

# University College Cork (UCC)

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## Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 8th October 2015

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

UCC opened the meeting noting that they recognise the value of strategic dialogue and the validity of oversight and governance process such as this. They welcome the comments and assessment provided, but wished to record some views. In the first instance, resources, capital and revenue don't appear to be prioritised in the process. They would welcome the expansion of the process to encompass dialogue on matters of governance and management and relations with HEA and wider Government or indeed the opportunity to comment on such. UCC considers the reality to be such that institutional bandwidth has been exceeded. The sufficiency of resourcing now needs to be added to the public policy agenda. In strategic terms the experience of the higher education sector may not be best represented by having a buffer body between the HEIs and the Ministry.

The HEA invited UCC to set out the impact of several years of financial austerity. UCC has taken decisions in relation to research and internationalisation ventures, for financial and strategic reasons but it cannot, and should not, be solely about generating finance from international students. There is a clear focus in terms of university mission, evolving to become a global institution and they consider that it would be important to have this reflected in the discussion, perhaps by adding a section to the compact on funding. Beyond this, the management toolkit is inappropriate, certain activities cannot simply be stopped as UCC don't have the ability to do so.

On student quality, this is a concern as UCC tries to guarantee a quality of experience yet the IT infrastructure is outdated for example. Schools are securing the necessary investment but there are less resources allocated to third level. Indeed international students come from locations which might be far better equipped in terms of technology and this not a good message to be sending out. HEIs should be allowed to generate surpluses which can then be used to invest, grow and improve the education, research and student experience. The position nationally appears to support the maintenance of mediocrity in capital infrastructure as demonstrated by the launch of the Capital Plan last week where growth or improvements in higher education were not forthcoming.

To ensure a quality experience, UCC is very closely linked to industry and they are aware that they are meeting the needs of industry. On staff student ratios, in terms of delivering student generic skills, the resources simply aren't there. In terms of recruitment, this makes Ireland less attractive as a higher education sector in which to work.

One significant impact of constrained finances is that the Process Engineering programme has lost its accreditation, as UCC couldn't afford to appoint a professor. Having secured research grants e.g. from SFI, they remain unable to appoint academics. Accreditation bodies then

threaten removal of accreditation unless the 15:1 ratio is retained yet they know that the resources aren't there. As it stands, the data and the rankings, are a year or two out of date, and having lost up to 12% of academic staff, they will only serve to worsen.

In addition, student support services, such as counselling, now see longer queues, tutorials at undergraduate level are fewer. So, the overall the student experience is reduced. When questioned as to whether this is reflected in student surveys of their experience, it was explained that students often report a very positive experience which is unsurprising as there is no overlap between cohorts and since it is their first experience of the system, there is no comparison. The HEA explained that the hope is that the Cassells funding group will shortly make a recommendation in this regard.

The HEA queried how it can be sure that high performing institutions are setting stretch targets as part of the process. In addition, some reflection on benchmarking of performance against national or international comparators would be useful to demonstrate that the appropriate level of ambition is being set. Benchmarking data was presented outlining institutional success which is welcome this but the purpose of benchmarking to help drive further ambitions. UCC responded to the effect that they consider that they are operating at capacity and the stretch is already there. The group against which they benchmark is chosen to match UCC objectives and includes those that match the 70/30 undergraduate: postgraduate ratio. The undergraduate retention target is 93%, and UCC currently stands at 91%. It will be increasingly difficult to meet the target set as the student numbers and diversity grows.

UCC has chosen EU Multi-rank as a source of benchmarking as it is non-commercial and more inclusive in terms of the stated mission of UCC. In addition, the research quality is open to review and external scrutiny in such matters is welcome. QS, on the other hand is commercial and somewhat narrower.

UCC was invited to discuss access strategy and targets. As a general observation, linking with further education appears to work better for UCC. They can demonstrate more successful outcomes through FETAC and such routes. The mature cohort has dwindled as part of the access cohort. The traditional mature cohort often find it more difficult to adjust to full-time programmes, so part-time options may be better suited to their needs. Once again resources are such that a mature student support officer is currently not in place so that is also a hindrance.

More generally, UCC will look at the selection process and the number of routes into higher education and they would expect to see a more diverse set of entry routes in time. The national agenda to deliver on Level 6 provision and links between FE and HE also needs elaboration. UCC note that they have just appointed the CEO of the ETB to the Governing Body so that adds value.

HEA commends the strong research performance. In the context of benchmarking, it is noted that UCC undertook a research review in 2009 and they are looking to update on performance since then. 115 international experts across 15 panels were engaged. The results showed that 18% of research output was deemed to be 'outstanding'; 36% 'excellent'; 22% 'very good'.

Also, 43% of UCC staff were deemed to have 'outstanding reputations'. Meanwhile, although a tenuous comparison it's worth noting that the UK RAE 2008 exercise found (UK overall results): 17% at 4\* (outstanding); 37% at 3\* (excellent); 33% at 2\* (very good). On the issue of research assessment, this was conducted as a whole of institution effort. The preference was that it was done internally rather than being imposed externally.

The HEA queried the strategy and policy around research centres and units and how this will develop. SFI centres are an extensive part of UCC's research domain, so there is a strong relationship from the centre but micromanagement is a difficulty. As it stands, the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation is a threat to universities insofar as it includes a move towards developing green field research centres. In UCC's view, there is a need to embed centres in the university. Otherwise there is a risk in terms of governance of research and how agencies behave and universities need to be more robust in responding to that. In the case of the APC, for example, it has accepted the university relationship.

A new chair has been recruited at Tyndall. Prior IR issues have caught the attention of the media and been useful in bringing these issues out into the open. The service level agreement will need to be re-concluded with DEJI and that will further the agenda here.

On research more generally, it is recognised as a loss leader, particularly in view of research overhead policy. Ideally, there would be lower volume grants, securing greater funding and therefore conducting research of better quality. SFI funding was too widespread and therefore couldn't ensure quality outcomes. There needs to be a greater focus on leveraging national funding to compete internationally. The overhead rate is currently about 19-20% whereas the FEC suggests it is above 50%. UCC highlighted the need to address investment in what they see as a gap between postdoc positions and research centres

UCC should have a 3% annual surplus and be capable of maintaining its own capital infrastructure but this isn't happening. Instead it is eroding its capital base to fill in the gap in research, while at the same time cannot afford not to research.

In relation to mapping excellent teaching and learning and ensuring a quality student experience, the Teaching & Learning strategy is broadly strong. UCC's ambition is to bring in research experience from first year down, this is a real stretch goal. It was noted that in the UK, teaching and learning is a core requirement and is funded and worked into promotion criteria. The NAIRTL project was the top ranked SIF Project, yet funding was moved away which caused some damage. As it stands the centre to deliver this is under resourced and the activity is voluntary. A 60% target was ambitious in this regard, but there are infrastructural constraints such as future proofing infrastructure and ICT capability. It is estimated that € 15M will be required to bring the infrastructure up to standard or € 25M to make it first class. Part-time and blended students require this infrastructure. There is also a knock-on in terms of curricular design. The MIS is from the 1980's and this doesn't accommodate credit accumulation for example. The access agenda is confined as a result too.

On the subject of finances, salaries on average represent 54% of income; at UCC this stands at 74%. So there is no spare capacity for expenditure. Were UCC able to secure additional

funding it would be put towards ICT in the first instance, followed by targeted recruitment and lastly, enhancing quality of space.

In terms of the Transitions reform agenda, UCC always had a small number of entry points in HSS. . This year will see some consolidation in the Law discipline. Research has informed the curriculum so there are new undergraduate programmes such as digital humanities. It remains a somewhat complicated issue, but UCC is working to reduce the range and offering opportunities to transfer. UCC will not necessarily follow the UCD path, but it was noted that UCC holds a different position in its region and serves as a regional comprehensive university function.

The offering to international markets is important too, they are discerning. There are also logistical issues as it is necessary to have the resources to realign to offer bigger lecture halls for common delivery. UCC also cautioned on pursuing an agenda such as this when there is a sector-wide commitment to diversity.

Related to this, the integration of IMI is progressing and will be concluded by end of the year. It will become a wholly owned subsidiary of UCC.

The HEA queried whether UCC may face a challenge to achieve their 2016 target on international enrolment. It will need to increase by 30% based on 2014/15 enrolments.

UCC responded that targets are ambitious; there are stretch targets in the strategic plan which are followed through in the compact. The HEA reporting format was somewhat limited in allowing HEIs to expand on issues like this. A section of the compact on sustainability could have allowed more detail on the challenges faced. The self-evaluation report is largely green, and represents a targeting in the context of resources available.

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.

**UCC representatives**

Dr Michael Murphy, President

Mr Diarmuid Collins, Bursar/ Chief Financial Officer

Dr Rónán Ó Dubhghaill, Director of Planning and Institutional Research

Prof. Caroline Fennell, Senior Vice President Academic and Registrar

Mr Michael Farrell, Corporate Secretary

A copy of the items marked red on the university risk register has been supplied.