

Mary Immaculate College (MIC)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 7th September 2015

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

HEA welcomes a good compact report and there is evidence of good performance by the institution. HEA specifically welcomes ambitions related to peer observation of teaching and around reaching 100% progression rates. As part of the process, MIC seeks to align and mirror internal strategic dialogue reporting with their broader strategic planning and reporting structures. They note challenges around resources, common across the system. MIC is a teaching-led institution, underpinned by research, recognised for their work at home and overseas. The institution has come through a difficult period of financial constraint and restructuring, while not compromising on quality.

MIC requested that future iterations of HEA data should separately report on the colleges of education¹.

The HEA invited MIC to update on progress under the National Institute for Studies in Education. The appointment of a director has been delayed. The intention is to do this by means of a joint appointment with UL, making use of funding secured from the HEA. Impediments to date include the differential in salary scale compared to currently serving staff. NISE will deliver on continuing professional development for teachers and further the Teaching Council's agenda.

MIC also pointed to incremental growth in cross-campus teaching in Geography, Geometry and perhaps soon in the Irish language. The NISE has contributed to the development of a strong professional relationship, with increased levels of collaboration. At the heart of it, it is about maintaining high standards in each institution while trying to emulate the quality of the other.

A Teaching Council review of St. Patrick's College, Thurles was conducted in 2012 and the programmes offered there were successfully accredited. MIC plans to convene an expert external review panel to re-assess teacher education provision at St. Patrick's following incorporation in July 2016. This is being done with a view towards early preparation for the next cycle of review by the Teaching Council, due in 2018. They will also look at aligning the student experience at St. Patrick's with MIC and engage staff in MIC staff development. There's a challenge too in terms of student cohorts as MIC have a tradition of attracting candidates with 460+ points.

¹ Future iterations of HEA data will report MIC as a stand-alone college of education, owing to the integration of other providers with universities.

A Director of Engagement and a Director of Student Life have been put in place and this will help with alignment and risk management strategies.

The HEA invited MIC to update on links to FE and pathways. There are good relations with FE and the ETBs locally and MIC can demonstrate success with teacher education access programmes. It is recognised that MIC experienced a decline, in 2011, in terms of access students and set its targets for increases in the area at modest levels to account for the external financial and other challenges that are facing individuals considering participation at higher level. But overall the trend is going in the right direction. The ETBs have helped to address challenges, such as the Irish language requirement, which can be a barrier for mature students. Also, the Shannon consortium sub-group is looking at regional provision of learning space to include further education. MIC discussed the definition of “flexible” – its meaning and measurement, and the difficulties posed by inclusion of variables such as ‘part-time’ attendance and ‘blended learning’ elements in the composite indicator. For example, these elements make it difficult to disaggregate what is required for reporting purposes from student engagement with mainstream modules, very many of which now include blended learning methodologies.

In terms of developing consistency of regulation between UL/MIC and LIT, a federated research graduate school is now in place with a federated approach to the delivery of structured PhD programmes. The three institutions are aligning activities. The built environment structured PhD programme, for example, is regionally relevant and draws from each institution’s strengths, which is key. Level 10 student numbers are increasing by reference to LIT and PhD pathways established with other providers. It was noted that this arrangement builds on the long-standing practice by MIC where UL academic regulations are observed.

HEA advised that MIC should consider the material provided under the “consolidation” part of the compact, it may be more suited to the cluster section since MIC is not formally consolidating with LIT and UL.

In terms of the Joint BA, MIC has noted that progress in relation to the delivery of a joint BA will be slower than originally anticipated. There is a commitment to students to deliver and they are looking to see what they can do that is new and creative. As currently set out, the dates for delivery are unrealistic. MIC consider that it is more important to build it up slowly and to get it right. Currently, the main challenge is a technical one, arising in terms of timetabling and programme provision at different sites. In the case of the latter, staff can travel, but in some cases but there are financial and contract issues. Overall, staff are enthusiastic about the opportunities as they realise that the menu of options that can be offered to students is enhanced. The HEA notes that work to bring this programme on stream continues; however, the HEA considers that the need for progress in this area is paramount and the institution should give high priority to this and the appointment of a director to the NISE over the coming 12 months.

MIC has a history of achieving high standards, next month, for example, they will graduate their 100th PhD after only 11 years' in the research space. MIC has a strong record in producing highly qualified teachers. Students also go on to secure Notre Dame scholarships. MIC would welcome HEA assistance on benchmarking and the challenge it represents. The institution is also currently developing a workload model. In terms of use of the title "University", the preference is to use the title of "University College" but it was noted that this is the Minister's prerogative.

MIC highlighted the fact that HEA consultations often issue to the university and institute of technology sector, but that colleges of education might be missed.

It was noted that the way in which the C&AG prepares accounts changes and as a result, the financial part of the institutional profiles can change from one year to the next, hence they might not be directly comparable. There is a pensions issue at play too. They also advised of the benefit of tying strategic dialogue into budget meetings.

The Chief Executive stated that, following the strategic dialogue cycle 2 process, MIC was deemed to be a highly well performing institution.

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.

MIC representatives

Prof. Michael Hayes, President

Prof. Eugene Wall, Vice President Academic Affairs

Mr John Coady, Vice President Administration and Finance

Prof. Gary O'Brien, Associate Vice President Administration