

Higher Education Authority

Report of the 378th Meeting held on 24th May 2016 in Brooklawn House, Dublin 4.

- Present: ¹ Mr. Bahram Bekhradnia
Dr. Mary Canning
Mr. Kevin Donoghue
Ms Siobhán Harkin
Dr. Stephen Kinsella, Acting Chair
Mr. Gordon Ryan
- Apology: Dr. Jim Mountjoy
Dr. Brian Thornes
Mr. Declan Walsh
- In attendance: Ms Annie Hoey (items 1-13)
Mr. Tom Boland (items 2-13)
Mr. Pádraic Mellett (items 2-13)
Mr. Andrew Brownlee (items 2-13)
Mr. Fergal Costello (items 2-13)
Dr. Eucharía Meehan (items 5, 10, 12)
Dr. Gemma Irvine (items 5, 6, 9, 10, 12)
Dr. Vivienne Patterson (item 5)
Mr. Stewart Roche (item 5)
Ms Sarah Fitzgerald (item 5)
Professor Pat O'Connor (item 6)
Professor Paul Walton (item 6)
Mr. Ryan Shanks (item 6)
Mr. Alan McGrath (item 7)

1. Members only session

1.1 Members discussed the following;

- CEO appointment
- Chair and members appointment
- Governance in Higher Education Institutions; roles of governing authorities

2. Reports of meeting held 22nd March

Decision: The minutes were approved.

¹ Members present for all items unless otherwise indicated.

3. Matters Arising & Follow-up actions

3.1 Item 3.1, DkIT – It was agreed to circulate the response from the chair of DKIT, Mr. Brownlee outlined a summary of the letter. The emphasis was to focus on future solutions.

3.2 Item 12, Service Level Agreement – Members were advised that the CEO issued a letter to the Secretary General on foot of the discussion at the last Board meeting. The Executive did propose an additional insertion to the effect that the SLA reflects, and develops upon, the work programme approved by the Board in November 2015. It was suggested that the Secretary General or Deputy Secretary General address a future meeting of the Board. This was unlikely to happen until new members are appointed.

3.3 Members welcomed Ms Annie Hoey who would be assuming the office of President, USI with effect from 1st July 2016.

4. Report of the Chief Executive

4.1 UL Protected Disclosures – The CEO briefed members on developments.² There has been no response from the University to the letter sent by the HEA, although members noted that the University has dropped its litigation against the Limerick Leader. The CEO briefed members on a meeting he and Dr. Canning had with the Chair and another member of the UL Governing Body. One difficulty the University has is the apparent knowledge the Irish Times had about the HEA's letter to UL. The CEO indicated he was satisfied from discussions with the paper's education correspondent that the newspaper does not have the actual letter. He advised members that the letter would not be releasable under FoI legislation while the matter was subject to the deliberative process. Dr. Canning noted that the University GB members were initially strong on the need for the University to protect its autonomy but at the conclusion of the meeting recognized that the HEA was operating in a spirit of help. It was noted that the matter posed a reputational risk to the University especially at this time when it is recruiting a new President. It was critical that the University responded promptly, otherwise it would be up to the DES to determine the next steps which could include the appointment of a visitor.

4.2 Meeting with the new Minister for Education and Skills – The CEO briefed members on a meeting the Minister had with the CEOs of the state agencies operating under his aegis. The Minister outlined his priorities and signaled his

² The CEO indicated he did not propose any course of action or substantive debate, members accordingly agreed that it would not be necessary for Dr. Kinsella to recuse himself.

intention to initiate a review of strategy in the Department. The CEO, in his comments to the Minister, referred to the forthcoming System Performance Report and its key message of a well performing system which is in need of additional funding and the need for ongoing engagement between enterprise and higher education. Noting the Minister's interest in increasing the number of ICT graduates, the CEO pointed out that Ireland already had high ICT participation rates. He suggested that industry could have a role to play in making the profession more attractive, especially to females. He briefed members on correspondence just received from DES in relation to its review on strategy. A tight deadline has been set for submissions – 9th June.

4.3 Members raised TU developments – were mergers still on the agenda? The CEO noted that the Minister issued a reply to a PQ on this matter. It was not clear when the Minister would recirculate the TU Bill.

4.4 Human Resources – Mr. Mellett briefed members on progress with the recruitment process. It was anticipated that the new appointees would be in post from early July.

5. Second System Performance Report

5.1 Mr. Costello advised members that the draft as circulated took on board comments from members in addition to feedback from the DES. The Executive has shortened the report and sought to sharpen the key messages. A key task is to insert an executive summary, this will be included in the next draft.

5.2 The following issues were raised;

- The key message the HEA wishes to convey. The report seems to be saying that the system is performing well with a number of concerns tagged on. Mr. Costello noted the fact that there was a time lag between system performance and the deterioration in funding.
- Reference needs to be made to demographic growth, deterioration in staff: student ratio and the risk this poses to long term international competitiveness. The deterioration in the staff:student ratio does not appear to have had a negative impact so far on student satisfaction rates. This view was not universally shared with both USI and TUI expressing unhappiness with the deterioration in the staff:student ratio.
- Reference was made to concerns about possible increasing casualization of staff. This needs to be considered carefully as some disciplines rely heavily on part-time staff with professional experience.
- The impact of the funding cuts on campus facilities.

- Evidence of a deterioration in research metrics. Mr. Costello indicated it was too early to be definitive on this. On the one hand there appeared to be a reduction in citations but this may reflect a deliberate decision on the part of institutions to be more selective as regards where they published their research.
- The ability of the system to manage diversity in the student population.
- The risks to the system of focusing on quick-wins in the area of research was noted.

5.3 The Executive noted that the key message the DES wished to convey to D/PER and other stakeholders was that the HE system was performing well, with a reference to risks. There are some who believe there is potential to extract even more productivity from the sector. Members expressed the view that it was important that the serious concerns of the Board be conveyed in the report, preferably in the Executive Summary.

Decision: It was agreed that the Executive would further develop the report having regard to the above comments and further observations that may be conveyed by members.

6. Report of the Gender Equality Review Team

6.1 The acting Chair welcomed Professor Pat O'Connor, Professor Paul Walton and Mr. Ryan Shanks to the meeting. Professor Walton presented the report. He commended the HEA for embracing gender equality and noted that the Authority has now got the opportunity to make a meaningful impact to gender equality in higher education. Underpinning the team's recommendations is a desire to protect and motivate talent to come through the system. He stressed equality is not a mandate for mediocrity. He outlined the process followed by the team noting it met on 7 occasions and engaged widely with stakeholders. The key finding was that the higher education system is losing female talent as they progress through their career. This was not sustainable in the modern world. He referred to an on-line survey which attracted a high response rate. It produced evidence of their being nepotism and a 'boys club' in the system. The team's recommendations, while radical, were designed to ensure this loss of talent will not continue. He noted that higher education in all countries face a degree of gender inequality however the problem in Ireland was particularly acute.

6.2 Members welcomed the report and raised the following issues;

- It was important that the recommendation in relation to quotas was underpinned by evidence. This was to ensure that the report achieved the maximum support. Applying quotas might be particularly difficult in small

academic departments. The introduction of rotating Heads of Department in the IoTs might also be problematic as they currently hold their post on a permanent basis. Professor O'Connor noted that it would take 40 years for gender equality to be achieved assuming an annual turnover of 3%.

- The status of the report as presented to the Board. The CEO advised that it is open to the review team to take on board views expressed by members before finalising the report.
- RIA gold medal award proposal. Professor O'Connor indicated that this initiative was mentioned as a benchmark. The proposal was to achieve gender balance over a three year period. In relation to membership of the RIA it was noted that the main problem rested with the lack of senior female academics in the HEIs. It was noted that the current President of the RIA is female.
- The extent to which the lack of gender equality is attributable to females not applying for promotion.
- The reference to female Presidents of USI needs to be amended.
- The importance of transparency in recruitment, HEIs should apply the Public Appointments Commission's Code of Practice.
- The valuable contribution of the Athena Swann initiative

6.3 The Review Team thanked members for their comments. While there may be unanticipated consequences emerging from implementation of their recommendations, implementation of the recommendations would enable Ireland to become a world leader in gender equality. Both the OECD and the EU have recognised the link between equality and innovation. In UK higher education gender equality targets are set rather than quotas. Progress has however been slow. Quotas should cease once gender parity has been achieved. It was noted that some countries are now using quotas for Boards of Directors.

6.4 Members considered the next steps, dissemination of the report and implementation of its recommendations. Professor Walton suggested that it would be a matter for the HEIs to develop their own gender equality programme having regard to the recommendations set out in the report. The HEA would need to be clear as to its expectations and undertake regular reviews. The power of hard data should not be ignored. Leadership from the top will also be critical. The CEO indicated some targeted funding might be considered. Members were advised that it was planned to launch the report towards the end of June. Consideration can be given to organising a seminar in the autumn.

Decision: Members thanked the Review Team and its Secretariat for their dedicated work. The Executive would now finalise the report having regard to input from members. It was agreed that the Board would consider implementation of the report's recommendation at its November meeting.

7. Report of Finance and Governance Committee

7.1 Mr. Brownlee circulated an overview of the 2016 budget meetings. Members were advised that the Executive visited each of the HEI campuses this year. The IoT financial review exercise was dovetailed into the budget meeting process. A number of key themes were emerging from the budget meetings. These included the following;

- An overall deterioration in the budgetary situation with a number of Universities now reporting deficits as well as many of the IoTs.
- Institutions reported a disincentive to increase STEM student numbers under the RGAM. Further capital investment will be required and it was proposed to discuss this with the Department's building unit.
- Institutions were facing HR constraints due to the Lansdowne Agreement.
- Institutions were now relying on research capital grants and (in the case of universities) borrowings to fund campus developments.

7.2 Mr. Brownlee outlined the funding situation of a number of institutions. He noted there were some positive news emerging from NCAD. Three of the vulnerable IoTs were making progress – DkIT, IT Tralee and LyIT. However there remains a concern with GMIT and WIT, while new concerns have emerged with AIT and CIT. On the University side both TCD and UCC may need to submit a S. 37 letter. A further, more detailed report will be provided to the Finance and Governance Committee in July.

7.3 Members raised the following issues;

- The report included some compelling material for the System Performance report. It clearly signals that the system is operating at full capacity. Similar structural deficits in the primary or secondary sectors would not be ignored.
- Was the Executive satisfied as to the accuracy of the HEI income and student number projections? Mr. Brownlee indicated that the Executive has verified the budgets and where necessary have followed up with particular institutions.
- Are there areas for further efficiencies such as centralising more shared services or outsourcing certain services? Mr. Brownlee noted that there remains a considerable reluctance, particularly in the universities, to progress the shared services agenda.
- It was noted that some institutions were relying on revenue from Brazil's Science without Borders Programme which may not be sustainable over the medium to long term.

7.4 Members noted the Committee's decision in relation to the proposed 2016/17 Student Assistance Fund and Fund for Students with Disabilities allocations.

7.5 Mr. Costello briefed members on meetings of the Finance and Governance Committee held with the six consortia currently involved in landscape reform. Some of the consortia are progressing very satisfactorily, others are less well developed. It was accordingly proposed to link payments to the achievement of specific milestones. Dr. Canning indicated she attended the meetings and outlined five key messages;

- The importance of bringing in external expertise early-on into the process, this has ensured the DCU incorporation has to date been a success.
- Importance of setting a reasonable pace and good targets.
- Phase implementation having regard to targets that can be reasonably be achieved.
- Legal costs should be managed aggressively
- Importance of providing clear and assertive leadership

She concluded that the process was very informative and the new chair should consider how members might engage with the process in future years. The CEO noted the importance of there being clarity as to the role of the Executive and the Board in this process. There was benefit in involving members in the process but it needs to be managed carefully. The acting Chair suggested this be considered further in the context of member induction.

7.5 Mr. Costello briefed members on the outcome of discussing concerning the withholding of performance funding from three institutions. The Committee at its meeting recommended that the withheld funding be restored to both DkIT and NCAD. He briefed members on the position relating to GMIT and discussions with the institute subsequent to the Committee's meeting. The Institute's new President recognises that there is a need for improvement in its operations and it is his intention to take the necessary steps. On this basis the Executive is recommending that the withheld funding be restored subject to ongoing monitoring of the strategic and financial performance of the Institute. Members agreed to this recommendation.

7.6 Members discussed the recommendation in the Committee's report relating to the closure of the Killybegs Campus. Mr. Donoghue indicated that he did not support this proposal. The CEO noted that this recommendation was agreed in the context of protracted discussions on the deficit in Letterkenny Institute. Mr. Brownlee confirmed that the Killybegs Campus was not sustainable without additional resources. The Institute's reserves run out next year. It was now a matter for the DES to determine if there was a viable alternative to closure. If

there was not, the Department will need to provide funding for redundancies. Members agreed that the overriding concern was the best use of funding from a system perspective. There was no question of funding being cut immediately. This will need to be carefully managed having regard to the interests of students.

Decision: Members approved the minutes of the Committee meetings held 3rd May 2016. The opposition of Mr. Donoghue to the Killybegs Campus recommendation was noted.

8. Report of System Development and Performance Management Committee

Decision: Members approved the minutes of the Committee meetings held 3rd May 2016.

9. Report of Policy and Planning Committee

Decision: Members approved the minutes of the Committee meetings held 3rd May 2016.

10. Report of Research and Graduate Education Committee

Decision: Members approved the minutes of the Committee meetings held 3rd May 2016.

11. Opening of new bank accounts

Decision: Members approved the opening of a new bank account for the Erasmus 2016/17 programme.

12. Presentation from the Irish Research Council

12.1 The Director of the Council, Dr. Meehan advised members that a copy of the Council's 2015 annual report would be circulated once the Minister signed-off on the Foreword. She focused on the following in her presentation;

- The role of the IRC
- IRC Budget and how it is allocated
- Funding programmes operated by the Council
- Overview of 2015 awards
- Implementation of Gender Strategy and Action Plan
- Priming for international success – Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions
- Meeting national challenges – partnering with enterprise
- Engagement with Government and civic society

- IRC and Innovation 2020
- Role of IRC in facilitating Irish participation with Horizon 2020
- IRC involvement with other European Programmes
- Love Irish Research Campaign

12.2 Members raised the following issues;

- The success of females in Government of Ireland STEM fellowships following the introduction of gender blinding to the application process was noteworthy and may have implications for the gender equality report.
- What proportion of postgraduate students are funded by the IRC? Dr. Meehan estimated 20-25% of postgraduates are funded by the IRC. The others are funded through SFI funding, EU awards, HEI schemes and own resources.
- What distinguishes the IRC from other donors such as SFI? Dr. Meehan noted that individuals apply for, and are awarded funding by the IRC. In the case of SFI the funding is secured by a PI who then engages postdoctoral and postgraduate researchers. She noted however that the Council's Government of Ireland award, although prestigious, was at €2,000 lower than the equivalent amount paid by SFI.
- One option might be for the IRC to make fewer, but larger awards. What are the current success rates? Dr. Meehan indicated these were – 13-15% for the postgraduate schemes and under 10% for both the postdoctoral and project schemes. She confirmed that neither Council members, nor staff have a role in determining awards.

13. Any other business

13.1 No issues raised.

Next Meeting

26th July 2016

Padraic Mellett

22nd June 2016