



National University of Ireland, Galway
Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session
Tuesday 12th September 2017
14.00 – 17.30

NUIG

Professor James Browne, President
Professor Pol O Dochartaigh, Registrar and Deputy President
Professor Anne Scott, Vice President for Equality and Diversity
Ms Mary Dooley, Bursar
Mr John Gaffney, Director Management Accounting
Ms Caroline Loughnane, Academic Secretary
Mr Gearóid Ó Conluain, An Rúnaí

HEA

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

External

Professor John-Dominique Vassalli, Expert Panel member
Professor Jean-Marc Rapp, Expert Panel member
Mr George Pernsteiner, Expert Panel member
Dr Trish O'Brien, Process Auditor

Context

NUIG has demonstrated a strong commitment to the strategic dialogue process, aligning performance and ambition to the university's strategic plan. Over the course of the compact, the university has continued to develop its research profile, internationalise its campus while maintaining its commitment to serving the needs of its region. NUIG is currently in the process of incorporating St Angela's College.

Introduction

The HEA opened by welcoming the NUIG delegation to the meeting and noted that it was the fourth strategic dialogue meeting to date. As their initial observation, the HEA remarked on 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.

NUIG took the opportunity to make a written response, prior to the meeting, setting out areas of clarification. NUIG stated the process was a positive development and useful for faculty to set targets and identify different measurement tools to assess performance. Conversely, the university has endured a particularly difficult period, especially for its staff as they have experienced a reduction in numbers and indirect salary reductions on top of increasing student numbers. However, overall the university feels it has performed strongly over the course of the compact.

Cluster Developments

As per the compact self-evaluation, NUIG is the largest institution in the cluster and it recognises that it should play a leadership role. The context of a diminishing demographic, coupled with some institutions increasing their student numbers and others pursuing Technological University designation, has created a tension within the cluster. The university confirmed it has no issues with competition but that there should be a system level response to meet the needs of the region and this won't manifest appropriately unless it's incentivised. In NUIG's view, the HEA needs to provide more leadership, instruments and mechanisms to reward cooperation.

NUIG stated that the institutions within the region collaborate to leverage regional engagement. For example, LYIT collaborates with NUIG to provide PhD education which is then used as a catalyst to attract industry to the region. The cluster partners try to avoid duplication of provision but as some institutions are in financial deficit, there is an incentive to grow student numbers and hence introduce additional programmes even where this may duplicate current provision

The cluster has performed well in areas such as developing progression pathways. IoT employees complete PhDs with NUIG and there is joint PhD supervision, but they note that there has been relatively small reward for the level of effort provided by each partner. If the cluster is to be successful, it requires a collaborative model which can leverage the ambition of staff in each institution. It would be beneficial to collaborate jointly in programme provision but the funding model for higher education does not incentivise this.

International student enrolments

NUIG emphasised that there is a financial imperative to enrol international students, however, as per the compact self-evaluation, the international strategy is based on enhancing the student experience, providing an opportunity for international student placements, staff mobility and partnerships with other institutions.

The university confirmed that its 30% target for international student numbers was set in 2014 when this cohort represented 22% of the student population. NUIG has grown its international numbers since 2014 and stated that it views Brexit as providing both opportunities for the university, along with risks, as students may begin to pivot towards institutions located in mainland Europe. As Ireland will be the only English speaking country in the EU, it is important that Irish HEIs encourage students to undertake European languages.

NUIG confirmed it has a shortage of student accommodation but it is working with both public and private providers to build capacity. A number of sites have been identified around the city and 450 bedrooms will be built each year for the next two years. The increase in student accommodation is

essential to the university's international strategy as it needs to be able to guarantee international students appropriate accommodation.

Research

NUIG confirmed it reviewed its research portfolio and as the university has strengths in both the medical and engineering fields, coupled with the large industry engagement in these areas, the majority of its research will be focused on these two disciplines. Furthermore, to underpin institutional research activity, NUIG recruits staff whose credentials are aligned with the university's priority areas. As per the compact self-evaluation report, the breadth of performance is highlighted by reference to increases in its academic citation impacts and the increased diversification of its research funding sources

Significantly, NUIG is adopting a proactive approach in relation to research and has taken steps to rectify identified issues in response to national policy and benchmarking outcomes. An example is their focus in this year's return on slow completion rates in PhD provision and recommendations to address this. The degree of critical reflection here is notable and has evidentially proven its value.

NUIG emphasised that the overhead cost of research is problematic. NUIG confirmed its research income has increased but simultaneously so has its unfunded research overheads, however, the university must continue to allocate internal funding to meet that overhead as research defines the institution. NUIG stated that if Ireland wants its HEIs' research to compete internationally, then the issue of adequately funding research overheads needs to be addressed. Other countries, such as the UK, are covering the majority of their research overheads costs. NUIG emphasised it is running a deficit to support its research provision and is applying its own resources such as leveraging its private foundation to bridge the gap. This will pose a long-term risk to the institution and the sector more generally.

Gender Equality

The HEA stated that it would consider the additional information provided by the university relating to the 'Gender Equality' theme as part of its self-evaluation report. The HEA noted national targets stemming from the *HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions* and that NUIG has also set its own internal targets.

NUIG explained that a lot of work has been completed in this domain and its own internal gender task force recommendations mirror the recommendations of the aforementioned HEA report. The university had set an ambitious target of achieving at least a 40% female representation on all its decision-making committees by the end of December 2016. NUIG confirmed it achieved this goal apart from on its Academic Council. A new structure for appointing members to the Academic Council has been approved and the university is confident its Academic Council will also have achieved at least 40% gender balance over the course of the next year. With NUIG's gender equality action plan in place, it has enabled the institution to build capacity and foster a culture of equality across the institution. The university is currently reviewing different models of international best practice to continue to enhance its performance in this important domain.

Other issues raised

NUIG confirmed there are risk areas which need to be addressed in order for Irish HEIs to improve their performance. Firstly, there is a risk that due to reduced remuneration packages available, HEIs are struggling to recruit experienced managers into the system. More generally, the sector is currently at a juncture where something has to give. As the sector has grown, this has impacted on the

staff/student ratios and the students who require the greatest level of supports are being impacted the most. Incentivisation is also important in order that people to take on leadership roles. This will require flexible work and support models. More generally, a management mix is essential to diverse and enhanced outcomes.

NUIG stated the higher education sector did not receive additional pay costs stemming from the agreed pay restoration under recent pay agreements. The HEA confirmed it would seek clarification from the Department of Education and Skills on this matter.

The HEA indicated that the review of the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) is due to be published shortly. The review may recommend some amendments to the model, to be phased in over the next 3 years, and other potential new funding strands which could be contingent on the higher education sector receiving additional funding.

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.

NUIG is to be commended for its clear vision and ambitious strategy, which culminated in the university performing strongly across a number of areas. However, in view of increased levels of engagement and growth in activity, in the context of decreased funding and staffing levels, the university is invited to consider whether it should be prioritising its activities to mitigate against any institutional risks.

NUIG's research performance has been impressive, again underpinned by a clear research strategy and identification of research priorities. The university achieved the majority of targets it set out within its performance compact. As research overheads costs are not diminishing, and the university is subsidising its research through international income and private foundation subventions, NUIG is invited to consider if it can continue to grow its research operation based on this current funding model.

The HEA acknowledges the need for greater clarity around regional cluster policy. NUIG for its part has acknowledged its role as a very important, if not leading, player in the region, and the need for a collaborative approach if the region is to compete. There is an opportunity for those in the region to set an agenda too; NUIG is invited to consider how greater trust amongst the cluster can be fostered and supported; and how momentum can be maintained at cluster level.