

Trinity College, Dublin
Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session
Tuesday 19th September 2017
12.30 – 15.00

Trinity

Dr Patrick Prendergast, Provost
Professor Chris Morash, Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer
Ms Patricia Callaghan, Academic Secretary
Mr Leonard Hobbs, Director, Trinity Research and Innovation
Ms Orla Sheehan, Manager, Academic Services Division

HEA

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

External

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

Context

The aim of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin is to ensure that it maintains its status as a leading international university at the forefront of research, as it seeks to incorporate national priority goals around access; teaching and learning; research and innovation; regional engagement; and internationalisation. Trinity has largely delivered on its strategic dialogue compact with significant progress made in the areas of research and internationalisation, but its challenging financial position is noted. Trinity has recently been invited to join the League of European Research Universities (LERU).

Introduction

The HEA opened by welcoming the Trinity 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.

Trinity noted that the compact has been a positive development as has the process of interaction with the HEA. Trinity set out its vision, noting that the college sees itself as part of a global research system, and its aims are to perform as a global high-quality research university with its education provision informed by research. Trinity has been invited to join the League of European Research Universities (LERU) which both reflects its performance to date and provides opportunities for further development.

Access

In its compact submission, Trinity included four objectives under participation, equal access and lifelong learning, with three marked as complete and one partially complete.

Trinity stated that its access agenda is to ensure the university attracts and retains students who have outstanding talent and demonstrate potential, irrespective of the students' background or -financial advantages/disadvantages. Statistics indicate that by the second year of study, access students perform as well as standard entry students. Access students contribute to the creation of a diverse student population and bring life experience, ambition and commitment to their studies and enrich campus life. Trinity considers that its overall excellence as a research university is enhanced by drawing students from a broader base.

Research

It was noted that in Trinity compact, two of its four goals in relation to research were categorised as 'amber', and one of these relates to the diversification of funding sources. Trinity was asked how its four targets fit into its overall research strategy.

Trinity noted that it aims to win research grants in a competitive environment. Given the strong levels of SFI funding, which were maintained reasonably well during the recession, the time given to seeking international/European research funding was necessarily reduced. Trinity pursued a research diversification strategy during this period which resulted in significant funding from the EU. The university remains strongly committed to continuing the diversification of research funding sources, and continues to have success in attracting EU funding where the university is Ireland's top performer. However, Trinity considers that the research overhead needs to be reviewed as it doesn't cover the full economic costs of research.

Trinity also has an industry engagement strategy which brings in expertise, and funding, and enhances industry connections. Trinity is looking to its LERU partners to draw lessons on managing and driving research performance – it's notable that they all have higher levels of research funding diversity. The university is working to foster a culture where academics apply for international grant applications. Supports are in place with a centralised team and embedded research programme officers in some schools. Overall, the Trinity success rate is higher in European funding than several other universities in LERU, though the number of funding applications is lower. Trinity aims to increase the number of fundable PIs in coming years.

International

Trinity is aiming for a new target of 18% international students by 2019. Trinity stated that in some universities (such as Manchester or Edinburgh), 30% of their student population is comprised of international students. However, it does not wish to displace Irish students. The issue is not just one of physical capacity but also quality and class sizes.

Online Strategy

As noted in its compact submission, Trinity has undertaken a review of its online strategy. It noted that it is resetting its approach to online education, which addresses the issues of revenue, education, and branding. The university is instilling an e-learning culture and wishes to see cohorts of staff using online platforms in their teaching.

Trinity's Education Project

Trinity noted that it now has a new academic year structure and will be fully semesterised from 2018. Exam regulations have been redeveloped and it has developed graduate attributes. There are 20 research themes that are linked with the undergraduate curriculum: electives with five ECTS credits will be available to every undergraduate student. Trinity has surveyed students in relation to employability and graduate attributes. It has also asked students to look at experiential learning and to define how they have achieved one or more of graduate attributes. Trinity considers the outcome of the different student evaluation surveys (compulsory module and course evaluations) that are conducted internally or by an external agency (ISSE (Irish Survey of Student Engagement) and the ISB (International Student Barometer) annually and, where possible, recurrent issues highlighted across all the surveys are feed into course development, teaching and learning strategies, and student support services. This is monitored annually by the Faculty Executives, the Quality Committee and the University Council

Two-subject moderatorship (TSM)

Trinity is considering its entry routes and its new science entry routes will be launched shortly. This is a reflection of Trinity's commitment to reviewing its entry routes in line with national objectives for entry to third level. With guidance from external reviewers it is currently reviewing entry routes into TSM with a view to reforming it to allow for fewer points of entry. HEA noted that progress in this area would be very helpful in delivering on the transitions agenda.

Capital

Trinity confirmed it is in the midst of a large capital development. This encompasses both the refurbishment of the university's current stock of buildings and the development of new buildings. Trinity emphasised that a large proportion of the cost for these developments is being met from their own reserves and emphasised if the sector is to meet the projected demand in student enrolments, it will require additional capital funding.

Gender

The College expressed its disappointment that the HEA gender report failed to address the fluid nature of gender identification. The College is taking actions on gender equality, aligning its activities with ATHENA SWAN goals. It is not in favour of gender quotas and its Statutes do not permit the appointment of more than one Vice-Provost. It would be unable to appoint a VP for Equality even if that were considerable desirable. The approach Trinity favours is to include gender equality in the remit of the Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer.

Brexit

Trinity draws students from north and south of Ireland and the issue of Brexit is causing uncertainty, particularly the impact it may have on the fees applied to students from the north when the UK leaves the European Union. Furthermore, there will be challenges to research partnerships as in a lot of cases,

Irish institutions partner with their UK counterparts when applying for European funding such as H2020. Conversely, Brexit does provide Irish institutions with some opportunities such as recruiting academics wishing to leave the UK, however, to take full advantage of these potential opportunities, the Irish higher education sector requires a coherent strategy.

Next steps

The HEA intends to circulate a minute of the meeting in late October. HEIs will have the opportunity to respond 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.

Trinity submitted a strong self-evaluation report demonstrating significant progress in monitoring and implementing compact objectives. This included a strategic and coherent review of performance including clear evidence of self-reflection on past performance and identification of future issues/risks arising.

Trinity's clear focus is on enhancing excellence in research and the College is a high performer in this regard. Trinity's research performance has been measured with reference to appropriately benchmarked peer institutions, particularly through the College's membership of LERU. Trinity has also considered links between teaching and research and this is to be commended.

Trinity is also commended on its commitment to review entry routes, particularly the two-subject moderatorship offering. The HEA looks forward to ongoing progress in this area.

Trinity is invited to reflect on how it might benchmark within Ireland using available tools such as ISSE, and in areas such as online education and the development of graduate attributes.

Trinity has clearly set out a distinctive and individual position for itself within the higher education landscape in Ireland. As a high-performing and internationally renowned university, there is a need to continually improve so as to maintain international standing and relevance and Trinity might consider how it continues to satisfy itself it is setting demanding and searching performance targets at the appropriate level.