

University College Dublin (UCD)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 22nd September 2015

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

UCD opened by providing an overview of performance which is on track to achieve the targets set. UCD has spent a lot of time developing a new strategy, establishing benchmarks and setting KPIs in line with performance indicators in the compact. As it develops, the university may seek to adjust compact targets. UCD is looking to 5 year rolling budgets, which will be a new departure.

The HEA queried how the university has managed to get through times of financial strain. UCD responded that they have done so by reference to a higher staff-student ratio, growing international student numbers and increasing the fees in line with Russell group averages. While these represent short term measures, they are not sustainable in the longer term. Small group teaching and fieldwork will ultimately suffer as a result of the ongoing income decreases. In the longer term, the student experience will be affected. While this won't necessarily be reflected in the grades, the impact will be felt on the generic and transferable skills such as team working and the kind of skills that employers seek. That said, the commitment of staff ensures that the worst case scenario won't be allowed to happen, academic and administrative will dig into their personal commitment rather than let the students suffer.

The HEA raised the subject of benchmarking. UCD is looking to identify a peer group comprising HEIs of similar size and subject mix. There is a draft list of 35 HEIs and the university is consulting internally on this. Inevitably there will be some cross comparisons with individual schools and departments, but they will try to find HEIs as a whole that are as similar as possible.

Some areas are difficult to benchmark, such as the work of clusters, but there is a commitment to try to map such progress. In other such areas, such as Non-EU growth, progress has been significant and has effectively doubled in the last year. In particular, post graduate students have increased 25%. This outcome is intentional and the result of five years of strategic planning.

The HEA invited UCD to set out progress being made in relation to initial teacher education restructuring. A large amount of effort has been expended to locate the joint Professional Masters in Education within the schools structure in UCD. It will be a challenge to deliver this in full by 2016, but the shared modules and shared delivery will be in place at that stage. A funding challenge also presents as one of the institutions is funded in a different way to the other three.

When asked about having achieved and/or exceeded targets relating to access, UCD explained that they want to proceed with caution in this area. This is not a priority area, in

the way that research is. This year's increase may be a one off occurrence, tied to the fact that more direct entry opportunities for FETAC students were made available, so the increase seen may not be replicated in future years. In the new strategy, access appears as a fifth objective of a diverse student cohort; an area that will be developed in time.

There is strong prioritisation of the research domain with improved performance in areas such as citations, where there has been a shift from increasing volume to greater impact. The focus is most certainly on research excellence, followed by scale and the right type of partnerships (both education and industry). Publication volume has decreased nationally overall. Larger numbers of international students will also make research output appear to be proportionally less.

The HEA queried whether more could be done in this area and UCD noted that there is a need for more scholarship opportunities for international PhD students. The benefit of attracting such students is also leveraged as part of undergraduate teaching and learning.

The definition of "research active" staff has been in place for 10 years or so, but it is quite general and it is being revisited as a result. The definition is better presented as a continuous scale, including research contributions to areas such as T&L. So it is not simply a case of being research active or not and UCD is looking for a multi-dimensional definition to incorporate such considerations.

The HEA invited UCD to discuss progress under the UCD – TCD Innovation Alliance to date. UCD noted that this vehicle has the ability to drive research activity. UCD consider that UCD-TCD collaboration is working well; in terms of the base activity, it is remarkable and unusual internationally. The SFI centre funding is a significant contribution to that. In addition, there have been some new developments in joint appointments such as in palliative care, so the partnership is leveraged.

UCD notes that the alliance was launched at a time when the country was at a low ebb, so perhaps there is a need to do some refocusing on where it can move over the next three to five years. In terms of the innovation modules, they would expect to exceed the target and that's the objective.

On recruiting international faculty, the university is looking to bring in people who will act as a catalyst in the development of new areas and ideas. For example, an SFI professorship jointly funded with industry, in the area of the "internet of things", will bring together people and ideas to build capacity and capability for a range of activity. There is a need to invest in ERC applications and that will take time and effort. Winning them is one thing, but maintaining the successful awardee at UCD is another.

The HEA has recently launched an engagement strategy and noted UCD's contribution to this nationally important area. UCD has very recently appointed a director to take the engagement agenda forward.

The only section that has been self-reported as not achieved relates to UCD's target to establish a Learning Innovation and Academic Development Centre (ILIAD). Having reviewed the objective, UCD has decided not to proceed. A broader scale review and reform of

curriculum is planned and will drive policy in this regard. The university has significant international ambitions and quality of teaching and learning and leadership is just as important in that space.

The HEA queried UCD's contribution to the Transitions Agenda. While there will be a move away from small-scale entry, students are often lost in broader entry routes as it is very hard to articulate all options and pathways available. It is expected that the curriculum review will inform the respective balance.

In terms of learning to inform the quality of the student experience, UCD is triangulating data from graduate outcomes, staff peer review and ISSE. While peer observation is voluntary, those participating normally represent those most interested in T&L. Overall, the aim is to collate data around the student learning experience and tie this to module performance. Challenging modules well delivered can have good outcomes and they are thinking about how this feeds into the process of staff development. Good data will underpin and drive this. While many staff are engaged and involved, there is a perception of a lack of carrots and sticks though and the HR toolkit needs to be developed.

UCD explained that the next iteration of the compact will better align internal strategy and KPIs. It was essentially a separate exercise last time around; lessons learned will feed into the next iteration. As UCD aligns its strategic KPIs to the compact objectives, the level of stretch will become more apparent and they would appreciate HEA views in progressing that.

The HEA invited UCD to discuss collaboration efforts with NCAD. This is unlikely to progress to a full merger. UCD can't necessarily see a public value in that and there would also be a loss in terms of identity on the part of the specialist art provider. Funding also represents a challenge and the HEIs have looked at Edinburgh and Glasgow mergers in this regard which cost up to €37 million.

UCD continues to collaborate with NCAD on programme provision. There are many points of contact in the innovation space, good links with UCD School of Architecture and a new Masters programme is planned. There are challenges though, not solely related to finances. Logistics are difficult, integrating a different calendar, a different pedagogical approach and so forth, all place an administrative burden on UCD systems. The collaboration brings many benefits, however, not least of all the benefits associated with a specialist provider sitting alongside a traditional, comprehensive university. UCD also note potential for international student recruitment. More generally, the national positioning of the creative arts is not a *fait accompli* and will be returned to in due course.

On UCD finances, they explained that the grant notification issues far too late for it to be useful, so that impacts on internal planning processes. UCD needs to make reasonable assumptions and plan on that basis. If the funding situation changes, the staff student ratios are impacted and have to be adjusted. If things continue as is, then the aim will be to hold Irish numbers steady and grow international numbers.

On the strategic dialogue process, UCD noted that a reward structure would help to drive stretch targets. The HEA countered that is that it is not unreasonable for government to hold

HEIs to account for the € 1 BN exchequer investment per annum. From UCD's point of view, a research intensive university should be funded at a comparably higher level than is currently the case. They consider that such universities are agreeing to much higher targets and deliverables and from a government perspective, there is a greater return on investment. That said, the good performance is a reward in itself. While the RGAM can perhaps respond to calls like this, funding is required to support growth, so perhaps that could be applied to the process or to these most responsive to government policy.

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.

UCD representatives

Professor Andrew Deeks, President
Professor Mark Rogers, Registrar
Mr Tony Carey, Director of Strategic Planning
Ms Triona McCormack, Director of Research
Ms Maura McGinn, Director of Institutional Research