

Mary Immaculate College
Strategic Dialogue – Bilateral Session
Thursday 7th September 2017
14.00 – 16.30

MIC

Professor Eugene Wall, President (Acting)
Professor Gary O'Brien, Associate Vice President Administration
Mr Michael Keane, Vice President Administration and Finance
Professor Michael Healy, Associate Vice President Research
Dr Geraldine Brosnan, Director of Student Life

HEA

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

External

Professor Catherine Harper, Expert Panel member
Dr Richard Thorn, Expert Panel member
Mr John Malone, Process Auditor

Context

MIC has demonstrated strong engagement with the process throughout the duration of its current compact. The College meets the majority of its compact targets and this performance was achieved in tandem with the successful incorporation of St Patrick's College, Thurles. While some progress has been made towards the initial development of the National Institute for Studies in Education, performance in this area of the compact has been well below expectations.

Introduction

The HEA opened by welcoming the MIC 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.

As part of MIC's opening statement, the College stated it appreciates the opportunity to engage in an annual dialogue with the HEA. The College is currently working through a period of transition but welcomed the HEA response to the self-evaluation report, particularly the identification of strong performance and areas for further discussion at the dialogue meeting.

Student enrolment numbers

MIC acknowledged that its student enrolment numbers had increased but emphasised the level of growth provides the College with challenges. To support increased numbers, the College has recruited additional employees but are still operating within budget. However, the College is still feeling the effects from the prolonged reduction in sectoral funding.

MIC noted that evidence from the CAO showed that the demand for its teacher education programme is still particularly strong. Due to financial costs and staffing issues, the provision of the new joint Bachelor of Arts programme with University of Limerick (UL) is a concern but there is demand for the programme and it has contributed to an enhanced arts provision for the Limerick region. The programme provides a positive example of the relationship and collaboration that exists between both institutions as students are enabled to undertake modules across both campuses.

On flexible learning, the College explained its 'LINC' programme is currently being delivered across nine campuses and recently won an award for 'best online programme'. The feedback from students has been positive but the demand for this programme in recent years has decreased. As per the compact, one of the College's objectives was to advance and embed blended learning strategies and technologies across the institute and the College has achieved all the targets it set out. To support this objective, MIC has invested resources in developing a Blended Learning Unit and is planning to incorporate blended learning across all its programme provision. The College emphasised its view that if the blended learning approach is to be successful, it must be aligned with 'face to face' teaching.

MIC outlined the initiatives it undertakes to enhance its teaching and learning. The College runs a number of seminars to assist the dissemination of best practice and exemplars to its staff. The College engages with Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to undertake quality review evaluations and is continuously undertaking staff assessments and reviewing internal quality mechanisms.

MIC acknowledged that some of its current compact targets were set at the operational level and confirmed for the next compact iteration, it will be focusing on setting high level targets and stretch targets where applicable. MIC explained that the introduction of its teaching learning strategy will assist the College with innovating its current teaching practices and this will be aligned with the College's strategic plan.

Research and Federated Limerick Graduate School

Following the recommendation in the Sahlberg report that teacher education should be research led, MIC appreciates that the discipline should be moving to a scientific evidence based provision with more research engagement from students. The college takes its role as an education provider seriously and views research as a priority in this regard, in order for its graduates to obtain higher order learning skills. The college conducts research which is knowledge driven and can be used to improve teaching and learning systems and teacher education provision in general. Furthermore, as the college views its provision as university level equivalent, it also views its research provision as a vehicle to align itself with international HE organisations and bring an Irish dimension to research collaborations. To underpin its research agenda, the college amended its recruitment policy to attract academics who

have particular research credentials and qualifications. However, the college indicated that, as it is precluded from hiring at professorial grade, this inhibits the college's ability to attract high calibre staff and the development of the college in general.

MIC explained that fourth year Bachelor of Education students are required to undertake a dissertation, demonstrating that the programme is based on research informed practice. MIC has a research strategy, and this is assisting with developing a college research profile, but more work needs to be undertaken to embed it across the institution. The college has purchased a building to support its research functions and this building will provide accommodation and supports for all its postgraduate students.

MIC explained its research is predominantly undertaken in the areas of education and humanities. The college currently offers professional doctorates in Educational Psychology, along with Structured Doctorates in Applied Linguistics, Education, Irish Studies, Development Education & Practice, and Irish Studies. The college's Professional Master of Education is currently oversubscribed and if the college received sanction from the Department of Education and Skills, it could increase its enrolments. The college provided an update on the Federated Limerick Graduate School (FLGS) and reported that it was functioning well and there is active sharing of teaching and skills provision with UL and LIT, its Shannon Consortium partners.

Regional Cluster

As per the compact, MIC confirmed that it was still committed to the development of the Shannon Consortium and outlined the success of the cluster has continued and has transcended the scope and reach of the goals set during the current cycle of Strategic Dialogue. With the appointment of three new presidents, this provides a unique opportunity to develop the cluster further. The leaders are conscious that a one-size fits all approach to clustering will not work and the Shannon Consortium members are proposing to develop something different that will focus on the needs of the mid-west region. The College is not sure how this would fit with the Regional Skills Forum in its region but it is exploring different avenues such as the possibility of developing an umbrella grouping to assist with addressing governance issues etc.

Thurles Campus

The Thurles campus is a positive development for the College as it provides both a regional benefit and has also enabled MIC to grow its student numbers. The one caveat with the campus, aside from modernising its capital infrastructure, relates to staffing. The campus currently employs 25 people who are currently in the process of enhancing their teaching qualifications.

National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE)

MIC explained there is a degree of competition between itself and other institutions in the region but that institutions do collaborate on a number of fronts and NISE is one example of where this collaboration can develop. The College would like to see NISE as a legal employer that can employ researchers, however, as UL's president has only recently taken up his post, the College hasn't had an opportunity to engage with him to establish the long-term strategy for the centre. The Shannon Consortium has explored the possibility of recruiting a project manager to assist with developing this further but this has not progressed as yet. There also needs to be further engagement to establish the parameters to what the institution and its partners can achieve. MIC appreciates the scale of the new Dublin City University Institute for Education but explained it does not feel a threat to its student demand as the combined teacher training enrolment numbers in the Limerick region is still greater than the new institute and it provides a different offering to its students. The College wants the

institute to function and achieve the mission it was established for but is concerned it will be benchmarked against its lack of progress. A separate strategic discussion needs to take place between the College and the HEA.

Other issues raised

The College suggested that if it could amend its title to include 'university', it would greatly benefit it in attracting international student enrolments.

MIC emphasised that the introduction of delegated sanction authority to institutions would provide it with the internal structures to recruit the staff it needs and enable the College to grow its staff cohort to meet student demand. Equally, it would enable the College to retain its research staff which would benefit the research ambitions of the College.

The College provided clarity as to why its access student enrolments had declined. MIC explained it had an increase in enrolments through the HEAR/DARE programmes but experienced a decrease with its mature enrolments probably due to increased economic circumstances. Furthermore, the €3k student contribution charge is also negatively impacting on enrolments particularly for households who do not meet the means test to qualify for maintenance supports.

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.

MIC demonstrated good institutional strategic focus and improving regional engagement but there will be an ongoing need to further integrate the newer campus in Thurles into institute wide planning. Progress against the NISE goal is very disappointing.

The College has shown strong growth in student enrolments with demand exceeding capacity on a number of programmes. It is appreciated that the College's blended learning and online provision is at a preliminary stage but MIC is invited to explore how these flexible delivery options could be harnessed to meet increasing demand.

It is commendable that the College is adopting a research-led approach, informing teaching and learning. However, as per the compact, the College states its research provision is contributing to the national knowledge economy and in this regard, the College should consider more carefully articulating its research alignment and the balance therein, such as the national nature/activities of its research centres.

An agreement on the appointment of a Director for NISE at professorial level has been given but limited progress has been made here. The Sahlberg report set out a roadmap for enhancing teacher

training education in Ireland and one of its recommendations was that the College should collaborate with UL to develop this further. The HEA will undertake a follow-up to Sahlberg in early 2018 and will be keen to establish what has been achieved to progress report's recommendations.