

Self-evaluation report – institution overview

Institution overview:

- Generally, UL is meeting the objectives it set and even suggests that it needs to be more ambitious in areas such as internationalisation. It should be recognised that the report shows a number of strong areas such as teaching and learning and significant improvements in research performance.
- While benchmarking has improved, there is still scope for greater comparison of its performance over time and against national and international best practice.
- All targets have remained consistent as per original compact.
- Some issues need to be explored –
 - The Director for NISE has yet to be appointed.
 - The Employability Forum for the Midwest was not established ‘for financial reasons’.
 - UL was not as successful as hoped under Horizon 2020; what steps is it taking to address this in the context of future programmes?
 - Flexible learners – what plans are in place to develop in this space?

Self-evaluation report - domain level reviews

1. Regional clusters:

Initial commentary:

UL sets out eight targets in their compact pertaining to regional clusters. They report that all targets have been achieved for all but one, namely 'the establishment of a centre of excellence in teaching and teacher education'. UL once again, outlines its concern for the appointment of a Director of National Institute for Education Studies (NISE) and notes its implication also for the successful integration of PhDs at UL and MIC.

Advised after cycle 3, UL provide more detailed figures of their Springboard/ICT upskilling programmes for 2014 to 2016.

UL report that regional clusters have extended beyond collaborative activities between HEIs to include synergies with Section 5: Engagement. They wish to see more links in strategic plans between these two sections (Section 1 and Section 5) in the future.

UL have reported clearly on their 8 objectives and where progress has not been made, it is clear that issues within the regional cluster have yet to be resolved particularly with regard to NISE. The establishment of the Federated Limerick Graduate School is to be commended and the HEA looks forward to receiving further detail following its launch in the autumn.

National Policy Context:

UL advise that some of the objectives within this section are beyond the control of the reporting institution and they also call for clarity from the HEA in terms of the HEA's position, policy and future funding of regional clusters.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

UL noted, in Cycle 3, their concern for the establishment of NISE. Their concern is ongoing in Cycle 4 where they coded this objective 'amber' and say that NISE is still not fully operational despite the approval of appointing a Director at full professorial level. UL have not provided detail on why a Director has yet to be appointed. On a positive note, UL and MIC have successfully secured and are running CPD programmes for teachers with a combined value in excess of €15 million.

All other objectives are coded 'green' by UL for this section.

UL state that additional costs for the joint programme in 'arts' offering at UL and MIC will need to be addressed by both parties.

While a governance document for the Federated Limerick Graduate School (objective 3) has been agreed and plans are underway for related projects; it will be interesting to get further information on the school and the online presence the school will provide when it is launched.

UL report under Objective 4, that while they have exceeded targets for joint postgraduate programmes with NUIG, these developments have been curtailed by regional cluster priorities.

UL state that together with MIC, they have agreed mutual recognition of progression from access entry programmes on a regional basis (objective 6). However, they have not reached their target of such progression on a national basis. UL recommend a review of the provision of access programmes in higher education be carried out.

UL provide enrolment figures for their Springboard/ICT upskilling programmes (objective 7) in 2014, 2015 and 2016. Numbers dropped in 2016 and UL state this is due to an uplift in the regional economy.

As in cycle 3, for objective 8, UL advise that their target to have a single collaborative alliance with UL to engage with enterprise in the areas of research and technology transfer is no longer possible as UL and NUIG are leading two different consortiums.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning:

Initial commentary:

In their overview, UL state that they have exceeded their 28% target (29%) of non-standard entrants onto full-time undergraduate programmes. In an effort to continue to increase these numbers, UL have set up initiatives aimed at STEM programmes. The success of the Mature Student Access programme as well as plans to roll out the 'After School Club' to the greater Limerick area is beneficial to potential future mature student numbers.

The success of the university to secure DES funding for two Career Professional Development (CPD) education programmes is to be commended; and it is positive to note that UL has identified the need for further investment into technology-enhanced learning strategies and made available to potential remote learners in both Ireland and abroad.

UL outline six objectives under 'participation, equal access and lifelong learning', all of which are coded green.

As with Cycle 2 and Cycle 3, the university acknowledges that their flexible learning figures are boosted in the main due to the DES funded Professional Diploma in Mathematics for Teaching. Once the final cohort for this programmes ceases, there is likely to be a drop off. UL states there is a need for further investment/funding to develop online offerings in the future, the detail of which is not provided.

Overall, UL's CPD, Assistive Technology Centre and initiatives for strengthening mature student numbers are positive.

Benchmarking and recognition of national priorities would strengthen their reporting further.

National Policy Context:

In their overarching statement for this section, UL welcome the publication of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015-2019*. Although, stating that it will be a useful benchmark for measuring progress in future plans, there is little reference to updated plans or changes to targets as a result of its publication.

The self-evaluation would have benefitted from reference to the wider national policy context, in particular how the institute is engaging with the *Action Plan(s) for Jobs*; the *National Skills Strategy 2025*; the *National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship*; the *Transitions agenda*; and *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2013/14 – 2014/15 (2017)*.

However, UL did provide extensive detail on efforts to improve retention rates and on the transitions agenda in Cycle 3.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

As per Cycle 3, under objective 1, UL has identified that it has reached its target of 28% (29% in 2016/17, according to UL) for overall student intake onto full-time undergraduate programmes for non-standard entrants. UL report challenges in relation to enrolling mature students but not provide a breakdown of their target mature student numbers. It

would be helpful to have a breakdown of these numbers in order for comparisons to be made to key institutional statistics. However, UL do identify initiatives for addressing challenges that have arisen with mature numbers attending tertiary education. For example, the introduction of a Higher Level mathematics programme jointly administered by UL and two Education Training Boards

UL has successfully established the Education Assistive Technology Centre which is scheduled to be launched in May 2017 (objective 2). An online presence is currently evident at <http://www.ulsites.ul.ie/disabilityservices/pds/assistive-technology-assessment-centre?lang=en>

UL report the successful achievement of establishing a CPD centre at UL with all online programmes availing of common UL Moodle (objective 3 and 4). In addition, UL have successfully aligned all CPD courses (100%) with a common framework (objective 5).

The university states it has exceeded their 17% target of flexible learners as a proportion of their overall student population (note that 2016/17 HEA statistics indicate 2,068 part-time/remote students – this is 14% of the student population).

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience:

Initial commentary:

UL refer to their '*Engaged Learning*' report and in their overview, they provide the text from the HEA's case study for in their December 2016 Higher Education System Performance Report to the DES.

UL's teaching and learning and quality of the student experience continues to be strong. Where objectives were not met, clear explanations and plans for reaching these targets are presented.

Some further information in relation to benchmarking would strengthen UL's reporting. For example, how do their figures for broadening modules compare to national or international data or how do UL's academic staff numbers undergoing CPD activities compare to other HEIs.

Two objectives in this section are addressed in two other sections of the report and this is laid out coherently.

As with section 2 above, further reference to national policy would enhance this report.

National Policy Context:

Under this section, UL are cognisant of the transitions agenda in relation to retention rates of first year students.

It would be helpful if UL could confirm if they have plans in place for reducing entrance points; and how changes in Leaving Certificate grading might impact on the transition for students from post-primary to tertiary education. Equally, how data compiled from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) will be applied across the university.

The graduate attributes hub in UL provides ongoing supported events and activities for advancing teaching and learning. UL make reference to the newly configured UL Graduate Diploma/MA in Teaching, Learning and Scholarship (August 2016) and its alignment with the National Forum's recently published Professional Development Framework.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

There are 11 objectives identified under Section 3. However, objectives 2 and 4 are addressed in Section 5 and Section 2, respectively. Of the 9 objectives reported in this section, 5 were coded 'green' and 4 were coded 'amber'. This differs from Cycle 3 where all objectives were coded 'green' in UL's self-evaluation report. Those coded 'amber' in Cycle 4 include objective 6, 8, 9 and 10.

Objective 6 refers to retention rates. UL has successfully met two of the three targets here and while their retention rates (90%) are in line with average university retention rates, they have not yet reached their $\geq 91\%$ target. UL's learning support and retention initiatives

are positive developments for the university's plans to increase their first year retention rates.

Objective 8 was also coded as 'amber' in this cycle and the reasons for this are clearly outlined by UL. Students recently voted in favour of an annual levy to support the student centre and UL has submitted plans for an Education Building (supporting teacher education) to the HEA. The library and information services building is due for completion during the 2017/18 academic year.

While steps were made to formalise the review and monitoring of programmes in Cycle 3 (under objective 9), all existing programmes are not yet enrolled in a complete review (objective 9). A review of policy document, completed in March 2017, was to be presented to the university's Academic Council in June 2017. An update on this would be welcome.

UL, under objective 10, identify the progress made in terms of grade and assessment descriptors but recognise that a centralised information system for same has not yet been implemented. UL report that funding sources from their core budget are necessary for this to happen.

UL's strategic plan for teaching, learning and assessment (2014-18) has previously been commended by the HEA (objective 1). UL reports, under objective 7, that academics in need of pedagogical support are engaged in formal and informal CPD activities. It would be helpful to know the number of staff availing of this support. The new UL teaching awards rolled out across the institution in addition to the module satisfaction survey in 2016 (objective 11), is very positive.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation:

Initial commentary:

UL set eight targets for itself under this heading. It references the organisation's "Research and Innovation Strategy, Excellence & Impact 2020" as the strategy underpinning its goals in this area.

UL set out a series of measurable targets and has met almost all of these.

It acknowledges that it has not met its target of securing a 50% increase in the value of funding under Horizon 2020 over the first three years of FP7. It states that this was due to the slow start in securing projects. It further points out that the Nexus centre targets for start-up companies was not met, particularly because it is now at full capacity and the anticipated turnover in companies was not met.

That said, UL presents a coherent and well executed plan to improve its research effectiveness and impact. It is also noted that the University doesn't just view research impact as simply a dry measure such as an increase in citations; it links it very clearly to regional development and external engagement, highlighted under Section 5.

UL sets out its strengths in the areas of materials, advanced manufacturing, software, health and applied mathematical sciences and this is reflected by the restructuring of their research institutes (amalgamating the Materials and Surface Science Institute and the Stokes Institute into a consolidated Bernal Institute). Lero – The Irish Software Research Centre and the Health Research Institute (HRI) also features strongly.

National Policy Context:

The university has made commitments within the Mid-West Action Plan for Jobs which is contributing to sustainable job creation initiatives such as Limerick for IT, Limerick for Engineering and the growth of the UL Enterprise Corridor.

Construction of the Clinical Education and Research Centre at University Hospital Limerick was completed in Dec. 2016.

The university has experienced a 40% increase in doctoral students achieved.

UL's report could have benefited from an enhanced description on the links between Research and Teaching & Learning.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

UL has benchmarked itself in its Strategy, albeit, against data provided by the *Times Higher Education*. The institution would benefit from benchmarking itself against QS or Leiden data.

Where figures can be easily measured (eg no of citations), UL is on target.

UL acknowledges it has not succeeded in drawing down significant Horizon 2020 funding. It would be helpful if UL could clarify how it plans to address this and what preparations are being made to attract future EU funding. In addition, some detail on the number of applications made and success rates should be outlined.

Greater detail on the link between research and teaching & learning would be useful.

Views should be sought from UL and indeed the system to support the future development of Nexus to ensure a greater number of start-up companies emerge.

UL rightly recognises the importance of a strong contribution to regional development and in specific areas of research prioritisation by the University.

5. Enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange:

Initial commentary:

UL has a strong record in the area of engagement with both enterprise and the wider community. The institution sets itself nine objectives, though links one of them relating to access back to Section 2. Given its strong record, we should expect UL to perform well here and generally it does.

It is only under the performance indicators set out under objective 2 – “Continue our commitment to the role of cooperative education as an intrinsic and distinctive part of the student experience” - that it does not award itself full marks.

National Policy Context:

Generally, UL performs well under this domain and are heavily engaged in the development of the Midwest. The university highlights the overlap between this section and sections 1 and 5 concerning engagement with various stakeholders.

The university outlines the active role it plays in the Midwest Action Plan for Jobs.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

Generally, UL performs well under this heading, given that it is one of the most experienced institutions when it comes to engagement with enterprise and the community.

Their acknowledged failure to meet the targets set for themselves under objective 2 deserves closer scrutiny.

They set out four performance indicators –

1. Biennial feedback system on the work-readiness of new graduates and their ability to continue to learn
2. A shared employability agenda with Ireland’s national and regional development agencies by establishing a formal forum to include representatives from the IDA, IBEC, FORFAS, Enterprise Ireland, InterTradeIreland, Chambers of Commerce, Tourism Ireland, ISME and Connect Ireland
3. Inclusion of industry in the design of all new programmes and the review of existing programmes
4. To have explicit employability-related learning outcomes for all UL programmes

With the following responses –

1. National survey designed and finalised. To be disseminated to employers in October 2017

2. No - Funding not available

3. Delayed - linked to roll-out of programmatic review, which has been delayed (See section 3, Objective 9 above)

4. Delayed - linked to roll-out of programmatic review, which has been delayed (See section 3, Objective 9 above)

UL regard this as 'substantial progress' which the HEA would challenge. The idea that a forum comprising reps from various agencies could not be established because of a perceived lack of funding does not seem plausible.

An update on the roll-out of the programmatic review should also be sought.

6. Enhanced internationalisation:

Initial commentary:

UL has exceeded its targets in this section and they suggest the need to be more ambitious with respect to internationalisation targets in any future Compact(s). An enhanced and more targeted internationalisation plan is one of the three core goals of the university's strategy, "Broadening Horizons 2015-2019". It is to be noted that this includes seeking to enhance "UL positioning in international rankings and league tables."

All six objectives received a 'Green' coding as achieved.

National Policy Context:

The University will benchmark its progress against *Irish Educated, Globally Connected: An international education strategy for Ireland, 2016-2020*;

It plans to target specific countries and it would be helpful if UL could clarify how these will be determined.

Critical evaluation and feedback:

UL acknowledges the need for it to be more ambitious in this field. It will be useful to inquire as to how they plan to do this. Will their focus be on rankings and league tables to which they make reference to.

7. Institutional consolidation:

Initial commentary:

No specific report on this in the UL submission but it should be noted that there has been consolidation of the institution's research capacity to make it more effective.

8. Additional Notes:

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).

On a whole and as identified in Cycle 3, greater reference to national and international benchmarking through the report would have been helpful.

There is some reference to national policy in the report but further insight into how the institution plans to address changes in policy (e.g. Transitions agenda) would be welcome.

UL have focussed clearly on their intention to continue to build a strong research agenda based around the area of materials, advanced manufacturing, software, health and applied mathematical sciences. Increasing their profile with international students as well as progressing in international rankings and league tables appear to be other key goals for the institution.

The report does not make reference to gender equality in Irish higher education.

The idea that a forum comprising reps from various agencies in the Midwest to build an employability agenda could not be established because of a perceived lack of funding does not seem plausible.

An update on the roll-out of the programmatic review would be helpful.