

University of Limerick (UL)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 18th September 2015

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

UL is currently developing benchmarking indicators with external assistance. While this exercise contains sensitive data for internal use, UL noted that a number of Irish and international HEIs have been selected as comparators. UL feels they can match or exceed their levels in particular areas, but with realism as to how long this will take.

The linking of data to measures of quality remains a challenge. A student satisfaction survey is now in place, with 22 core questions aligned with the UK model to allow for benchmarking with UK institutions, including Imperial College London. On the basis of the scores alone, UL didn't compare as favourably in spite of a comparable performance, so there are probably cultural mores and methodologies at work, leading to more positive responses in the UK. This is a challenge. On ISSE, UL demonstrates a good performance, but the margins are notably small there and the take-up nationally is not sufficient. UL use their own survey data to benchmark internally too. There is some caution around interpreting student surveys so there is a need to triangulate with teaching observation for example. UL employ a number of tools including a module satisfaction survey and they aim to engage early if there's a problem. The survey of 2,000 modules, showed that 40 were flagged as red. The staff response was generally positive and addressed content or structural issues.

The Teaching & Learning Academy monitors teaching and learning and positive reinforcement is important too. Engaging staff in this is a challenge; many engage well and are quite involved but there are always hard to reach individuals, locally and nationally, an issue that is not specific to UL. Peer observation feedback is largely more reliable than student data which might be biased. Hence the work of triangulating responses, the outcomes are far more useful.

UL is preparing the launch of a new strategic plan for the university. For the purposes of the planning cycle, a five to ten year window would seem more appropriate. They also note that the compact and framework are rather restrictive in setting out strategic priorities within a relatively short time frame.

UL's competitive advantages lie in the student experience, employability and the role it plays in the community. The challenges lie around research and strengthening the international profile.

The HEA invited UL to discuss the further development of NISE ; and how it will deliver goals of improved quality of teacher education. The NISE project could be advancing more quickly but is currently restricted by governance issues. As previously stated, the HEA may be better placed to be the strategic driver on particular issues. For example, one notable issue has

arisen around the recruitment of a Director at an appropriate salary point. The pace of development is slower than UL's ambition for it. UL is willing to invest, to grow, but others are not necessarily willing to match this.

The joint BA degree (UL-MIC) has raised some logistical issues. This has delayed implementation and meant that the target relating to operation of the programme in 2014/15 has been missed.

UL wished to record their dissatisfaction around HEA discussions with linked providers on the subject of St. Patrick's, Thurles, when UL as the recognising body for both HEIs was not consulted.

The HEA invited UL to set out progress on participation, equal access and lifelong learning targets. UL noted that access targets are locally derived. Progress continues in this regard, but the market for mature students is starting to become challenging.

On further education, there are plans at cluster level to work with ETBs. SIF funding ran out in 2011, at a difficult time for all HEIs, so much of this activity fell off. From a cluster perspective the FETAC pathways map more closely to IOT transfers. If there are good links from FE to IOT, then student transfer routes can lead on from LIT to UL in the future.

The Centre for Assistive Technology has been pioneering. UL is now recognised as an institution with the capacity to take such students from second level which is a distinguishing feature in the higher education landscape. There are discussions with DES on supports and resources to roll this centre out nationally and any HEA assistance would be welcome.

CPD is also a developing area. There is an access dimension to this, but also an enterprise engagement aspect. The CPD programme developed with GM can serve as a model and UL is working to replicate this with DELL on supply chain management. The HEA welcomes such developments, noting that these areas are of priority for the enterprise agencies.

The HEA queried UL's contribution to the Transitions Reform agenda. UL set out how the national agenda is compatible with the modularisation process locally. There are still a significant number of entry points but there is a commitment to further reduce the 70 level 8 entry points and to move towards more generic entry programmes by 2017. There is a concern that all seven universities must move in tandem on this and there is a marketing issue too so that students do not get the wrong impression that a particular course in UL is no longer available. So if UL's biomedical engineering programme is subsumed into the broader entry engineering programme, students do not merely opt to do biomedical engineering in, for example, NUIG. Programmes in combined arts will see course entries collapse from 9 or 10 into one. There are broader issues at Academic Council that also need to be addressed.

Beyond this, UL was keen to explain that there are many other initiatives, such as "Aiming Higher", which is having a significant influence on student choices. "Limerick for IT" and "Limerick for Engineering" initiatives have also been very successful regional initiatives involving multiple HE, industry and other stakeholders.

The HEA invited UL to set out their views on research performance. Ambitious targets have been set around H2020 participation with a 20% increase in industry supports. There has been a significant increase in H2020 applications, but the success rate has been poor. This is of concern, since UL has done well on securing national funding, but is somewhat slower on H2020.

The number of publications with industry is set out as a target in the new strategic plan. UL is looking at aligning other industry engagements and as an initial step, research active staff must understand what is required to meet such a metric.

UL has engaged nationally with EI supports and also with interests in Brussels. The university is working with IBM, DELL and INTEL via LERO. Internally, more supports have been put in place both in faculties and in the research office. It is noted that UL has revised some baseline numbers in the research domain and the compact should be updated accordingly.

There is a clear focus in the compact and self-evaluation report on research objectives. Notably, UL has put in place a health research institute and explained the underpinning expertise and rationale.

The HEA queried how UL monitors performance. UL explained that it regularly produces metrics and reports on their research activity which showed education and health science to be a significant growth area. They then looked at health practice in the region - hospitals, trusts, community care and growing technology-enabled lifestyle and health outcomes and finally health service delivery and population health, aligned with GP practice expertise. So the research institute is not in the area of discovery or biomedical science, but rather in applied health services; an area in which UL can lead. It's a longer term strategy and won't come to fruition in 5 years, but 10 to 20 year timeline rather.

Looking to the cluster too, there are pharmaceutical sciences links to Cork and medical devices links up to Galway. UL started working with J&J and are now working with Cooke on the research front. A tangible outcome has been that they have seen the first establishment of an R&D unit by Cooke in Limerick, outside of US operations. UL continues to work with industry partners to progress this.

Cooperative education is a single point of differentiation for UL. A challenge relates to the diversity of the student mix, such as placing students with a disability. The economic picture has also been a challenge as companies weren't hiring or expanding so there was a fall back to about 80%. Another challenge relates to the proliferation of internships, arising under various initiatives such as Springboard and Job-bridge which weren't necessarily as well structured as the UL model which is far better managed and provides greater depth.

The HEA raised the issue of stretch targets and UL noted that internationalisation targets were always a stretch, even without Science Without Borders programme. UL is seeking to broaden study abroad markets. UL is also proud of outgoing student numbers too where they have

either achieved and/ or exceeded targets. In terms of Erasmus and co-op placements, approximately 20% of students comprise the latter. UL has the largest Erasmus programme in the country. Enhancing internationalisation is important to UL, it is a two-way system as there is an international impact locally too, but also carries a cost.

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.

UL representatives:

Professor Don Barry, President

Professor Paul McCutcheon, Vice President Academic & Registrar

Dr Mary Shire, Vice President Research

Mr John Field, Director of Finance

Mr Eamonn Moran, Programme Manager