

Maynooth University (MU)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 21st September 2015

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

MU opened by noting that the institution is broadly on or ahead of target across the compact domains. The cluster is functioning well, academic planning and access initiatives are proceeding well. The FE-HE pathways project, in particular, provides an opportunity for roll-out as a national project. On 3U joint academic provision, logistics have proved troublesome for students and the venture will be reassessed with regard to student demand for jointly offered courses.

MU was invited to discuss student enrolments and access and participation matters. MU is currently ahead on enrolments at undergraduate level, but has some concerns on post graduate numbers where the sectoral share is not proportionate nationally. Declining mature students at a national level are a concern. MU undergraduate curricular reform is also proceeding well and the quality of research has been reviewed positively too. Future areas of focus from a cluster perspective include enterprise and community engagement. Internationalisation targets are ahead of plan, standing at 9.5% international students, up from 6 – 7%. Frobel integration is now complete. Work with St. Patrick's College Maynooth is also progressing, but at a slow pace. In summary, MU aim to grow postgraduate offerings, the research agenda, with some caution on postgraduate reform, given the significant reform at undergraduate level underway.

The HEA queried how MU has coped in times of financial austerity. They note that they have a history of conservative financial management and was better equipped than most to cope, but maintenance and upgrading of infrastructure has suffered and has now become a significant problem. Recurrent funding cannot continue to plug the capital gap. The combination of poor staff student ratios, a capital related drain on recurrent funding and a difficult capital infrastructure environment is a cause for concern. MU would like to do more on work placements but staff are stretched and so, making time is the challenge.

In terms of international students, according to a recent survey, MU have the “happiest” international students in Europe. Data shows a significant number of publications in quality journals and staff output continues to hold up. As the institution expands they are recruiting good staff so that also contributes to research output. However, the staff student ratio makes it less attractive as a location to conduct research.

The HEA queried benchmarking efforts underway. The EUA institutional review suggested benchmarking but this was complicated to action. Now there is a complex set of system indicators in place, with twice yearly reviews at management level and then an annual review by Governing Body. In this way, performance is monitored. The HEA statistical data is also very useful, MU contributes to its accuracy, and uses it to model its own performance.

Greater disaggregation of the HEA data, to ISCED levels for example, would be of use if it could be done for future rounds. ISSE is also a very useful tool. The latter indicated that MU students didn't feel sufficiently workplace-ready so the benchmarked data was very useful to allow MU to respond.

In terms of hitting mature students targets, the challenge in attracting students lies in the economic context and ability to self-fund. After a number of years of a recession there is less funding available for this. In addition, the jobs market is improving. The grant system is also a concern, the entitlement may not there or is regularly reviewed. Also, the Department of Social Protection encourages students towards short courses. On the whole, demand is falling for both mature and flexible provision and level 7 courses have been hit significantly; fall in supports from Pobail and FAS have contributed to the latter. MU consider that there is a government policy gap relating to the support of students going back into education.

MU was invited to discuss the academic workload model in place. Academic Council has set a model for academic workload that is managed at departmental level. Operation is somewhat complicated but there is buy-in and data sharing at department and cross-departmental levels. In practice, it is difficult to have common rules across disciplines so there is some local flexibility required. Departments are empowered by providing a general framework which is adapted to local needs. Teaching, research and postgraduate support to the university feature in promotions policy and are weighted accordingly.

The curricular reform process has also assisted, allowing a wider range of set options. MU has also rethought the first year experience to better promote critical thinking, small group interactions on writing and sharing, and constantly review the contribution they make.

The HEA queried the approach to research growth and performance measurement. MU note that there is a strategic approach to recruitment. In the first instance, the current research profile is reviewed. Vacancies are assessed in a domain context too, looking at how a research position might overlap domains. MU also consider how best to provide researchers with the resources they need, which is not simply a case of removing teaching loads, but what supports can be provided such as putting managers in place for head of department roles for example. So recruitment is key, along with targeted growth of clusters of research activity.

MU raised some concerns on HEA PhD data, which they consider should encompass overall system numbers, not limited to first year PhDs. An analysis of the ISCED profiles would also greatly assist.

MU is looking to develop a graduate school too; a structured doctoral programme is one thing but the creation of a research community is a more difficult matter that MU are trying to progress through research centres.

In terms of research centres, all four PIs at Hamilton have departed. The centre will need to be rebuilt now with existing strengths and the cross-disciplinarily opportunities in mind, in view of the chance to create something new and differentiated.

In terms of the quality of the student experience, the HEA queried the significant growth rate at MU, in view of the fact that the institution has grown at a rate twice that of the sector. A

key consideration in view of this is how quality education provision is assured. Staff-student ratios have increased over time, in part due to the growth rate of students. The staff-student issue at MU is also structural in nature, as it stems from the original structure of the institution. Close monitoring of student results and external examiners suggests that education quality standards are being maintained. Infrastructure is a challenge though, some modules require teaching at three separate locations. Underlying the strategy is a funding model that rewards student numbers, so behavioural change could be driven by a cap on numbers. In essence, the business model only just sustains the institution, the situation, in particular, the capital infrastructure, won't improve unless resourcing improves.

As reported by MU they appear to have doubled their outgoing students over the last 3 years, but HEA data suggests that the numbers of Erasmus students have not doubled over the period. Erasmus numbers are stabilising, there is an imbalance between incoming and outgoing so MU is looking at to balance partner countries rather than it being a one-way flow. On growing outgoing opportunities as part of the three year degree, it is a challenge to find a matching two-subject host abroad. It is more likely that a student will convert to the international programme, thereby adding a year of study.

MU discussed the 3U pathways programme which continues to attract low numbers, in part because the programme is new and will take time to be established. There are 16 students registered on the 2014-15 intake and an additional 10 students this year. The intention is to open up opportunities in new markets.

MU's participation in the 3U partnership sees potential in the bioscience strength that RCSI brings. There is also great potential for value in rational academic planning for growth, in particular at undergraduate level. International recruitment is strengthened as this couldn't be done on an individualised basis. So the collaboration is focussed on specific projects that add value.

MU proposes several changes to compact objectives/targets in the areas of participation, equal access and lifelong learning and high quality, internationally competitive research and innovation.

The HEA discussed the future evolution of the university, the fact that MU is essentially a comprehensive university, without a medical faculty, and their ability to present a differentiated offering in the higher education sector. This is something that MU is cognisant of and keeps under close review. MU offers courses in electronic engineering for example, but has stayed away from the type of "heavy" engineering on offer at UL for example. Growth in particular disciplines is done on the basis of coherence with MU's plan. MU see their contribution lying in the scale of research intensity in certain areas as a means to ensure their diversity. So, the distinctive competitive position might be framed as a more focused contribution, drawing on the fact that the university is lean and can offer a distinctive teaching and learning experience whereby staff are engaged in the student experience.

On the strategic dialogue process generally, this process is fundamental to MU. The compact reflects the strategic direction. The HEA noted that a key consideration is how high performing institutions can demonstrate that they are setting stretch targets. MU noted that

they need to be careful in setting targets under an accountability structure if they aren't sure they can reach them, so there is a caution there. On the whole, the compact and strategy drive the performance indicators and are well aligned as a result. They also consider that the current process doesn't discourage diversity, but they are unsure how it can support it either. Balancing the funding risk with the ambition for stretch is a concern. There could be more room for discussion of risk in the compact and in the self-evaluation report.

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.

MU representatives:

Professor Philip Nolan, President

Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Vice-President Academic and Deputy President

Professor Jim Walsh, Vice-President for Strategy and Quality