

Dublin City University (DCU)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 21st September 2015

The HEA welcomed Dublin City University (DCU) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which the process operates. DCU was invited to provide an update on institutional progress.

DCU discussed how the strategic plan and the rolling planning function of this process track the same set of measures as featured in the compact. The HEA Compact is aligned to a number specific actions within the DCU Strategic Plan. Progress on these are monitored and reported on annually. The compact is mostly marked in green, a few ambers feature and these will form part of the discussion, along with some proposed changes and clarifications too.

On the subject of benchmarking, the HEA asked how a university can be sure that the very positive outcomes being reported are genuinely stretching and improving, as measured against key peer groups. DCU responded that they have looked to certain comparable UK based institutions (universities without medical schools), including Bath, Lancaster and Strathclyde. DCU has set specific goals for its research performance, including measuring the proportion of staff who are research active. Currently there is no internationally accepted definition of “research active” staff within higher education. Instead, DCU has developed a broad metric which examines staff activity in research publications, completion of research awards, and active supervision of PhD students within this metric. A key part of the DCU mission is the fact that they are a university of enterprise, so DCU have developed a further metric to measure its progress in relation to knowledge transfer activities, including licence creation, spin-outs, innovation partnerships etc. Increases in global rankings are attributed to improvement in citations (as a result of better journal placement) and graduate employability.

In terms of the consolidation underway with teacher education providers, the HEA invited DCU to set out progress to date. The project is in its final phase, with final contracts due to be signed in June 2016, with all four incorporating institutions actively engaged and significantly invested in this process. A weekly meeting is scheduled on the subject of incorporation and the oversight board meets fortnightly. Some concerns on resourcing have been expressed and it is a huge challenge to cooperate and coordinate across three different campuses.

The relationship with DKIT is also developing positively; A DCU-DKIT graduate school has been established, with DCU accrediting and awarding Level 9 and 10 research awards for students completing these qualifications at DKIT. In terms of the future, it is going to be challenging from a capacity and bandwidth perspective to develop options in programme provision. That said, Dundalk forms part of the DCU region, having the DCU brand and enterprise focus associated with DKIT is important. One area of collaboration is in financial services. Drogheda has been earmarked as a centre in this regard and there is a set of institutions progressing this with DKIT. DCU has also developed a strategic agreement with Ulster University, and continues to have academic teaching and research links with Queens University Belfast.

DCU advised that the next phase of campus development with EIB support will be announced in early 2016. As a general comment, given the level of executive commitment to the incorporation programme, it is challenging to maintain and develop cluster and other collaborative partnerships.

In terms of access and participation, from work conducted under the Strategic Innovation and Development Fund, DCU see that 50% of their students come from Dublin county and focused on enrolling students from target socio-economic groups. DCU has quite a strong record in relation to access and is above average compared to the others in the university sector. While there were concerns that incorporating partners would dilute the proportion of access students, they have managed this successfully, and DCU has exceeded 1,000 access students for the first time. To deliver on this, there are strong DEIS schools links with DCU. Furthermore, the FE – HE portal developed under SIDF has great potential nationally.

The HEA queried whether targets already exceeded would be further increased. DCU conclude that they have demonstrated strong performance but there is a cost there and it is not possible to keep raising the bar.

On the 2016 profile and how this reflects the incorporating institutions, projections represent an increase on the baseline of 640 postgraduate research students and DCU is comfortable that the projection will be met. DCU note that projected numbers in the profile are not targets, but forecasts rather, and performance funding is not tied to their achievement or otherwise.

HEA asked for clarification on the proposed composite metric of innovation output and how it will be applied / measured. DCU considers itself to be nationally leading in innovation and technology transfer, and has developed an aggregate measure for innovation to monitor progress. In order to measure innovation output, DCU has developed a metric that aggregates innovation activity and output based on a strategic weighting of each element. This will have an internal value to DCU, and important in measuring progress against its own strategic priorities, but is perhaps less important in terms of benchmarking with peers..

DCU is currently working to a target of 75% of staff being research active. The HEA queried how this fits with the “university of enterprise” mission. DCU clarified that this varies from subject to subject so it is a stretch goal but not out of reach. DCU generates significant income from research activity, given the enterprise focus, so they are consider that it is appropriate and don’t think that one impacts the other negatively. The outcome from this will be an increased research output, higher impact and citations so that’s the value and the outcome as a result of the target. The strategy has been successful, for example the BDI has engaged with a US drug discovery company who will invest in a number of research teams, which will be located on the DCU campus.

In terms of teaching and learning, given pressures on staff student ratios, there aren’t many options to incentivise uptake of CPD/ pedagogical qualifications. The lever lies in linking it to strategy, publicly and within the university, linking to promotions where relevant. The message is conveyed coherently through the deans at institution and faculty level..

The Minister has publicly noted that DCU has reduced its CAO offering in line with commitment to the Transitions Initiative. The initiative is an opportunity to reduce a further small number of courses. In business there are some programmes with international options, so that inadvertently inflates provision. In other disciplines, there may be further opportunities reduce the number of entry routes. DCU expects to see a further small reduction next year, but it is difficult and slow process. In respect of DCU and the 21st century campus, they have made real progress in online provision. While this is an area of great potential, the HEA noted that it is not apparent in the compact. Future growth in this sector will be delivered through the development of modules and short courses as well as full online programmes. This is an expensive business and the funding model doesn't support it. They are also looking at the Australian model of delivery and talking to IBM too on the opportunities to leverage the provision.

DCU has suggested several changes to the compact which should be incorporated into future iterations. It was noted that a revision to figure 6.1 is required.

In relation to the earlier discussion, DCU doesn't agree that the compact is in any way conservative, the targets represent a stretch and are real. There was a risk in including such targets. The compact reflects the genuine objectives of the institution, set and measured with the Governing Authority's input. The targets and measures reflect expected changes and outcomes. A few are more process driven where they want to see a change in behaviour, such as quality reviews, but the overwhelming wish was to have quantitative and measurable targets around quality, the student experience, the DCU brand and what it means for education. The DCU experience is based on that.

The E-Portfolio challenges they face were noted – a mix of financial and technical challenges involving an external commercial partner.

There is stretch more generally, including the work on the accreditation and delivery of a number of programmes with Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University in Saudi Arabia and the 12 fully owned subsidiaries also generate an income. DCU also has an ambitious campus development plan underway and are located in the fastest growing region of the country, so they have the benefit of student choice to go to the university closest to them. While overall it's manageable, there's no flexibility for discretionary investment for strategic advancement. Previously they had a top-slice for quality enhancement that they used for this. IUA are lobbying on this issue, communicating the risks to the system.

Prior attainment by entering students in leaving certificate mathematics in particular has been examined as a factor in contributing to student retention. To this end, DCU has successfully invested in a Maths Learning Centre, using SIDF funding and partnerships to address this. The equipment deficit is a challenge too, more broadly there is a need to move the ICT equipment over the line from physical infrastructure to cloud.

The outputs from the cluster work to date have been very exciting for all the partners. Note that there has been significant data sharing that couldn't have been imagined five years ago, but this is funding dependent. Notwithstanding future challenges, they continue to progress.

More generally, they note that the IUA pre-budget submission focussed on employment needs, not to be over utilitarian, but to look at skills needs projections.

DCU reported that while there was an initial surge in programmes and international partnership as part of the 3U consortium, they are assessing the lessons learned from the first few years through a presidential level review and looking at where it goes now and how it might fit with wider cluster.

Appendix

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with an External Advisor, met with the institutional representatives as set out below. The meeting was chaired by HEA Chief Executive, Tom Boland. A process auditor was also present at the meeting.

DCU representatives:

Prof Brian MacCraith, President

Mr Jim Dowling, Deputy President

Mr William Kelly, Deputy Registrar/ Dean of Teaching and Learning

Ms Aisling McKenna, Institutional Research Analysis Officer