

**University of Limerick**  
**Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session**  
**Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2017**  
**09.30 – 12.00**

**UL**

Dr Des Fitzgerald, President  
Mr John Field, Director Finance  
Dr Pat Phelan, Acting Vice President Academic  
Dr Mary Shire, Vice President Research  
Mr Liam O Reilly, Director Information Technology Division  
Ms Ruth Maher, Director Strategic Projects & Transformation

**HEA**

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

**External**

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

**Context**

While the vast majority of UL's targets for 2016 were met, there are some targets that are ongoing. The most significant stumbling block, identified in Cycle 3 also, is in relation to regional clusters and in particular, NISE which is not yet fully operational. Progress in appointing a Director has yet to be agreed. There are some positive regional cluster developments identified however and the establishment of the Federated Limerick Graduate School is very positive (launch in autumn 2017).

**Introduction**

The HEA opened by welcoming the UL 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.

The HEA also noted that it is currently conducting a review into governance issues at UL. As this is ongoing, it did not form part of the strategic dialogue session.

### **President's overview**

The President opened by discussing recent restructuring at UL, including the appointment of a new Chief Operations Officer. The former VP Academic and Registrar role has now been split in two, to allow for a greater focus on academic quality and performance.

Access remains an important consideration, given the location close to a large socio-disadvantaged area. UL looks to increase non-traditional student and mature participation, while addressing progression issues too. UL sees the industry demand for postgraduate and continuing professional education and has appointed a Dean as part of that remit. This is important as research moves from its current focus on science and engineering, to industry.

Internationalisation is another key area; providing both greater financial stability for the institution and also a wide range of other benefits, not least enhancing the student experience on campus. UL currently attracts large numbers on short programmes but would like to develop in the full time provision too.

The Shannon Consortium has been positive for both the university and the region. UL is strongly engaged locally with the city, but see that it can do more e.g. on culture and sports. The university noted that this is an unusual time in that there are now three new presidents in place in the three Limerick HEIs. The university considers that there is an opportunity to build on previous successes but there are also challenges such as lack of fit for purpose governance structures across the three institutions that slow engagement.

### **National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE)**

Initial teacher education in Limerick accounts for 30% of provision nationally, but the sense is that the university hasn't capitalised on the national impact in the form of policy development and regulatory bodies. This could be achieved via some form of common programme among partners either at undergraduate (joint BA) / CPD level.

At the outset, however, the President discussed how it is not entirely clear what NISE is supposed to achieve over the next ten years. The vision and role of NISE is still under negotiation, having regard to the fact that all HEIs expect to remain as standalone institutions for the foreseeable future. An issue arose around the appointment of a Director at the professorial level which was testing for the partners. This gave rise to discussions around the creation of a special purpose vehicle, but the preference is not to pursue this as a solution and so, the complexity remains.

Broader cooperation among partners continues, with UL acting as the accrediting body for MIC programmes and both sharing common frameworks. Both have schools of education that conduct research but there is little synergy there at present. UL views its role as one of impacting pedagogy and delivering CPD for teachers, other HEIs will contribute to other areas. The federated graduate school set out to bring postgraduate activity together in such a way as to allow UL to accredit MIC and LIT's programmes. "UL Report that the current focus of FLGS is to identify and resolve oversight issues

identified during the recent accreditation of Level 10 programmes in LIT and Institutional review of MIC”.

There is a need for a higher level vision of NISE to transcend issues between HEIs. The Panel queried whether there were any initiatives that have worked well to date. UL discussed the development of the joint BA, initiatives in the access area and more generally, the efforts to promote the idea of going to third level. Other levels on which partners have engaged relate to the promotion of Limerick city, but there is a sense from city authorities that UL has not engaged as much as it could, perhaps as it does not have a physical presence in the city. Across all partner institutions, 25,000 students are being educated and they are looking at the Limerick 2030 initiative and how best to contribute.

The HEA stated that there is a growing impatience with lack of collaboration in this area. They cautioned that delays in implementing a vision and mission for NISE will lead to competitors progressing at a far greater rate and that the Department of Education and Skills has options in terms of how it allocates funding for places nationally. A second review of the implementation of Sahlberg’s recommendations will begin in Q1 2018 and UL and partners would be advised to think seriously about NISE and come forward with a more imaginative role before this review takes place. UL agreed that a pragmatic solution needs to be found with cooperation all stakeholders.

## **Research**

The panel noted the reasonably narrow research portfolio and the two areas of strength presented - health and material sciences (Bernal). The aim is to develop the interface between the different parts of the institution and UL notes strengths in the areas of applied maths and data analytics. This will contribute to delivering on the national healthcare agenda, having regard to the fact that hospitals and community health often operate separately, and the challenge is to bring them together.

UL also see their strength in relationships developed with industry. The university is developing a research culture, benchmarking by looking at bibliometrics, snowball metrics, QS/ ISI web of science and Scopus. Compared with 5 years ago, there is much more appreciation of research performance across the academic community and in fact, the tenure-track programme looks closely at research performance.

In addition, UL is involved with three SFI centres, hosting one. Having had a tradition of foreign direct investment in Limerick, the types of companies coming in now are diverse- in areas such as biopharma, financial services, biomedical and ICT. Johnson & Johnson has located its smart manufacturing European HQ in Limerick for example. This has helped with graduate retention and now up to 68% stay in the region post-graduation.

While the target on H2020 was not met, UL has research support services in place to target national and international funding programmes. Building from a small research base affects the university’s ability to participate in European funding calls but it is looking to hire staff, buy out time and has also met each faculty and heads to develop funding plans. Success rates in European programmes have improved from 4.2% to 9.1% and the university has switched focus to the “excellent science” pillar of H2020, where it considers it can achieve the greatest success.

In addition, all PhD students are now enrolled on some form of structured PhD programme. Links with LIT continue in the research space, but it is important for a university to look more widely than its immediate region in the search for partners. In addition, it can be challenging to join programmes where the funding base and mechanism is different across university/ IoT sector.

UL was invited to discuss the issue of overheads and whether it can lead to a weakening of financial position. UL responded that it is necessary to fund this activity and that while it is an upfront cost, it provides different types of returns, for example, as a major contributory factor in attracting international students and industry links.

### **Internationalisation**

UL stated that income from 2,000 non-EU students amounts to € 15 million, of which half is generated from the medical school. The university would like to increase international student numbers and will focus on this during the restructuring of senior management. It has a strong presence in China and North America. Research PhD students are a key focus, particularly in the new Bernal institute

Internationalisation has become increasingly important as a means to subsidise other areas of activity in the university. UL reports, however, that there is a need to look at the margins for hosting international students, often times it is not as high as envisaged as it requires investment in recruitment, facilities, marketing and scholarships.

The Nexus Innovation Centre is now fully occupied, a challenge of its own success and so, is constrained in terms of generating a further income stream. The university is also conscious of the separation between commercial and non-commercial activities. UL collaborates with LIT on New Frontiers, but that has also reached capacity.

### **Teaching and Learning**

In line with the Transitions agenda, UL has reduced its programme offering from 74 to 44 entry points and has reduced the number of exit points too, particularly in Engineering, Science, Business, Arts and HSS areas. While it has been a challenge, the university has seen a higher take-up than in previous years. Common entry is popular and that is the first tangible indicator, and it remains to be seen how it affects other areas such as retention. There is also a suggestion that the very best students do not favour common entry as they wish to engage quickly on their preferred specific area of study.

The University uses ISSE along with other relevant data to investigate and improve performance in relation teaching and the student experience more generally.

### **Systems Data**

The university is faced with a major challenge in respect of systems data. It recognises that future decision making must be data and evidence-driven, but this requires systems and technology to be realised. New digital systems infrastructure is needed urgently, the student records system was put in place in 1999 and requires a complete overhaul. Infrastructure investment is urgently needed to avoid a critical failure and to prepare for the future of higher education.

### **Future developments**

Nationally, the population is expected to grow by about two million in the coming decades, but growth will largely be focussed on the east coast. There is a need to balance that and to think about how the university might grow to cater to the regional demand. At present, there are 15,000 students based on a 330-acre campus, north and south. There is potential to grow substantially and even double the student numbers. In addition, the northern campus could expand to absorb the increase, and UL could also look to have programmes in the city.

## **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.

University of Limerick is commended on its level of self-analysis. It is reassuring to see a level of objectivity, ambition and self-critique from the leadership. There is a clear desire to connect delivery of compact objectives to its own strategy.

It is clear that the university recognises its challenges in improving research performance, and continues to work to achieve this. It would also appear that a stronger focus is being brought to bear on the teaching and learning agenda with the associated restructuring and key appointments made.

In terms of the Transitions Agenda, 60% of 2017 first year students now enter on a new programme structure. Additionally, UL can point to the successful joint delivery of a new BA with MIC.

It is disappointing to see the lack of progress in respect of initial teacher education. It appears that the mission of NISE is still under consideration, when it would be expected to be well underway at this stage. There doesn't appear to be a high degree of buy-in from the university on what NISE can achieve. Allied to this, there seems to be less progress than expected with the Shannon Consortium compared to previous years. This is a key moment for the three HEIs, with new leaders in place across all institutions, and represents an opportunity to reignite efforts across the cluster.