**Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)**

*EVALUATION REPORT*

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# 1. Introduction

This report is the result of the evaluation of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT). The evaluation took place in March and June 2015.

## 1.1 Institutional Evaluation Programme

The Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) is an independent membership service of the European University Association (EUA) that offers evaluations to support the participating institutions in the continuing development of their strategic management and internal quality culture. The IEP is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and is listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

The distinctive features of the Institutional Evaluation Programme are:
- A strong emphasis on the self-evaluation phase
- A European and international perspective
- A peer-review approach
- A support to improvement

The focus of the IEP is the institution as a whole and not the individual study programmes or units. It focuses upon:
- Decision-making processes and institutional structures and effectiveness of strategic management
- Relevance of internal quality processes and the degree to which their outcomes are used in decision-making and strategic management as well as perceived gaps in these internal mechanisms.

The evaluation is guided by four key questions, which are based on a "fitness for (and of) purpose" approach:
- What is the institution trying to do?
- How is the institution trying to do it?
- How does the institution know it works?
- How does the institution change in order to improve?

## 1.2 Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology's profile

1.2.1 GMIT's origins lie in the establishment of the Regional Technical College in Galway in the late 1960s when that College was designated as the main centre outside Dublin for both craft and management education and training for the hotel industry.

1.2.2 In 1998 the Regional Technical College was legally designated an Institute of Technology and renamed the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT). The Institutes of Technology Act (2006) brought the Institutes under the aegis of the Higher Education

Authority (HEA), similar to Ireland's university sector. Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology is now one of fourteen Institutes of Technology (IoTs) in Ireland. It has five campuses - two in Galway and the others in Castlebar, Letterfrack and Mountbellew. GMIT is a self-avowed teaching and learning institution, and has recently formalised its ambition to become part of a technological university.

1.2.3 As the SER notes, the establishment of the Connaught-Ulster Alliance (CUA) in 2012 represents 'a collaboration which will be instrumental in establishing a Technological University (TU) for the region. This significant strategic decision, a direct response to the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, prioritises the re-designation of the Institute as a Technological University within Ireland's future higher education landscape.' Currently Technological University (TU) legislation is being drafted which will allow for amalgamated Institutes of Technology, upon reaching set criteria, to apply for re-designation as a TU.

1.2.4 GMIT is also currently part of a regional 'cluster' alliance to promote academic planning and student progression, prior to which the institution had also signed an alliance to work more closely with the local university. However, since three institutions within the cluster now have ambitions to become universities they have remained competitors and this has detracted, in some measure, from consultation over long-term planning. GMIT collaborates with the local university on initial teacher education and a joint MSc is under consideration by which students would progress to programmes at the university. GMIT is concerned to maintain its ethos and mission towards applied learning, with generally small class sizes and an emphasis on the student experience. However, there is also a wider debate concerning vocational drift from universities, creating more common ground between these types of higher education provider.

1.2.5 Data from the 2013/14 HEA Returns show GMIT to have a total of 5,918 registered students (5202 full-time and 776 part-time) predominantly on level 6-8 programmes. Graduate numbers have been growing steadily since 2011.

### 1.3 The evaluation process

1.3.1 GMIT's senior management had proposed the EUA IEP to its Academic Council as a way of supporting a review of their strategic planning processes. The national quality agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), had also been consulted and it supported GMIT in its engagement with IEP as a way of demonstrating to external stakeholders that the institution was open to international scrutiny. GMIT had taken a very thorough and systematic approach to the preparation of the self-evaluation report (SER) and the team was provided with a planning / briefing document which evidenced this. The SER had been informed by a series of SWOT analysis reports undertaken by academic and functional units. The thoroughness of the self-evaluation was also emphasised by the Institute's decision to reflect on the outcomes of the process by presenting a number of its own recommendations at the end of the SER.

1.3.2 The team noted that, because GMIT had not wanted a comprehensive, large scale engagement on the scale of the recent programmatic review[1], not everyone had been consulted over the SER, although someone from each area had been involved. In general, academic staff that the team met were aware of the SER and the SWOT analyses. Students were found to be less aware of the SER, although some knew that the president of the Students' Union had been a member of the Self Evaluation Group (SEG).

1.3.3 The self-evaluation report of GMIT, together with the appendices, was sent to the evaluation team in March 2015. The visits of the evaluation team to GMIT took place from 25 to 27 March and from 14 to 17 June 2015, respectively. In between the visits GMIT provided the evaluation team with some additional documentation.[2]

1.3.4 The evaluation team (hereinafter named the team) consisted of:

- Professor Sokratis Katsikas, Professor, Department of Digital Systems, University of Piraeus, formerly Rector, University of the Aegean, Greece, team chair
- Professor Lučka Lorber, Vice-Rector, Quality Development, University of Maribor, Slovenia
- Professor Thierry Chevaillier, Emeritius Professor of Economics of Education, University of Burgundy, formerly Vice-President for Resources, University of Burgundy, France
- Ms Sarah Tuytschaever, student, Ghent University, Belgium
- Dr Karen Willis, Dean of Academic Quality and Enhancement University of Chester, UK, team coordinator (for first visit)
- Dr Raymond Smith, formerly Academic Registrar, London Metropolitan University, UK, team coordinator (for second visit)

The team wants to express its considerable gratitude to all participants in this IEP evaluation for their openness and willingness to discuss all issues concerning the Institute and to the whole GMIT community for their friendly hospitality.

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[1] Programmatic Review, which involves programmes of learning being reviewed once every five years, is a requirement under delegated authority from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

[2] At the beginning of the first visit the team was advised that the President would soon be leaving his post and GMIT had therefore decided that, for the purposes of the IEP exercise, the team would meet privately with the Registar instead of the President or the interim President.

## 2. Governance and institutional decision-making

2.1 In the SER the Institute's **Mission** is stated to be the development of 'life-long learning opportunities through…teaching and research, by supporting regional development consistent with national higher education policy'.  Its **Vision** is set out as follows:

- Learning is and will be the core activity of the Institute, bringing students, staff and the region together to share, apply, test and create knowledge;
- GMIT will continue to develop as a regional organisation with an international focus committed to the personal and professional enrichment of its students, the needs of its region, national priorities and global opportunities;
- GMIT will both shape and respond to the perspectives and expectations of its stakeholders and will work in collaboration with them to meet their needs;
- GMIT will be an organisation characterised by its flexibility, creativity, responsiveness and a capacity to adapt.

2.2 While GMIT's Mission and Vision were seen to embrace both tradition and flexibility it was clear to the team that the higher education landscape in Ireland was moving in such significant ways that the future direction of the Institute, in all its dimensions, was subject to wide-ranging internal and external pressures. At the heart of this discourse was the rationale for its expression of interest in becoming part of a technological university; and this continued to preoccupy all levels of the organisation from the Governing Body to senior / middle management and, not least, a significant part of the wider academic and professional service communities. It was also notable that many students seemed content with the current standing of the Institute. The push - pull dimension of this debate was exacerbated by national and international factors - the former by an experience of austerity that had severely challenged the structures and human and physical resources of the Institute, while the latter was characterised by an increasingly competitive market place and a globalised approach to the delivery of higher education.

2.3 To the team, therefore, this appeared to be a watershed moment for the Institute and one that demanded clear leadership and decision-making to ensure that regionally, nationally and internationally it responded appropriately to these major challenges. There was, however, something of a contradiction or conflict in terms of the debate on GMIT's future direction. On the one hand, the Institute had decided to put forward a formal expression of interest in being re-designated as a Technological University - with all that this entailed. This is set out very explicitly at the beginning of the Executive Summary to the document submitted to the HEA on 4 March 2015, shortly before the team's first visit to GMIT. The expression of interest is endorsed at the highest levels of governance (Chairs of Governors and Presidents) in all three institutions of the CUA. On the basis of the articulation in that document much work has already been undertaken to understand the challenges of the venture and to start planning towards achieving this 'medium -process which will require the full engagement of the partners from the outset

in order to be successful'.[3] In the run up to the submission of the expression of interest the team also noted that the President of GMIT had presented to the staff body on the developments in higher education (April 2014) and, in particular, had confirmed the position of the Governing Body in relation to the TU. The President stated that 'as the Institute is committed to becoming a Technological University (TU), the Institute should move forward with this ambition urgently'[4], a position endorsed by the Governing Body. *Yet* while the intervening year had seen progress in terms of the Institute's formal submission to become part of a TU, the team found, during both of its visits, that the appetite for, and belief in, this strategic ambition was fragile at many levels of the organisation. And notwithstanding the President's presentation, some staff felt strongly that consultation over the TU proposal had been inadequate and lacking in senior input or direct communication.

2.4    This uncertainty related to both the role of the CUA and to the views of a broad constituency of GMIT staff. One senior view at GMIT was that the commitment within the CUA to the TU was not as strong as it needed to be. On the other hand while this presented some difficulties it also offered GMIT the opportunity to take a leading role in the consortium and move away from the sense that 'the future would take care of itself' which had found some traction even at the highest levels at GMIT.

2.5    In part this reluctance to seize the initiative reflected the fact that the CUA had a limited track record in terms of collaboration and also the perception that the TU was very much an end game. In addition, there was a real nervousness around the requirement that the CUA institutions had to merge *before* they could be designated as a TU. This fear of merger was very much a feature of the GMIT staff view but it also extended to some members of the new Governing Body. The team heard from a number of quarters about possible alternatives to TU status, from joining with Limerick IoT to more formal collaboration with the local university; there was also a discernible mood amongst some staff that GMIT should consolidate itself within its current status as an IoT – why, it was asked, risk becoming a second-rate university rather than a first-rate Institute of Technology. Ultimately the view of middle management and many other staff was that the TU proposal did not yet affect them and it was seen as *a long-term* rather than a *medium term* venture. In one meeting the move towards TU was described as a 'mixture of scepticism, anticipation and ambition'. This reflected the fact that the mission of TU not yet been defined; it was generally expected that it would be the same as an IoT but this was not necessarily the case.

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[3] Connacht-Ulster Alliance *Expression of Interest for Re-designation as a Technological University*, p.35.

[4] Staff Presentation, April 2014

2.6    The team was told that there were several perspectives on why GMIT wanted to become a university. It could, for example, be viewed as a natural evolution - the institution had developed from its status as an Institute of Technology in 2006 to include research awards and the delivery of some taught postgraduate awards. One somewhat negative reason was that the proposed changes in the sector would lead to three tiers of institutions - universities, TUs and Institutes of Technology - and that IoTs would have diminished status. GMIT might therefore find itself left behind in reputational terms with its branding unclear not least in the international arena. On the other hand, there was no consensus amongst the staff that the team met that GMIT was failing to attract international students because of its title. This view was characterised by a high degree of caution and an unwillingness to jump to conclusions.

2.7    The team understood that, fundamentally, the decision to pursue TU status was strategic rather than financial. Nonetheless there would be no change in the overall amount of funding available and the model might not necessarily benefit GMIT if there was a weighting on past performance. Furthermore the HEA had not yet acknowledged that there would be a cost to achieving that objective. A more positive view noted that the pre-requisite of merging the CUA institutions prior to TU designation offered potential cost savings across a range of activities.

2.8    Some in the Institute also worried about the need to develop credibility in research as part of the requirements for TU status, not least as there was no state funding for research. Equally GMIT had no ambition to become a research university and TU partners were also weak on research. Moreover it was clear that a research agenda would not appeal to many staff although attempts were being made to incentivise staff to pursue PhDs through the payment of fees and some relief from teaching. This was having some impact, not least in raising awareness, but there was still a significant gap in the type of research infrastructure required for TU status. How would staff cope with a strategic move to do more research, when still teaching 18-20 hours per week?

2.9    The team recognised the ebb and flow of this debate but found the strength of the various opinions somewhat surprising given the Governing Body's clearly stated commitment to TU status. Equally, at a time when the Institute was facing its greatest challenges in terms of its future direction, not least from the reservations of its own staff, the team also encountered real concerns about the extent to which its current arrangements for strategic leadership could deliver on that ambition.

2.10   This doubt revolved around the capacity of executive management rather than as a result of any fundamental shortcomings in governance or management structures. At the centre of this concern were the delays in progressing a range of permanent appointments at Executive level and this was linked to the on-going appointment process for a new President. The Governing Body was reluctant to consider permanent appointments at Executive level without the participation of a new President. This had

resulted in a number of acting positions being established and work being absorbed by the current executive leadership. A range of middle management posts were also being covered on an acting basis. In the view of the team this position was not sustainable other than in the very short term. The executive management and wider management of the Institute needed to be at its strongest to explain and then deliver on its strategic ambitions and to ensure that more immediate priorities such as the development of a three year financial plan and a newly formulated student retention strategy could be implemented effectively.

2.11 As things stood the Institute's management itself had doubts about its overall effectiveness and the dangers of this situation were now being formally noted in an updated Institutional Risk Register. The team therefore strongly supported the establishment of two new executive positions at Vice-President level, one to take forward strategic development and the other to lead on research (and possibly oversee international developments). It was crucial, however, that these positions were secured without further delay. Within this overall context of the need for clear strategic direction and strong institutional leadership, the team advised that there was a *critical imperative to accelerate the process of appointing the new President* and also an urgent requirement to *remove the uncertainty in strategic direction, systematically preparing in advance for the acceptance of the TU proposal, and the establishment of a contingency plan* should unresolvable difficulties emerge in the path towards TU status.

2.12 The team met with a range of groups and staff in considering the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Institute's governance and decision-making structures. In general, the team found solid and robust arrangements in place for governance and accountability at the various levels of the Institute. The organisational structure diagram presented in the SER was clear; and while some staff commented to the team that it was an overly hierarchical organisation there was no sense that it required fundamental revision. Some aspects of these arrangements might be open to improvement but the team noted that governing body membership principles and terms of reference were outside GMIT control as they were established by national legislation.

2.13 The team was advised that a new Governing Body (18 members) had just been appointed (1 April 2015) and this had involved significant changes in personnel. Within the nationally determined rules, the Academic Council was able to make recommendations for five places from a list, but could not select the individuals, only the bodies that nominate them.

2.14 A view was expressed to the team that the manner in which membership of the Governing Body was constituted was inappropriate, as it focused on representation and therefore did not give due consideration to the skill sets needed at governance level or, more broadly, meet with best practice in corporate governance standards. And while the team understood that this aspect of governing body arrangements was being reconsidered by the HEA, it was seen by senior managers in the Institute as having a

negative impact on GMIT's ability to harness the most effective composition of that body. Certainly it struck the team that, with the current consideration of university status, the Governing Body would benefit from a more flexible membership that included, for example, an expert in Higher Education policy and practice.

2.15 The Institute's Academic Council had a majority of its members elected by academic staff, with two students and a number of ex-officio members, primarily heads of school. Minutes of meetings and decisions are available to the staff body. Some thought that committees, for example, Monitoring and Review, generated a lot of discussion but did not lead to action. However, one newer committee had set up pilot projects to deal with retention issues and this was felt to be an important and positive initiative. More broadly, a view was expressed that Academic Council did not seem to have the power it should have. Such concerns around the operation of deliberative structures are voiced in many institutions and the team did not feel that that these issues were particularly pronounced at GMIT. Certainly the level of staff and student representation in the deliberative structures of the Institute were seen to be appropriate and the team also saw clear evidence of a comprehensive suite of policies and procedures to support decision-making in both executive and committee settings.

2.16 On the wider management level the team was advised that heads of department and heads of functional units (20-25) met fortnightly, chaired by an executive member. This was said to provide a good communication forum which directed practice at operational level. However, the team noted that the head of school role is ill-defined nationally and that heads of department might be given more authority. Changes in structure had been considered, to give heads of schools more strategic roles and promote a broader perspective at senior management level; and there was a commonly expressed view that heads of schools needed to take more of a central role, not just heading up particular business units but taking part in decisions that affected the whole institution. It was reported that the management group received information but that this had not always flowed down to academic staff, highlighting issues of local leadership in some areas. Connected to this, the SEG expressed a view that the management group should summarise decisions through an annual report. It was also noted that staff were doing a lot more, leaving less time for people to read and engage more widely. Notwithstanding these concerns the team found the staff body - both teaching and professional service - to be dedicated, enthusiastic and professional.

2.17 Academic units had an appropriate degree of autonomy but the team heard from senior management that they would like to see closer cooperation and synergy between them. It seemed that various factors formed barriers to this, some historical and some to do with the way academic units were funded which prompted a preference to grow in their own silos rather than drive the strategy for change both within the school structure or more widely in the Institute. Indeed the team understood from comments made during various meetings that GMIT faced problems with its organisational structure and had not been able to rationalise programmes internally in the best interests of efficiency.

For example, there was a strong view from within middle management that more institutional leadership was needed to align the different business programmes being delivered in three separate organisational areas - the School of Business, the College of Tourism and also on the Mayo campus. The original intention to do this at programmatic review had been lost and the programmes had been reviewed separately. An attempt to rationalise this provision had been made five years ago after modularisation but there were still multiple deliveries of the same or similar modules, with separate external examiners.

2.18 Some restructuring of academic units had been attempted but with limited progress; it had ended with only one merger taking place, between the schools of hotel and humanities. There had been an intention to merge science and engineering into one college; however, on consultation science had felt that this would not be in their best interests, so the two separate schools remained. While staff in science felt they had been listened to and were now able to build on their strengths, staff in tourism and art felt that they had undertaken what had been required while other schools had evaded this responsibility. This had left some resentment, and had not resulted in an optimal organisational structure for the academic units. There was some expectation that the re-organisation of academic units would restart with a new senior management team. Ultimately it was stressed to the team that curriculum rationalisation needed executive leadership as academic staff were either too busy to effect change from below or saw this process as a threat.

2.19 It was also felt that the fact that GMIT is school-based rather than function-based resulted in a lack of coherence for the customer, produced inefficiencies, and led to internal competition with some programmes having lower entry points. Collaboration was difficult within the time constraints and programmes were developed from the ground up, leading to duplication in some cases.

2.20 The team noted that structures and mechanisms for cross-department communication were either very ad hoc or did not exist. There were similar programmes in a number of different schools which were reviewed on a one-by-one basis. There was an annual report from each school and, in programme review, a specific SER for each programme. More inter-programme communication was required to support programme development. The organisational structure needed to follow the strategy the institution was about to implement in order to be effective.

2.21 The process for strategic planning included a mid-term review. An executive sponsor of each pillar of the strategic plan would report on this. The team were told that an annual operational plan was submitted to the HEA, followed by a meeting with the HEA to review outcomes from the last year and plan ahead. This focused heavily on student numbers and finances, with KPIs about performance costs and balancing budgets. The coincidence of internal strategic planning and external reporting to the HEA on future direction and the monitoring of outcomes was seen by the team as a source of strength

for GMIT. It instilled discipline and efficiency in those processes and made the best use of often over-burdened human resources.

2.22 It was also noted by the team that the current national strategy was for clusters of institutions to work together, and that these were taken seriously at GMIT. Decisions to offer new programmes were affected by what was run elsewhere in the cluster (rather than just in the Connaught Ulster TU group). In this context it was remarked that discussions around mergers had to date centred on academic units rather than sharing of services or 'back office' functions.

2.23 Ultimately, however, it was recognised by some in management circles that there was a gap between strategy and operations. Structures and decision making reinforced financial stability - which the team applauded - but were not optimal in terms of wider delivery and operations. And while some efforts had been made to identify and cascade non-financial KPIs through the institution, this needed to be driven by senior central leadership. The team noted that this had been highlighted in the institution's risk register. From discussions with a wide range of staff it struck the team that the most obvious shortcoming was at the level of the academic unit and that GMIT would therefore benefit from *establishing formal mechanisms and procedures for developing strategic and operational plans at the academic unit level*. This would help complement relatively strong planning arrangements at the institutional level with clearer leadership and measurement of outcomes at academic unit level. Associated with this development the team saw a clear imperative for GMIT *to improve **communications** related to the decision making process both horizontally and vertically*.

2.24 In discussions concerning the resourcing and sustainability of the Institute the team was advised that a balanced budget would not be returned in the current year. This was due to the decision to invest in research centres. It was anticipated that this imbalance would be rectified in the next financial year. One view was expressed that, although the balance sheet looked positive with established reserves, the institution was not financially healthy due to nearly a decade of stagnation with no capital investment. This was manifested in a shortage of laboratories for science, engineering, and technology; lack of investment also meant that some of the existing laboratories were technically obsolete and this placed the institution at a competitive disadvantage. More generally, there was some suggestion that the way in which the non-pay budget was determined lacked transparency.

2.25 The team gained the view from its discussions that there had been a high degree of financial risk aversion in recent years. This was perhaps understandable given the external pressures from the government's austerity programme. However, there was potential for growth at the Galway Campus and the team was told that GMIT had now put a comprehensive plan to HEA to enable them to buy land and undertake capital development, including a multilab building to meet the demand from growing student numbers in STEM subjects. There would be some matched funding from GMIT reserves.

This would also help prepare for demographic projections that suggested an increase of 7% in student numbers by 2019/20.

2.26 GMIT has extensive experience of operating with multiple campuses and this is a significant part of their regional identity. In resource terms the Letterfrack campus was leased from a local development company and it was intended to maintain this arrangement. The Mayo Campus at Castlebar was somewhat bigger (1000 full and part-time students) but had difficulty in attracting students. In terms of sustainability this was a key issue, as was the dependency on nursing programmes, particularly at a time when the government was undertaking a national review of nursing provision. It was acknowledged that the closure of nursing programmes at Castlebar would leave the Campus with no viable future. However, the team did hear that the Mayo campus had a delivery capacity of 1600 students and that a campus strategy, aligned to the Institute's HEA compact, was planning for an expansion to 1200 students over the next three years.

2.27 Inescapably, financial and resource matters would continue to dominate much of GMIT's strategic thinking for the coming years. The team was pleased to see that plans were now in place for some growth - depending on HEA funding; however, the team also felt that there were a range of other opportunities that could be explored by way of using investment from the Institute's reserves. It therefore recommended that GMIT *consider setting aside part of its reserves to invest in future developments* in addition to the major planned activities relating to land purchase and capital infrastructure investment.

## 3. Teaching and learning

3.1    As is noted in the SER, GMIT has focused its provision in STEM disciplines while also offering programmes in business, humanities, nursing and the social sciences. It delivers more than 120 taught programmes, some on more than one campus. There is a wide range of *ab initio* level 8 programmes (honours bachelor degree) while students joining level 7 programmes can progress on to level 8 one year add-on programmes. The team noted, however, that GMIT had a far greater preponderance of level 6/7 levels programmes (higher certificate and ordinary bachelor degree) than its competitors and the Institute acknowledged that this was not a sustainable position in the medium to long term. In terms of postgraduate provision there are limited opportunities for level 9 study (masters degree) and a small number of students registered for research degrees.

3.2    Learning and teaching is one of the five pillars that make up the Institute's Strategic Plan and much effort has been spent in recent years in ensuring that students experience a curriculum that is relevant to their needs as learners and also prepares them for the world of work and their wider responsibilities in society. This effort was framed by the development of a specific learning, teaching and assessment strategy covering the period from 2010-2015. The team was encouraged to see a formal focus and measurement of achievements in this core and defining area of activity. In practical terms this work was being directed by a relatively newly established unit - the Centre for Educational Development (CED).

3.3    However, behind these initiatives lay some substantial problems including high teaching and assessment loads, associated, in some disciplines, with high and growing student numbers; the on-going impact of the Funding and Employment Control Framework with identified staff shortages; lack of promotion opportunities, particularly from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer; significant issues over broken and/or outdated equipment in science and engineering, which could not be replaced because of budget constraints; and space constraints. The team also heard of issues of morale with some staff feeling very over-burdened by their teaching load and not valued by the institution. In summary, this was an extremely challenging agenda and one that had been exacerbated by significant student attrition rates in many disciplines.

3.4    The team heard much that was positive concerning staff development in teaching and learning and, in particular, the CED was felt to be a good platform for discussion around pedagogy. There was also interest amongst staff in obtaining formal teaching qualifications such as the Postgraduate Diploma / MA in Learning and Teaching. Clearly, there was potential to do more in fast-moving areas and teaching staff commented to the team on the importance of keeping up to date with technology in order to stay ahead of the industry curve. But while the emphasis on developing teaching skills was welcomed some commented that there was no measure of a teachers' currency. So while they could apply for short courses, there was a concern that skills sets and

knowledge became outdated very quickly in some disciplines, and they did not have the time to acquire first-hand experience of changing technologies. The team also understood that updating activity was self-started and driven by the individual's own professional links, over and above their standard workload and followed in their own time. Some staff felt that they were missing time for dialogue, both within and between groups in schools, which made it difficult to share best practice.

3.5     While, therefore, staff appeared to be aware of, and, in many cases, made good use of staff development and CPD, managers acknowledged that there were significant challenges to be faced in learning and teaching over the next three years. This was not helped in the view of some managers by the fact that there was no formal mechanism for a head of school/department to engage with their staff on these activities. This left a real gap in their understanding of staff performance and prevented appropriate resource and strategic planning at the level of the academic unit. There was, for example, no goal setting for staff. Feedback on staff performance came through a variety of informal avenues - from students, via programme boards and from external examiners. One staff view was that the Institute should avoid the descent into 'managerialism' in terms of staff performance. This view contended that staff were good at curriculum design, programme delivery and assessment and that there was no need for a staff appraisal scheme to confirm such excellence. Students that the team met generally thought that their lecturers were up to date and well-prepared. However, some students commented that, although their lecturers were knowledgeable, they could not impart this knowledge effectively and lacked the ability to explain. It was suggested to the team that if their lecturers were trained as teachers this might result in improved pass rates. Interestingly there was some feeling amongst staff that teaching should be given the same respect as research, even though GMIT prided itself on teaching excellence and had no ambition to be a research focused institution.

3.6     The team found the discussions around staff performance stimulating and accepted that there were many views that could be genuinely held in terms of encouraging excellence. There seemed to be a consensus amongst staff that there had been a growing thirst for support in improving teaching over the last ten years. However, it was also acknowledged that it was largely the same individuals who sought out improvement opportunities and that there was a group of staff that rarely participated in such activities. It did seem to the team, therefore, that the lack of a formal staff appraisal scheme was an inhibiting factor to identifying excellence and also in responding to underperformance, particularly when national agendas were increasingly emphasising the enhancement of learning opportunities for students. Clearly all staff should be expected to assume professional responsibility for their teaching but it was also important for managers to provide academic leadership, plan programmes and structure delivery in response to a full understanding of staff strengths and weaknesses. This could and should be done in a non-threatening way and there were many examples of staff appraisal schemes in the sector that did

precisely that. The team therefore recommended that GMIT should *examine the staff appraisal schemes in similar institutions and develop their own that is suitable for the GMIT context*. This would also help move staff development away from being an ad hoc exercise and reinforce the connection between strategy and operations in the teaching and learning domain.

3.7     Students that the team met were quite content with the institution and generally happy with their lecturers and the feedback they were receiving. They acknowledged that staff teaching loads were high but felt that levels of support were being sustained through the commitment of their lecturers. In terms of support for learning they thought that the administration was ineffective, and felt very strongly about the lack of flexibility in library opening hours, particularly before examinations and in the vacation. In some measure this had been addressed during examination periods but students clearly had higher expectations that were not being met. The team accepted the vagaries of student demand in terms of library facilities but also reflected that within the HE sector the library or learning centre was increasingly seen as a focus for wider learning strategies and that this might be one way of challenging some of the drop out issues faced by GMIT.

3.8     Many students highlighted laboratory equipment and resources as a source of weakness with laboratories being over-burdened, which affected timetabling and attendance. The Wi-Fi connection was slow, prone to interruption and not available in all locations. Students also thought that more information was needed before registering for courses. Medical science students, for example, had not realised that they would have to study chemistry and statistics and their lecturer had not realised that many of them had not studied chemistry before. This left many with a need to catch up and they had struggled with this pressure.  In engineering some students had not realised that they needed a good level of mathematics to be able to complete the programme, which also contributed to drop-out rate. The additional mathematics support that had been set up subsequently did, however, seemed to be working. There was also a wider concern about the difference in learning support across campuses including the two campuses in Galway. Students were very happy with extra-curricular activities organised by the Students' Union.

3.9     Students generally spoke favourably about work experience and placement opportunities with placements varying in length between programmes from 10 weeks to 6 months. In some subjects students commented that they were disadvantaged in trying to find placements because their industry was not keen on having students for short periods of around 2 months. In addition some students reported that work placements were not well-organised and that there was a heavy reliance on students organising their own placements. There was also some evidence that students were kept on in employment after their placements had ended. CV workshops and individual support were available but students reported that they found out information about jobs mainly through their lecturers. Some thought they needed an information service

which was better geared to their specific needs. Most students reported that they worked alongside their studies, some in jobs related to their studies and some not.

3.10    Students were also generally positive about their programmes, appreciating choice over when to do assignments and attend tutorials. They felt that communication could be improved, for example on what modules had to be picked for a particular stream, or about electives. They did not always know when to expect assignments, although some thought this had improved.  They reported some assessments had been changed after the start of the module, and that some areas had too much group work and too many time-consuming projects

3.11    It has already been noted (para 3.1) that level 6/7 programmes are felt to dominate the undergraduate portfolio in an unsustainable way and also that the programme portfolio at GMIT suffers from the duplication of the business curriculum in a number of academic units (para 2.17). It seemed to the team that this was symptomatic of an unwillingness to take a more strategic view of the programme offering across both undergraduate and postgraduate domains. A range of academic managers and staff commented to the team that programmes were insufficiently flexible and that there were clear opportunities for greater inter-disciplinarity. Business, for example, had a number of elective modules but there was insufficient flexibility for students outside the business school to take these. And despite the opportunity for students to take an additional module outside their core programme there was little take-up of this option because the timetable did not facilitate it.

3.12    At a time when there were real issues of teaching staff overload the team felt that the current inflexibility in the delivery of the programme portfolio was a lost opportunity. The team appreciated that modularisation could lead to a lack of programme identity but there were ways of developing greater flexibility without losing the sense of subject and cohort identity. It was also critical that GMIT took forward the use of new learning technologies in a more systematic way. The team understood that E-learning was not typical for undergraduate provision and that while the use of Moodle was increasing it was not compulsory. Equally the electronic submission of coursework was optional. Students confirmed that not all lecturers put their material on Moodle, which they thought should be mandatory for every lecture, thus creating more opportunities for self-directed learning. Some staff were perceived as being afraid of changing their teaching methods and the refusal to use Moodle was symptomatic of this mind set. And while staff had a specialist learning technologist to help with training this had not apparently addressed the fact that in some academic units 10% of staff were not engaging with Moodle. The team were told of some initiatives in learning technologies that were being taken forward by the CED, including a massive open online course (MOOC) pilot as a shared venture with two other IoTs. However, the team gained the sense that these initiatives were ad hoc rather than strategic - it was not, for example, convinced that the MOOC pilot was central to the Institute's current core needs - and

that there was a real need to focus on some of the fundamental issues around blended learning and the fuller use of the online learning platform.

3.13    From the narrative in the SER, it is clear that the Institute is aware of the relatively static nature of its programme offering and the strategic imperative to build on the outcomes of the programmatic review and to respond to the wider HEA landscape. However, in the view of the team this should not simply be seen as an exercise in the sustainability or a growth of programmes. Rather it should be seen as an opportunity to examine some of the underlying principles and practice of their undergraduate and postgraduate provision and, in so doing, the team recommended that the Institute consider, *inter alia*, (a) *using innovative ways to reduce heavy teaching loads (e.g. blended learning, increased weight for teaching on level 9 courses*, (b) *enhance the provision of interdisciplinary programmes* and (c) *increase the offering of level 9 taught programmes taking into account labour market needs*.

3.14    The team had no doubt that this would be a very significant exercise that would lie at the heart of GMIT's future development and academic organisational structure. It would also provide an important platform for work towards TU status. Moreover, it would inevitably embrace a number of other initiatives such as retention strategy, staff appraisal, the wider use of learning technologies, developing expertise in the recognition of prior learning and pursuing opportunities for collaboration with the local university at level 9 studies. In that context it was vital that direct executive level leadership for teaching and learning was seen with the same ambition as research and strategic development. The team therefore recommended that GMIT *consider appointing a Vice-President for learning and teaching* as part of their executive level restructuring.

## 4. Research

4.1    In many ways research encapsulates the uncertainties surrounding the future direction of the Institute. As noted earlier (para 2.8) the lack of a research infrastructure is a challenge in terms of TU status. There is also a discernible ambivalence in the staff body as to the rightful position of research in an essentially teaching institution. And although GMIT is the fourth largest institution in the country in terms of student numbers, this is not reflected in the scale of its research activity. Yet research and innovation forms one of the pillars of GMIT's strategic plan even though there is an acknowledgement in the SER that the main aspect of the current research strategy - the development of research centres - has seen 'mixed' outcomes. This was part of an attempt to incentivise research activity by providing funds from reserves to help the establishment of three research centres - Marine and Freshwater Research Centre (MFRC), Galway Medical Device Technology Centre (GMedTech), and the Centre for the Integration of Sustainable Energy Technologies (CiSET). The research centre model was acknowledged as being dependent on critical mass and track record. The team learnt, however, that following a review, it had been decided to discontinue CiSET as a research centre and this was a disappointment to the wider research ambitions of the Institute. It also sowed some seeds of doubt as to whether this was a sustainable part of research strategy.

4.2    In terms of the wider research infrastructure and resourcing, GMIT had not developed a Graduate School, although there were ambitions to do so, and research centres therefore reported to their own schools. A research office was in place but this, it was said, lacked focus and had become something of a 'catch-all' for anything to do with research and, in practice, dealt more with employers and knowledge transfer. Indeed external stakeholders confirmed that the research office had become the starting point for contact with GMIT on industry/business affairs. This did not provide for clarity of purpose in that office. Investment in research was problematic as it had to be funded from reserves as opposed to through agreed borrowing. GMIT was trying to identify new research areas and re-prioritise resources accordingly. And if successful in funding bids, for example, for a medical device centre, it was the intention to buy out teaching time for the staff concerned. A significant issue affecting research, reported by both the executive and staff, was the need for greater decentralisation and flexibility for academic units to allocate teaching and research to staff.

4.3    The team were told by many academic staff that their teaching load affected their enthusiasm for enhancing research and their expectation of becoming a TU. Others, having established an impetus in their own research, stressed their desire to continue, but highlighted the lack of administrative support to assist in managing research activity. However, at present the decision whether to pursue research was largely left to individuals. There was little incentive to engage in research; it was not a criterion for academic promotion and neither did it attract sabbatical leave, apart from paid leave for writing up the thesis. And while some staff, especially recent recruits, had

ambitions to pursue research, a significant number of established staff showed a preference for the original teaching identity of an Institute of Technology, focusing on levels 6 and 7 with an emphasis on smaller class sizes. At the level of the academic unit there were also pressures that militated against providing funding or incentives to staff to engage in research. It was, for example, more resource effective in some disciplines to recruit increased undergraduate numbers. This created much larger classes (100 plus) with staff then facing greatly increased marking and less time to build research activity.

4.4     Staff PhD fees were paid from the CED staff development budgets and the team heard that some staff were registered with UK institutions. In its meeting with the SEG the team was told that nearly 40 staff were funded on PhDs. The local university was also providing additional support in upskilling staff, and 40 further had expressed interest. But in this meeting it was again emphasised to the team that staff were engaging with research out of individual interest, rather than being steered that way by the institution. The question arose as to whether GMIT should incentivise people to do PhDs in certain strategic areas or leave it up to individual choice and interest? This was an example of where the vision of evolving into a more research-oriented university was not shared by all staff.

4.5     The team found some evidence of bottom-up research initiatives; in computing, for example, efforts were being made to build an early stage data science research group. This had been reflected in the appointment of four new staff members, two with relevant PhDs, and marks had been allocated for research in the interview process. However, teaching staff noted that measures of productivity focused on teaching rather than research, and there was no formal link between promotion and research. Time could be gained from grants or supervising a PhD student, which counted for 2 hours of teaching per week. However, there was an appetite in some schools for more research and the infrastructure for applied research clearly existed in some disciplines. Some were enthusiastic about this but felt that some remission from teaching was needed to write papers and apply for grants.  Overall the current situation in research was described to the team as 'bitty' and a 'patchwork'.

4.6     Awareness of postgraduate study amongst the student body was found to be variable. Some students reported that they simply did not know how to apply for postgraduate study. In areas that had more of a research presence, usually linked to a research centre, students found lecturers more prepared to spend time setting out the possibilities for further study at postgraduate level, including how to apply for projects and funding. The team understood that student supervision was managed in-house (apart from external examiners and vivas) and this often resulted in a lack of international orientation in both supervisors and students.

4.7     While the team found encouragement in the enthusiasm of some staff in their research activities and the niche research developing around two research centres, it

gained no sense of a fully purposeful research vision or the expertise or means to deliver on stated ambitions. Ultimately the concept and benefits of research were not, in the view of the team, fully appreciated and investment in research was too often seen as a cost rather than an asset. In the context of a dedicated teaching institution, for example, it was telling that there was no strategic focus on research-informed teaching and individuals were not encouraged to undertake pedagogic research projects.

4.8    The team noted that a new VP Research post had been advertised and it very much supported this initiative at executive board level as a way of driving forward research developments at GMIT. However, the challenges of embedding a research culture in the Institute were, in the opinion of the team, quite significant. As things stood research activity was fragmented and lacked belief. It would require clarity in strategy and bold leadership to steer an appropriate path that found positive support amongst the widest staff constituency. In the view of the team a crucial first step was for GMIT to *realistically update its research strategy and then take the necessary measures to efficiently implement it*. This should be the key and absolute priority for the incoming VP Research.

## 5. Service to society

5.1    The team met with a wide range of external stakeholders to establish how GMIT interacted with its economic and business environment and, more generally, what benefits it provided to wider society in the region and nationally.

5.2    The Institute's Strategic Plan and the revision to that Plan approved in September 2013 offer strong statements on student-community engagement and the ambition to 'create an outward facing organisation working with the community'. The SER is somewhat more circumspect with a description of student engagement with the new national student survey (ISSE) which stresses improvements in supporting learning and consideration being given to the introduction of a formal community engagement/volunteering initiative. More widely the SER acknowledges that community engagement lacks a focus and is essentially led by individual or departmental initiatives.

5.3    The team was impressed by the positive opinions offered by local and regional external stakeholders. GMIT was commended for its openness, responsiveness, flexibility and staff creativity in response to business needs. This positivity related to a breadth of activity. In many cases, GMIT graduates were considered to be ready for work and industry, particularly due to the opportunities for work experience and apprenticeships. Some concern was raised that GMIT might be moving away from vocationally orientated programmes, but the institution was praised for involving external stakeholders in programme reviews in order to understand and reflect the needs of industry and the local context.

5.4    In the context of business needs the team heard that courses would benefit from more cross-disciplinary approaches and that distance learning could be very effective. The team was also told that GMIT's strategic decision not to offer unaccredited lifelong learning programmes was seen as an issue by industry, which would often be prepared to pay for this. Indeed one of the proposals that had emerged from external involvement in programmatic review was to prepare industry relevant modules for accreditation. Courses could be arranged in the summer, or at weekends in winter. In addition, the Recognition of Prior Learning had to be better arranged and supported as a way of staff upskilling in the workplace. There was a feeling that, notwithstanding GMIT's aspirations and good intentions, the education system was very slow to change, and was not doing so fast enough for industry. More strategically there was a question as to how a TU would provide subject specialisation sufficiently to meet the local needs of business and industry. A number of these issues chimed with the team's observations in the areas of strategic direction, teaching and learning and research, particularly in terms of the underlying principles that should guide the Institute's programme offering and how it is structured (see 3.13 above). The team also felt strongly that the full potential for lifelong learning and CPD was not being exploited, not least in terms of income generation.

5.5     With regards to the extent and nature of GMIT's broader local and regional relationships the team heard that the college was seen as a catalyst for development and the discussions reinforced the point made by others that GMIT graduates were found to be well grounded and often more mature than university students. For example, the team heard that despite limitations of scale, the Castlebar campus developed graduates that were very highly thought of with regard to supporting local economic development, including tourism. There had also been efforts made to adapt the general business course delivered at the campus so that it reflected the local context.

5.6     The team found strong evidence of the vibrancy of community engagement not just at the Castlebar campus but also in Letterfrack. Perhaps because both campuses felt a degree of isolation from the Galway hub, managers and staff in those locations came across as highly committed to the delivery of courses, including accredited lifelong learning provision, that were relevant to their local region and to developing relationships rooted in the local community. In particular the team was impressed with the relationship that the Letterfrack campus had formed with Connemara West, a community owned and managed rural development company established in 1971 to promote the social, economic and cultural development of the area. The benefits of this relationship included Connemara West securing funding for the repair of campus buildings.

5.7     The Castlebar and Letterfrack campuses also shared the distinction of having been awarded Green Campus status. This was notable given that there are currently only seven third level campuses in Ireland with the Green Campus Flag. The team noted the substantial work and evidence that had gone into these achievements and recommended that GMIT *continue with and enhance the Green Flag campus policy*. More broadly, the team felt that GMIT should *build upon the successful examples of community engagement at the Mayo and Letterfrack campuses*.

5.8     The local authority had interacted with GMIT over number of years with recent initiatives in the areas of tourism and food. The potential in terms of economic development was again affirmed in these discussions and GMIT was seen as an important partner in pursuing the establishment of an inter-agency and business group. There was also interaction with the Innovation Centre which was often a useful source of professional advice. There were, therefore, strategic advantages on both sides and, in particular, the local authority found it beneficial to use GMIT skills and knowledge to supplement areas of limited expertise in its own staff base.

5.9     Throughout these discussions the team was impressed with the mutual respect that existed between GMIT and its external stakeholders and there was much to commend in a wide range of activities. In some ways the SER underplays GMIT's role in wider society. However, there was a general consensus that there was a lack of strategic direction to these developments and it was timely that GMIT was now beginning to

look at a more coherent structure to support community engagement. Currently, the involvement of business / industry with GMIT's strategic planning process was often through informal conversations. And initiatives such as industrial panels were viewed with some suspicion by schools with a preference to set up groups for specific projects. There was some recognition that there were dangers in relying on individual relationships in stakeholder engagement but this had not prompted a change of view in many quarters. In these circumstances the team recommended that GMIT *institutionalise stakeholder involvement in strategic planning*. This should form part of the wider considerations in this area of activity and some urgency should be attached to the *articulation of a community engagement strategy* that brings together the disparate elements of existing and planned collaborations and partnerships.

## 6. Quality culture

6.1    GMIT's position within the national quality assurance system is clearly articulated in the SER and this understanding was supported by a number of helpful discussions that the team had with senior staff. The team noted the Institute's expectation that, in due course, it would achieve Designated Awarding Body status. In the last institutional review (September 2010) undertaken by the then Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), GMIT was found to be 'generally effective' in the operation of quality assurance measured by the criteria of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA and HETAC's own benchmarks. While some time had elapsed since this institutional review the team was content that the basis for that judgment remained sound. Academic standards were sustained through GMIT's deliberative structures, the external examining system and by reference to external benchmark statements, particularly the national qualifications framework. This was supported by well articulated and documented policies and procedures which are prominently featured on GMIT's website. The team regarded this as an important support to the understanding of, and transparency in, quality assurance mechanisms. As some managers noted, however, quality could not be seen simply as adherence to written standards and the team found a strong commitment from teaching staff to quality principles in their disciplines and in the delivery of individual programmes. This personal ownership of quality in teaching appeared to be generally wide-spread amongst the academic community.

6.2    At the same time the team also found appropriate senior management oversight of quality processes. At the level of the Executive Board, the Registrar's Office had taken a leading role in engaging all staff in the quality conversation. In that context, GMIT had decided to change the programme review process. This involved a move away from the institution and programmes being considered under the same process as this had not allowed sufficient time for in depth consideration of programmes. In 2013-14, therefore, GMIT conducted a five-yearly programmatic review process which concentrated on programmes rather than strategic issues. In an extensive exercise, 48 panels had met over 13 days and reviewed 71 programmes, for each of which programme self-evaluation reports had been produced. Senior management commented to the team this should be seen as a significant indicator of staff commitment to quality assurance at a time of low morale, pay cuts and long hours. The team viewed this as an important re-focusing of monitoring mechanisms so that real enhancements could be made to the direct learning experience of students. At the same time it was important for GMIT not to lose sight of the wider relationship between outcomes that emerged from the analysis and monitoring of individual programmes / programme areas and strategic decision-making. The team understood that outcomes from the programmatic review would be followed up systematically; it encouraged GMIT to look carefully at the broader strategic lessons emerging from this

exercise and take account of the team's recommendations concerning the nature of the programme offering (see 3.13 above).

6.3 The team spent some time considering the involvement of students in the quality processes at GMIT. Teaching staff explained that they prepared summaries of the student evaluation forms for their head of department. However, students reported to the team that not all lecturers handed out evaluation forms. Furthermore they thought that the forms should be completed anonymously and be submitted to an independent person rather than to the lecturers themselves. Students had discussed with staff the fact that only the lecturers themselves receive the results of student evaluations and it had been suggested to them that this was because of trade union opposition. Nonetheless students were very critical about shortcomings in feedback, the lack of anonymity in the process, and the failure to 'close of loop' in the feedback process.

6.4 Some senior managers acknowledged that action on student feedback forms was problematic given that the head of school was not permitted to see the module feedback forms directly, only the lecturers' summaries. There were proposals to put programme feedback online as heads of department and programme boards would like to use the data as part of the annual review report. These are submitted to the Registrar's Office, and then presented by the head of school to the Monitoring and Review Sub-Committee. However, it was not clear whether anything happened as a result, or how effectively they were used. They did not appear to inform planning and it was only recently that these data have been made more widely available. The team were told by these managers that much more evidence-based decision-making was needed, and to ensure that quality assurance activities were meaningful, not burdensome. New thinking was emerging on retention and the first year student experience but they did not have any evidence of the impact of such initiatives; the 'Learning to Learn' module, for example, was six years old but it was not known what difference it had made. The view was expressed that GMIT had 'noble' ambitions, but that there was a real need to prioritise or extend initiatives based on more concrete evidence. The team agreed with these assessments by managers and urged GMIT to i*ncrease sharing of feedback amongst staff*. This was essential if there was to be an open and honest discourse on how to enhance as well as assure quality. In addition, it was also important to stimulate the promotion of quality on a regular basis. This might be facilitated *by the use of quality champions, for example a member of staff leading on best practice in assessment, within each academic unit*.

6.5 Students also had the opportunity to express their views at the programme boards. However, students did not feel that programme board meetings worked well, with limited information about timing and, when they did attend, finding them somewhat intimidating and confrontational. One reported that they were brought in to give their views, and then leave without knowing what has happened, indicating a lack of transparency in the process. And while staff emphasised their pride in their courses

and their readiness to take on students' comments, students that the team met also commented that staff could be poor at responding to feedback and failed to act on suggestions. Some students also expressed the view that poor teaching was not always addressed. There was praise by some students for the way in which the Students' Union represented student views to senior managers. The overall picture that emerged for the team was of feedback mechanisms being in place but that (a) these did not operate in a fully systematic way (b) there were flaws in the collection process which undermined student confidence and (c) outcomes were not always followed up and where they were they lacked visibility. In the view of the team, therefore, it was essential that the *feedback loop was closed, particularly in relation to the student body*.

6.7 The team had noted in its discussions on teaching and learning that there was no scheme for peer observation / review of teaching, nor an annual staff appraisal system (see 3.6 above). This clearly also had implications for the embedding of quality culture. The benefits of establishing such arrangements were not confined to the running of individual academic units. They were also key to connecting staff development requirements to institutional strategy and, more generally, this needed to *be informed by evidence from the quality assurance processes*.

6.8 While, inevitably, the team focussed much of its time on core quality assurance processes there were also opportunities to talk to students about the quality of their wider experience at GMIT. Their concerns were in many ways typical of students in the higher education sector and not beyond reasonable expectation. They wanted a modern technical infrastructure that was fast, flexible and responsive to their needs. Laboratories needed to be better equipped and able to accommodate the growing student numbers in STEM subjects. Student services needed to be better geared to the individual needs of the student and recognise that non-academic pastoral support was a growing issue. The team was aware of current investment plans that would help address some of these issues. However, it also appeared to the team that there was an opportunity for the Institute to *extend quality assurance to all institutional activities*. The tipping point for investment decisions in the academic and wider support infrastructure was often a fine one. It is certainly the case that educational quality can be jeopardised by failings in this respect. A more holistic approach to identifying quality benchmarks in all areas could help ensure that concerns were recognised and listened to in a systematic way and that decision-making was more understanding and responsive to identified needs. At a time of resource constraint there would always be matters of priority and timing but a broader approach to quality assurance should make that process more transparent and widely understood in all parts of the GMIT community. In the view of the team it could also offer a platform to *accelerate progress from quality assurance to quality enhancement*, something that needed to be at the forefront of the Institute's thoughts as it pursued its strategic ambitions.

## 7. Internationalisation

7.1　The challenges facing GMIT in the international arena were found to be quite considerable. Its own assessment in the SER is that 'it still has a relatively modest international presence' in terms of partnerships. Non-EU student recruitment was some way below 100 in total and then concentrated on the main campus in Galway. Outgoing staff and student mobility was small although there were better figures for placements in Europe and in the USA. And as mentioned previously there was some concern that the title Institute of Technology was a barrier to fostering international links and recruiting degree level students from the non-EU market. The team found the Institute's management only too well aware of the increased efforts that would be required from across the organisation to improve on these statistics.

7.2　In its September 2013 revision to the Strategic Plan, GMIT had framed its international ambitions under three headings: consolidation of EU partnerships to promote staff and student exchange; diversification outside Europe in its revenue base; and the enhancement of the international programme portfolio and quality service. Support for these objectives, particularly revenue generation, is provided through a Department of International Relations, Marketing and Communications. It was also intended that one of the new Vice-President appointments would take on Executive Board responsibility for international relations.

7.3　Staff in the International Relations Department were found to be appropriately experienced and highly committed. They were convinced that they had a very good product to offer but that there were significant resource problems in delivering the current objectives. The team found some difference in perspective between senior managers and professional international relations staff in terms of the shortfall in resourcing. Senior managers, while accepting that the international developments at GMIT were below the curve, felt that staffing levels were adequate for the current workload and objectives. There was some acknowledgment that the absence of senior leadership in the last year had hampered progress but there were now interim arrangements in place until new appointments were in place on the Executive Board. It was also felt important that a clear international strategy was put in place before any further resources were committed to these endeavours. The team entirely endorsed the *need for GMIT to develop an internationalisation strategy*. Clearly the basis for such a strategy existed in the current objectives although there was a great deal more that required consideration and articulation. And it needed to be complemented by a detailed action plan that monitored and measured progress against targets. The lack of a fully-fledged internationalisation strategy should not, however, prevent some more immediate decisions on self-funding recruitment activities. And there was an obvious case for involving academic staff in recruitment activity overseas and, more generally, e*nhancing staff mobility*.

7.4    The team accepted that the appropriate resourcing of international activity was a difficult judgement to make, particularly at a time when there were still severe constraints on expenditure. However, the team sensed that senior management underestimated the requirements of the business model in international affairs. This was an extremely fast moving and competitive market and the expectations of partners and, more particularly, non-EU students were extremely high in terms of responsiveness to enquiries, support infrastructure, staff knowledge and expertise and the relevance of the taught provision on offer. From its discussions the team were strongly of the view that the gap between GMIT and its competitors would grow unless it decided to *treat internationalisation as an investment rather than a cost element*. In this context the team recommended *enhancing the staffing in the International Office* and *looking into best practice at other institutions (e.g. self-funding models, summer schools, etc.)*.

7.5    The team was also keen to understand how students regarded GMIT's international profile and activities and how far this supported or enhanced their studies. The response from students was variable.  In some subjects with strong international placement opportunities such as tourism, students were generally happy with internationalisation. Other students were aware of overseas placement opportunities but commented on the cost impediment to going abroad, as those who went were largely self-funding. Another group of students felt that the institution was not promoting internationalisation or providing them with the information they needed, for example about Erasmus opportunities. For the team this student view reinforced the general conclusions it had reached about the Institute's approach to internationalisation – resources were insufficient, strategy needed to be better articulated and clear leadership was required to drive staff and student engagement with international themes and activities. And while the team applauded the prominence given to internationalisation as one of the five pillars of the Strategic Plan the team felt that GMIT should look for it to *permeate all institutional activity*, whether this be in teaching and learning, research or the development of activities at all the five campuses that emphasised 'internationalisation at home'.

## 8. Conclusion

8.1    GMIT is a very self-aware institution and this is reflected in the SER. Emphasis should now be put on implementation with clear priorities, milestones and effectiveness checks based on evidence.

8.2    GMIT has experienced an extremely turbulent period since 2008, particularly in terms of the external environment and the impact of the government's austerity measures. GMIT now has the opportunity to move forward with inspired leadership, well defined strategies, swifter implementation of action plans and a clearer sense of individual responsibilities and accountabilities.

**Summary of the recommendations**

**Governance and Institutional Decision-Making**

1    Critical need to accelerate the process of appointing the new president

2    Remove the uncertainty in strategic direction, prepare in advance for the acceptance of the TU proposal, and establish a contingency plan

3    Establish formal mechanisms and procedures for developing strategic and operational plans at the academic unit level

4    Improve communications related to the decision making process both horizontally and vertically

5    Consider setting aside part of reserves to invest in future development

**Teaching and Learning**

6    Consider appointing a Vice President for learning and teaching

7    Develop a staff appraisal scheme suitable for the GMIT context

8    Consider ways of increasing the offering of level 9 taught programmes taking into account labour market needs

9    Consider using innovative ways to reduce heavy teaching loads (e.g. blended learning, increased weight for teaching on level 9 courses)

10    Enhance the provision of interdisciplinary programmes

**Research**

11    Realistically update your research strategy and take the necessary measures to efficiently implement it

### Service to Society

12   Institutionalise stakeholder involvement in strategic planning

13   Articulate a community engagement strategy

14   Continue with and enhance the Green Flag campus policy

15   Build upon the successful examples of community engagement at the Mayo and Letterfrack campuses

### Quality Culture

16   Close the feedback loop, particularly with students

17   Increase sharing of feedback amongst staff

18   Strategic planning with regards to staff development should be informed by evidence from the quality assurance processes

19   Extend quality assurance to all institutional activities

20   Accelerate progress from quality assurance to quality enhancement

21   Consider the use of quality champions within each academic unit (e.g. best practice in assessment)

### Internationalisation

22   Develop an internationalisation strategy that permeates all institutional activity

23   Enhance staffing in the International Office

24   Look into best practices at other institutions (e.g. self-funding models, summer schools, etc.)

25   Enhance staff mobility

26   Treat internationalisation as an investment rather than a cost element