

NUI Galway (NUIG)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 2 Bilateral Meeting 28th September 2015

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

The HEA welcomed the National University of Ireland, Galway's self-evaluation report as clear with reflective commentary on strong original compact. The self-evaluation report addressed all themes comprehensively providing a strategic and coherent review of their performance.

The use of benchmarking is a particularly strong aspect but, as with all strong HEIs, the HEA sought to examine the degree of stretch in setting and achieving goals. On benchmarking for example, while there was strong evidence of a clear focus on quantitative measures, equally this could be perceived as reusing readily easily accessible data. All this could serve to set a context for an institution more generally, but there needed to be a direct connect between strategy and compact objectives too. For the future NUIG could usefully consider this data, this exercise, could be developed further for their own purposes. It would be interesting to see more on what NUIG drawn from the process and how it would use other data pertaining to academic standards and such in the future. A self-assessed clean bill of health could leave an impression that there is no strain within a compact – in reality there must be pressures of staffing, finances which don't necessarily fit well with strong ambition. Much of the ensuing discussion was on how an institution, such as NUI Galway, manages or deals with such risk.

NUI Galway stated that the process had been useful and that they welcomed the prospect of the discussion and engagement in the process. In some ways it was a good year for the institution but financially there is a real challenge (RGAM allocation, sustaining SFI posts and demographics are all challenges). The demographics are a particular concern as HEIs in the region don't have the same capacity to grow numbers in the way that others do, given the regional population. The also acknowledge some weaknesses in performance, but under all this there remains a commitment to be a research led internationally relevant institution. For example, in a large organisation with some 2,500 staff (1,000 p/t) there is going to be an issue of stress on people. In an era of constrained resources you soon get to a point where there is only so much that can be done. In that respect there is a risk in setting severely stretch targets as the system or balance will become unsustainable.

In measuring their own performance, NUIG look at rankings for example. As imperfect as such tables are, NUIG is rising which must say something about quality or performance. All this despite funding challenges. They look at research income and international performance (ERC grants for example) too and seek to benchmark their performance in those spaces with comparators nationally. For example, NUIG might expect to get 14% of any available funding pot, this measure is derived from their share of undergraduate students nationally. So they are a competitive institution in seeking their share. On SFI funding NUIG have proven this and are now getting this 'fair share'.

They also compare at specific discipline or research areas where there are relevant benchmarking partners, such as at the level of each academic school. Sometimes this benchmark is across the board, in other cases it is based on more nuanced measures such as research and quality of teaching. NUI Galway also benchmark internationally against a particular school, in Edinburgh for example. NUIG offered to engage with the HEA on their benchmarking so as to develop a case study for the system report.

Institutional confidence is also reflected in the new strategic plan, NUIG aims to be in the top 200 for example. This is a tough challenge in an increasingly competitive higher education world. This overall goal is aligned with the compact and each individual college has realistic operational plans as a contribution. There is a high level of ambition and clarity as a result. The university is competitive and performance-focused and has had significant successes. Their internal systems are also well improved and fit for purpose.

Funding remains a challenge though and the overall system may have underestimated the ability of technology to assist in addressing funding gaps. While providing assistance and support is significant in its use of technology, technology has also helped to address some of the staff student ratio challenges but it will not bridge the gap completely.

The incorporation of St. Angela's College, Sligo (STAC) and Shannon College of Hotel Management (SCHM) into NUIG are also significant projects. SCHM is now fully integrated, most obstacles were addressed (capital cost, pyrite issues) but there is a difference in accounting periods and practice that leaves a gap of €400,000 which will need to be addressed. This aside, the incorporation represents a good addition to the University. St. Angela's College, Sligo has been a bit more challenging as there are different structures but they have made significant progress. For example they have worked together to address the TUI lecturer grade issue. They have also discussed a merger plan, where the intention is to be in a single school with one head across the university. There is a fundamental issue on budget, the labour costs are high by comparison and beyond that there are moderator and deficit issues that leave them a long way from the university model. Differences remain in teaching, research practice and the pension scheme that need to be worked through. All in all the project remains challenging from NUI Galway's perspective. NUIG noted that assistance from the HEA in working through the pensions issue and an IT connectivity issue would be particularly appreciated.

As part of its strategic planning process NUI Galway has also updated its access agenda and plans to launch this soon. Overall NUIG considered its responses on access as strong. The number of schools and participants engaged with is positive. They are now looking at progression pathways for each discipline, including work with GMIT. So they are building strong cluster partnerships there and through the regional skills fora too. They also want to continue to improve the regional FE links and are largely agreed that with some exceptions (i.e. nursing) the more successful route to higher education is through the IOTs. On mapping, the progress has been strong, the work is in train and they are optimistic that it can move forward. But there is a cost benefit analysis in terms of the student numbers attracted.

NUIG also reports a strong teaching and learning performance with significant changes to policy and practice such as the inclusion of teaching practice as a criterion in promotion rounds. The revised promotion strategy recognises contribution to teaching and learning, staff can choose their own weighting on teaching contribution versus other areas such as research, so the institution can reward across different types of performance.

They have also brought in a 'University Lecturer Contract A' as replacement for an earlier teaching contract. This is slightly different to the standard 'Research and Teaching Contract B' but has a similar promotion track. The new arrangements provide for staff on either Lecturer A or Lecturer B (traditional academic contracts) to move, on a restricted and one-off basis, from one contract to the other, should there be agreement with their line manager and the Registrar that the alternative contract best reflects their academic profile. While this is all positive, cutbacks have impacted on teaching and learning, particularly for more challenged students. As noted earlier, technology can help, but the one to one or small group type teaching is a real loss to some students.

Challenges will continue to arise as NUIG seeks to implement strategic change. Dealing well with such change needs academic leadership. So you need deans or academic leaders to deliver on this and yet there is no resources to give people the reward they should get for taking on the challenge. Managerial capacity is therefore constantly challenged or restricted.

On Capital an institution also has to contend with maintaining infrastructure as a means to underpin quality teaching and learning. NUIG have moved some IT spend over to the capital side to address some €10M of such infrastructure needs. The last real national investment at NUIG was in year 2000 so this decision is driven by both an ambition and a need to introduce new technology and practice. The technology is one side, but a revamp of marking structures and systems by people who were already overloaded was a real challenge. They have achieved this, and there is significant academic system simplification as a result, but people are exhausted. So while a system or institution may have money for the technology freeing up the human resource is a larger challenge. On the ground in HEIs the impact of staff cuts and restriction is visible – more students are repeating exams now for example. This is probably because they don't have the supports they used to have. It is not an exaggeration to state that the tipping point for Irish higher education is now fairly close.

This tipping point is probably more like a gradual erosion of standards though. This was allowed to happen in France and Germany in the past and it took years to redress.

More generally on campus infrastructure, as older buildings are not being maintained as well as they should this will cause a problem in the future. Student residence places are a problem too for any institution with growth ambitions. Such builds are expensive and yet they are not attractive as an investment (it is a reality that young people are hard on such buildings). Finding a private investment source here is a challenge as it is a like a 30 year term. If NUIG is to continue to grow it needs 1,000 extra beds. They are making progress as they are currently putting in place 400, but the other 600 remain a challenge. They are determined to do it though, if they don't it will continue to be a challenge in student recruitment.

Mature student participation is also a concern. As the job market improves students are looking at vocational programmes, a real move away from more academic programmes. Up

to one third of NUIG provision is Arts. These fields are challenged still, despite improvements in the external economy. More generally, there is a national decline in numbers, driven by financial concerns. NUIG would like to have more mature students and they are very proactive in seeking to provide blended learning options to non-traditional learners. Indeed they have just signed off on two non-exchequer posts in online and blended learning.

On transitions reform NUI Galway looks at course number as well as student numbers. The vast majority come in via general entry points, after first year they then select their main course of study. There are however those who want to come directly to civil or mechanical engineering courses. There are other areas where the entry is particularly useful in recruiting and attracting students to distinct programmes. The B Comm can be adjusted, but there will be others that need to be retained. There are 52 distinct points now, based on five principles, this will reduce to about 47. NUI Galway's understanding of the university sector is that it currently offers the third lowest number of entry routes. NUIG would welcome the support of the HEA in this and would want to see progress nationally.

The real challenges remain as IT infrastructure, student accommodation, and maintenance. NUI Galway remains cautious in managing resources and ability. So in case of publishing they are more targeted, selective, strategic in their publishing so they can offset lost resources and in that way retain the ranking or even improve it.

On research, NUIG has a significant H2020 performance, the research themes to date have played to their areas of strength but the research office also engaged in relation to H2020 and they have been very successful. The equipment on site makes NUIG attractive. So there is a growing research culture in Galway, the earlier priority areas are now delivering.

They are cautious too though, such as in setting a citations target. Admittedly this could have been higher but they're aware that one highly cited paper can reflect disproportionately in the metrics and there's a constant flux so it's dangerous to set unachievable standards.

On changes and the future development of the compact, they are looking at gender equality as a particular issue. There are two processes in train now and will be delivered on time. They are developing a response to the broader issues around gender and so, will include a new category 8 to the compact.

NUI Galway would have liked to see more regional progress, there will need to be hard decisions and win/win situations identified though. Locally for example, GMIT is less engaged with NUIG than they used to be, likely as they are more engaged with the TU venture. The programme mapping in the region has been in-depth but it's the sustainable future for all that they need to identify now. Tech transfer could have seen more progress.

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.

NUIG representatives:

Dr James Browne, President

Prof. Pol O Dochartaigh, Registrar and Deputy-President

Ms Mary Dooley, Bursar

Mr John Gaffney, Director of Management Accounting

Ms Caroline Loughnane, Academic Secretary

NUIG requested that the following items be added to the agenda under item 7:

1. Academic Leadership
2. Demographic challenges
3. Performance Funding