

Maynooth University
Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session
Wednesday 20th September 2017
9.30 – 12.00

MU

Professor Philip Nolan, President
Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Vice-President Academic/Registrar and Deputy
Professor Ray O’Neill, Vice-President for Research and Innovation

HEA

Dr Graham Love, CEO
Mr Fergal Costello, Head of System Governance and Performance Management
Mr Tim Conlon, Senior Manager
Ms Valerie Harvey, Head of Performance Evaluation
Ms Sarah Fitzgerald, Higher Executive Officer
Mr Mark Kirwan, Executive Officer

External

Dr Andrée Sursock, Expert Panel member
Dr Richard Thorn, Expert Panel member
Mr John Malone, Process Auditor

Context

MU has demonstrated a strong aptitude for the strategic dialogue process, providing clear evidence of self-reflection and extensive data and information to supplement its self-evaluation reports. Since the introduction of its performance compact in 2014, the university has embarked on a major undertaking of reforming its undergraduate curriculum while concurrently growing its undergraduate enrolments numbers. During this period, the university has maintained its commitment to collaborating with its cluster partners and has been a national leader in implementing the ‘transitions’ agenda.

Introduction

The HEA opened by welcoming the MU delegation to the meeting and noted that it was the fourth strategic dialogue meeting to date. As their initial observation, the HEA remarked their view of how the sector has responded well to the challenges of providing quality education in an increasingly constrained environment, and it is important to sustain this in the future. An agenda had been prepared to inform the discussion. In terms of the strategic dialogue process as a whole, the HEA, for its part, considers that this has overall become an essential part of the HEA – HEI relationship, and for wider system performance and accountability. Given that a new cycle will commence shortly, the HEA

will consider how this might evolve, and will seek views from the sector on how the process can be improved.

MU took the opportunity to make a written response, prior to the meeting, setting out areas of clarification on the HEA reflections document. The HEA acknowledged that this feedback and would review those amendments following the meeting.

Reflecting on its performance under its current compact, the university feels it has performed excellently and has broadly exceeded the majority of its targets. The university appreciates the open engagement with the HEA and views the process as a vehicle to appropriately challenge performance. The university is a young independent institution and due to its approach to delivering its Humanities and Social Science (HSS) provision, it has a unique profile in the Irish higher education system. This should be taken into consideration when measuring performance relative to others. MU has grown research provision but setting targets is difficult due to the limited research funding available for HSS. Equally, the university's research strategy is focused on societal and academic enhancement rather than purely employment impact. The curricular reform project was a major undertaking but outcomes have exceeded expectations as over 1,000 students enrolled this year. On international intake, the university has exceeded its target and although it was growing from a 'low base', the target set was still challenging. The cluster has functioned well but certain aspects such as the deliverance of joint programmes haven't worked as there is lack of demand from students for this type of delivery.

Student enrolment numbers

On the back of significant undergraduate growth coupled with stable postgraduate enrolments, the HEA queried what MU envisages the student profile of the university to be in three years' time. MU expects its student enrolments (headcount) to increase to c. 16,000 by 2025 based on the projected demographic increase for the region. The university had focused on developing its undergraduate provision but its next phase of development will centre on its postgraduate students. MU noted that it is difficult to provide a target for postgraduate numbers due to the uncertainty in funding for HSS. It is continuing to develop the brand and the university to increase postgraduate intake. The university would like a student profile of 20% taught postgraduate with possibly 5-7% of students enrolled on PhDs. MU reduced its undergraduate intake this year as it is concerned the campus is operating to capacity and not allowing space for postgraduate development. From its Kilkenny campus, MU delivers a number of professional development postgraduate programmes through blended learning. Demand for this method of delivery is not currently evident from its undergraduate student cohort. MU has introduced three pilot programmes to assess the potential for leveraging this type of delivery across its campus.

Revised Curriculum

MU provided an overview of its revised curriculum and highlighted that aside from its various omnibus offerings; students also have the option to take a 'critical skills' module which is proving very successful. This module also seems to have assisted in improving retention rates, but is in its early days. The curriculum reform was a major undertaking for MU, but to date, the university has received positive feedback. MU is currently evaluating if its omnibus offering can extend across all disciplines. The university confirmed that it has maintained overall quality by prioritising investment in the recruitment of capable faculty members both to maintain staff/student ratios and quality of teaching and learning.

Research

MU outlined that it has established seven centres of research excellence but it wants to retain its links across broad disciplinary areas. The centres of excellence are important to the university as they

inform undergraduate provision. MU reviews these centres every five years to ensure the relevance of research programmes. The university encourages synergies across its research centres, particularly when applying for funding. MU emphasised the difficulty it has with drawing down domestic research funding as currently 60% is allocated across the sixteen priority areas identified by government which doesn't include some of the niche areas MU is involved in. On this basis, MU has to rely on successfully drawing down EU funding to maintain this research. MU's latest research budget was roughly €17m (75% national /25% international). The research overhead it receives is not covering the full overhead cost of its.

Clusters

As per the performance compact self-evaluation, the close proximity between each institution and the relative diversity in provision has enabled collaboration within the cluster to grow. Aside from this development, the original context for introducing clusters has changed. The review of programme provision has shown that in their cluster there is no scope for programme rationalisation. The university appreciates the value the cluster provides such as the sharing of best practice in student support and the ability to engage with the further education (FE) sector in a collaborative setting. On the issue of students progressing from FE to the university, there are challenges to manage, as some FE qualifications don't necessarily map with MU's programmes. If MU was to redesign its cluster; the university indicated it would develop a compact for the cluster to define what it is aiming to achieve and therefore allow the state to hold the cluster accountable.

Internationalisation

MU stated it has focused on growing its international student enrolments and acknowledged its outgoing international student placements are low but the university is addressing the situation. As per the performance compact self-evaluation, the challenges are due to financial obstacles based on the MU student profile and the current programme structure which allows only full year mobility. The university has developed a number of international partnerships particularly with FUJO institute and as the university's research provision has reached critical mass; it is actively seeking to collaborate with international providers to enhance its international research reputation.

Other issues raised

MU explained it is reconsidering its Kilkenny campus as an outreach satellite campus for its first year undergraduate Bachelor of Arts students. The university indicated it wants to keep the link with the campus if possible, and will continue to provide its suite of professional development programmes. MU emphasised that if policy dictates that higher education is to continue to be provided in Kilkenny, then it should be linked through the cluster, but if the decision is made to continue this provision then it requires critical mass and funding support if the campus is to remain sustainable.

MU currently has a campus funding lease and the university has to borrow to continue to meet this cost. The university stated that if a government priority includes student number growth then additional funding should be provided.

Through its new strategic plan MU intends to self-define as a research led institution with a large undergraduate offering underpinned by a strong postgraduate offering.

In relation to competitive funding allocated through the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM), MU stated it had a concern around the metrics applied for assessing performance. The university emphasised that volume metrics should be paired with quality performance metrics as assessment based on volume metrics alone would support funding towards STEM provision to the detriment of HSS.

Next Steps

The HEA intends to circulate a minute of the meeting in late October. HEIs will have the opportunity to come back on matters of factual accuracy or clarification prior to the publication of the full suite of documents. It is expected that the aggregated outcomes from the sessions will inform the publication of a system level performance report in 2018.

Summary / Outcomes

The outcome presented below is based on the key inputs of this process i.e.:

- the institutional self-evaluation;
- the review by HEA, and external experts;
- the strategic dialogue meeting between HEI senior management, the HEA, and external experts.

The university is to be commended for successfully reforming its undergraduate curriculum while ensuring the quality of programme provision was maintained. As the university indicated its focus will be shifting to its postgraduate provision coupled with the decision to reduce its undergraduate intake; MU is invited to consider providing further analysis of the projected student profile, in a region with increasing demographics.

The university clearly articulated how its research provision informs its undergraduate teaching & learning and undergraduate programmes and the value it attaches to human and social impacts. The university currently has seven research centres and this may be a credible strategy for a university of this scale but with limited funding and resources; the university is invited to consider prioritising its research and reducing the number of research centres it operates.

It is appreciated that clear policy direction is required on the proposed future of clusters, but based on the positive collaboration that has taken place within the MEND cluster, the university is encouraged to continue this collaboration to best serve the needs of its region and meet expected increases in student demand.

The adoption of an expansive international strategy, not one just focused on growing student numbers, is a positive approach and is welcome. MU's plan is holistic as it incorporates the internationalisation of the university's curriculum and campus. In progressing this strategy, the university is encouraged to continue to promote the outward mobility of its students through leveraging sources such as the Erasmus programme.