

LIT submission to National Planning Framework

1.0 Introduction

LIT is a Higher Education Institution (HEI) with an enrolment of over 6,000 students and with campuses located in Limerick and Tipperary. LIT has a range of programmes in Business, Art & Design, Information Technology, Science and Engineering.

The National Planning Framework will ultimately be an exercise in spatial planning. However, spatial planning does not exist in isolation and one of the challenges to the Irish planning system over the years has been the extent of the disconnection between social and economic planning and spatial planning. Strategic and cohesive spatial planning delivered through the National Planning Framework should provide physical Infrastructure (roads, broadband, and other facilities) to allow regions to develop fully.

Critically the output of the plan should not assume a “one size fits all” approach as regions are not generic and the strength in the diversity that is required has to be promoted and enhanced. In that context spatial planning should be focused on enabling the achievement of social, economic and environmental objectives.

Decisions regarding social and economic development need to be made in respect of all parts of the country – north and south, east and west, rich and poor, rural and urban. Ideally these decisions would be based on a vision of what the Ireland of the future will be and what it will offer to all its citizens.

While no such vision for the country has been developed it is submitted that any such vision should have a number of characteristics –

- It should provide for all communities in the country and should not abandon some at the expense of others
- It should seek the development of a demographic structure in all communities which would allow their members to live a full and vibrant life within or close to them
- It should facilitate optimum and equitable access to services for all and should consider how this would be achieved. Such access should include and support that provided through communities providing small-scale services for themselves
- It should *actively* consider how the development benefits which may arise from the growth of metropolitan areas can be shared with their hinterlands having regard to the changes in global trade, technology and consumer behaviour which are impacting on city/hinterland relationships
- It should actively seek to prevent the development of metropolitan areas taking place to the detriment of their rural hinterlands
- It should reflect the individual needs of communities and not seek to apply rigid and un-responsive models to all areas

Education at all levels, and higher education in particular, will play a key role in achieving some of these outcomes. It should therefore be a priority that Higher Education Institutions should play an important part in the considerations of any spatial planning exercise and outcomes.

2.0 The role of LIT

One of the principal focuses of the National Planning Framework is likely to be the re-distribution of future population growth in Ireland so that less of that growth takes place in Dublin and that more concentrated and managed population growth takes place in the regions with a particular but not exclusive emphasis on the regional cities.

There are a number of drivers of population growth and, while a certain amount of this growth will occur through natural increase of the indigenous population, migration will also be a significant factor. The overall objective, therefore, has to be to retain a greater proportion of the natural increase and attract a significant in-migration population to the region.

The extent of the natural increase will be subject to factors which are largely societal in nature.

However, the retention of that natural increase and the attraction of an in-migrant population will relate to the attractiveness of the area as a place of employment and a place to live.

The factors which impact on the both of these are many but a number, on which LIT can have a significant influence and impact, are the following –

2.1 The availability of a workforce with skills appropriate enterprises considering locating in the region

LIT delivers a large number of high-quality programmes of learning which cover virtually all areas required by business, Industry and many areas delivered by the public sector. Indeed, LIT has been named the Sunday Times Institute of Technology of the Year twice in the last five years. The programmes delivered in LIT range from PhDs to Short Certificate programmes which can be specifically tailored for specific needs of Industry. The LIT programmes of study have a strong focus on applied learning and research which equip the graduates for real-life employment immediately after graduation. In addition, LIT has available to it the flexible Special Purpose Award system through which programmes can be tailored for a specific enterprise, sector or profession and which can be delivered through classroom, on-line or blended techniques. Even if the workforce does not have the specific skills required by a particular enterprise immediately available, those skills can be quickly made available by close co-operation between the enterprise, sector or profession and LIT. This flexible approach has been demonstrated on many occasions most notably in recent times through the collaboration between First Data and LIT with respect to the company's decision to locate in Nenagh and a significant training programme for Vistakon in Limerick which will upskill over 200 staff over a two-year period.

The capacity of a region to provide a high quality of life for its employees is one of the important factors which influences enterprise location decisions. The availability of high-quality education is one of the factors which contributes to a high quality of life and the region is fortunate in having a number of high-quality education institutes located within it. LIT is one of the foremost of these institutes. It provides a large number of high quality programmes of study from certificate to PhD level, it has campuses in all parts of the region and it places a particular emphasis on the provision of education which has a significant applied content.

Due to its presence on Campuses in Limerick, Tipperary and Clare, LIT is in a position to offer this service conveniently to enterprises in all parts of the region and is particularly conscious of and committed to its regional remit which extends across all three counties. This allows us to respond pro-actively to many of the aspects of a vision for Ireland set out in the introduction to this document.

2.2 The availability of the research skills and facilities required by enterprise

Innovation lies at the heart of the development and growth of many businesses, research is the driver of innovation. The applied research capacity of LIT has been expanding significantly in recent years and this research is particularly related to the needs of industry and enterprise in general as is reflected in the significant number of Innovation Partnerships that have been undertaken by the Institute in recent years.

These Innovation Partnerships are specifically targeted at resolving the technical and process problems of industry and are something to which LIT is very committed. The Institute has also partnered with Institute of Technology Tralee in operating the Shannon Applied Biotechnology Centre which *“focuses on developing, enhancing and commercialising biotechnology in the Shannon region, and beyond, by confidentially collaborating with industry to promote product diversification and enhancement, increasing market growth and aiding competitiveness.”* LIT is available to partner with industry and other enterprise in growing their opportunities at home and abroad.

While this is of great importance to the Limerick Metropolitan area, it is also of importance to the hinterland areas and will ensure that the wider region will be an attractive location for high value industry.

These areas have capacity to be engines of economic development in their own right. However, they must be facilitated to engage at a global level and not merely as suppliers to the Metropolitan area. The access to the distributed campuses of LIT located across the region and easily accessible is a critical element of existing infrastructure which can easily scale to support required spatial development.

2.3 Support for newly establishing enterprises

While the attraction of external investment into the region is important, the provision of opportunity to local and other entrepreneurs to establish and run successful businesses within the region is also important. LIT is engaged with six enterprise centres throughout the region running four of them and actively participating in another two. This is the biggest engagement of any IoT in the country to enterprise development and helped create over 600 jobs between 2007 and 2014. This is a very significant to the enterprise base of the region and provides a real opportunity for enterprises to be brought from first conception to significant trading on the international market.

2.4 The availability of cultural and sporting facilities

Another quality of life consideration for those deciding on where to locate, is the availability of locally based facilities. LIT and its campuses are used regularly for meetings of sporting and cultural facilities. LIT provides a range of facilities on its campuses across the region. Its meeting rooms, conference centres and sporting facilities (including a world-class Sports Strength and Conditioning Facility in Thurles) are available to community and voluntary organisations and are used by them on a regular basis. Its Millennium Theatre in Limerick is used for many cultural events at different times of the year.

3.0 LIT's capacity and development plans

It is clear from the above that LIT has the organisational capacity, the willingness, the commitment and the relationships to make a meaningful contribution to the development of the city-region. Its regional spread gives it a unique capacity to deliver across the region while its being based in Limerick City allows it to focus in a particular way on that area.

Of course, a growing city-region will place greater demands on LIT in terms of its resources both physical and human. Like all HEI's, LIT has suffered a severe reduction in staff numbers over the last seven years. It has coped effectively with this reduction but is now at the margins of its capacity. While it has the management structure and willingness to deliver more it needs the personnel resources to facilitate this. It is also under extreme pressure with regard to its physical facilities.

The limitations of these facilities, compounded by the lack of capital investment in third-level infrastructure over the last seven years and the legal restriction on borrowing by the Institute is severely compromising the capacity of the Institute to deliver more. LIT knows what it needs in this regard and has a facilities development strategy for all its campuses which extends to 2030. The central and pivotal role that LIT can play needs to be recognised through the provision of enabling processes which will allow funding to flow. The catalyst that LIT can provide is central to the balanced spatial planning of the wider region.

In order to be as effective a partner as possible in the delivery of the ambition for the city-region LIT needs the investment in its facilities in Limerick, Thurles, Clonmel and Ennis to be accelerated so that it can deliver more highly qualified students to the region, more up-skilling for the staff of the increasingly technology-based industries being established in the region and the greater levels of applied research which will be required by industry, enterprise and the public and private sectors.

These priority capital investment needs are outlined in the Institutes Capital Investment Programme (2017-2021) which has been submitted recently to the HEA. The vision for the region requires these to be prioritised. The LIT submission for a total of €108m on key infrastructural projects will deliver over 30,000sq m of space with facilities for over 2,500 new students. These facilities underpin key economic areas of growth such as STEM and tourism. These areas of growth are in direct response to identified regional and national skills shortages. This capacity building by LIT will be a fundamental enabler of sustainable economic and social development for the Mid-West Limerick city region.

4.0 Conclusion

This submission sets out a number of key considerations that should inform the vision of the Ireland of the future. LIT is well positioned to deliver on many of these. However, in order for this to happen a number of key policy and strategic decisions are required and need to be incorporated in the NPF where appropriate –

1. The benefits to the region and its population of a distributed campus model with a major central facility such as that which operates in LIT needs to be acknowledged and any policy which seeks the centralisation of all learning into one regional location avoided.
2. The transformative role of IoTs within the Irish Higher Education system needs to be acknowledged and the use of the term ‘University’ as referring to all Higher Education Institutions should be avoided.
3. The key contribution of HEIs such as LIT to the development of the regions through the provision of a skilled work-force for industry and enterprise needs to be acknowledged and their investment needs in terms of capital, operational costs and staff across all its regional campuses need to be acknowledged and supported. In this regard the development of new methods of funding capital expenditure particularly within the IoT sector needs to be promoted. Structurally the addressing of the lack of a borrowing framework is a significantly limiting factor. The IoT sector is uniquely distributed and coherent to be a strong engine for regional economic and social development
4. The key role of IoTs in providing the applied research required by companies needs to be acknowledged and the investment needed to realise this potential supported.
5. The role of IoTs in engaging with their communities and in providing accessible pathways to higher education for the marginalised and disadvantaged needs to be acknowledged and development projects which are targeted at this outcome such as the Community Engagement Gateway proposed by LIT for Moylish needs to be supported.