weaknesses to be identified more explicitly.

The Link Team notes growth in the number of Fulbright scholars coming to WIT and in those going from WIT to the US. Further detail on how the Institute plans to build on these developing links would be useful here.

The Institute reports on strategic partnership contracts that ended in 2015. The international element is not specified and the relevance to of such partnerships to this particular category is not clarified. WIT has developed two contracts with the HSE in the area of health sciences but no further detail is provided.

c) Value and support research career development

The objective to value and support research career development is coded green. As with other areas relating to research and graduate structures, there have been a number of developments in this area including a review of institutional ethics and a good research guide.

d) Develop a graduate school

The institutional objective to develop a graduate school has been modified in the light of developments in the 2015/15 Southern cluster. The development of generic skills and shared learning across the cluster is reported here again.

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

There are three objectives in this category: a) further strengthen links with industry and enterprise agencies as part of the continuing development of the knowledge region by moving toward a sectoral model of engagement with stakeholders; b) prioritise the translation of research for societal and economic benefit; and c) enhance our contribution to the economic, social and cultural development of the region through the expansion of partnerships and alliances across all our activities. All three categories are coded green.

A total of 261vcollaborations, contract services and consultancy services were signed in 2015. Further detail here would be of benefit here. The Institute also reports on the translation of research for societal and economic benefit in 2013, 2014 and 2015 as part of this year's evaluation.

WIT will exceed its 2016 targets across this objective but the finer detail of the 2016 breakdown is not included. In developing the Institute's objective to contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of the region, CRM processes and relationship engagement with regional partners are being developed and WIT has become involved in strategic regional fora.

6. Internationalisation

There are two objectives listed in this category:

a) Further develop the international environment to a critical mass of international students. Support the international learner to manage the regulatory, financial and emotional challenges of loving and studying in a new cultural environment.

b) Grow the international research profile by diversifying the funding base further, particularly through the development of international strategic collaborations.

Both categories are coded green. However, no detail on the number of students going out of WIT into international environments is included. The original target of 200 full-time, fee-paying international students was revised to 327 when the Science without Borders programme is taken into account. Even though this programme concluded unexpectedly, WIT's success in this area is continuing, and the current figure for full-time, fee-paying international students is 307.

More detail on the breakdown of this figure in relation to discipline, qualification level and programmes would be useful here. The cumulative value of EU/international funding has also exceeded the three-year target of €8m and now stands at €8.6m.

7. Institutional Consolidation

There is one objective in this category: to contribute to the development of the region through the creation of a multi-campus TU through the consolidation of WIT and ITC. This category is coded green, but given that the process of consolidation is currently undergoing reengagement, the Link Team suggests this objective should be coded amber.

The process of reengagement is being supported by a successful €1.45 million funding submission. This is to be commended as it supports the production of a business plan required by stages 2 and 3 of the TU designation process. This aids in the achievement of the target for the end 2016.