

Maynooth University (MU)

Cycle 3 Outcome

Performance funding in full will be released in respect of the 2017 budget allocation.

In assessing performance, we have relied upon the self-evaluation report submitted by your institution, the reflections on performance document prepared by the HEA, and the discussion at our recent strategic dialogue meeting. Consideration was also given to any points of clarification as provided by your institution at our meeting or in related correspondence.

The self-evaluation report, and subsequent discussion at the bilateral meeting, have shown that progress can be demonstrated across all compact domains. The university is performing strongly and provided a good self-evaluation report. The university has met most of its interim targets and presented explanatory context in any area where performance was behind target. The HEA welcomes the strong cluster performance. Maynooth and its partners are particularly responsive to the needs of learners, industry and enterprise in their region.

The progress on teaching and learning reform, on growing the university, and on managing change is also positive. The HEA welcomes the risk management approach taken by the university. At a time of strong and continuing growth in student numbers, the university's use of relevant data to carefully manage quality is a particular strength. In recent years, MU has prioritised growth in student numbers as a regionally relevant response. The university has recognised the risk of allowing research activity to slow as a consequence, and has indicated that it plans to redress this. The HEA looks forward to more on these plans in future rounds of strategic dialogue.

In summary therefore, Maynooth University has demonstrated very good progress against mission-coherent objectives through an analytical and probing self-evaluation report and other data sources. The university is commended for its use of benchmarking and should seek to continue to use benchmarking to inform priority setting and self-evaluation. Maynooth University should have regard to the specific institutional feedback provided in this document and in the reflections on performance document in advance of, and in preparation for, the next round of compact evaluations.

Minutes of Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: bilateral meeting, 6 September 2016

In attendance

Members of the Senior Management Team and HEA Executive, along with two External Advisers (Mr George P. Pernsteiner and Mr John Randall), met with the institutional representatives as set out below. The meeting was chaired HEA Interim Chief Executive, Dr Anne Looney. A process auditor was also present at the meeting.

Maynooth University representatives

- Professor Philip Nolan, President
- Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Vice President, Academic/Registrar and Deputy President
- Professor Jim Walsh, Vice President, Strategy and Quality
- Professor Bernard Mahon, Vice President, Research

The HEA welcomed Maynooth University (MU) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which it operates. MU is commended on its strong progress and for its self-evaluation report, which provides evidence of reflection on performance and identification of issues arising. The HEA is aware that all higher education institutions are operating in a challenging financial environment, while continuing to respond to increasing student demand. The system has demonstrated that it continues to provide high-quality higher education and to respond to national priorities. The HEA makes the following observations on the university's performance:

- MU is performing strongly and provided a good self-evaluation report. The university has achieved most of its interim targets and provided explanatory context for areas where performance was behind target.
- The HEA welcomes the strong cluster performance. MU and its partners are particularly responsive to the needs of learners, industry and enterprise in their region.
- The progress on teaching and learning reform, on growing the university, and on managing change is positive.
- The HEA welcome the risk management approach taken by MU. In a time of strong and continuing growth in student numbers, the university's use of relevant data to carefully manage quality is a particular strength.
- In recent years, MU has prioritised growth in student numbers as a regionally relevant response. The university has recognised the risk of allowing research activity to slow as a consequence and has indicated that it plans to redress this. The HEA looks forward to more on these plans in future rounds of strategic dialogue.

Maynooth University opening remarks

Maynooth University (MU) welcomed the opportunity to engage with the HEA and the process. MU described how the university has sought to align its strategic planning with the compact process and how its strategy is based on a commitment to growth and reform of its undergraduate portfolio to support this. The HEA noted the very strong demographic growth in the university's hinterland and

the university's responsiveness to it, and asked how MU manages both growth and quality. MU outlined its commitment to quality, which is managed through intensive monitoring and careful analysis of feedback internally, externally and via the students' union. MU has extended the range of optional modules that may be taken at undergraduate level; the feedback from students to date has been positive and has sought further widening of the options. MU has also managed to maintain its staff/student ratio through curriculum reform. The university offers a critical skills module, and 85% to 95% of students taking that module agree that it improved their engagement with and progress on other modules. MU described how it is extending its campus and in particular its student accommodation, with loan facilities from EIB. However, given the predicted strong growth in demand for higher education, the university considers that significant capital investment will be required in the next five years.

Risk

MU considers itself to be risk conscious. The university has a risk register and associated processes for analysing and managing risk at all levels and for informing practice. Key risks include the financial position, as, in order to grow and fund the necessary capital investment, the university has borrowed against projected income. MU has done so in expectation of further State investment – it considers that the State cannot reasonably expect growth without capital investment. A second risk is need to balance the successful provision of undergraduate programmes with growth in research activity and internationalisation. To date, MU's focus has been on growth in undergraduate numbers and facilities, but the university is aiming for a better balance in future. Any external policy decision relating to fees is also a risk, as changes in State support or fee levels could have a detrimental effect on the MU student population. MU has a plan to mitigate these risks, but it is not all within the university's control. Broader risks include those related to resource constraints, which have led to the progressive erosion of problem-based learning, tutorials, and one-to-one teaching/learning. Despite these problems, there is no indication that students are less well-regarded in the job market or in international study contexts. This might be because of student engagement with the critical skills module, or because students are working harder now than they were three decades ago. High quality infrastructure is also a prerequisite for student engagement – for example, the new library is heavily used by students.

Clusters

MU reported strong cluster progress with its partners, Athlone Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Dublin City University (collectively known as the Midlands, East and North Dublin (MEND) Cluster). Work to date has concentrated on enrolment analysis and planning. The partners have shared data on trends and projections. MU emphasised that this is new activity and that such behaviour was traditionally not normal between competitors. The mapping data from the cluster has not yielded much evidence of wasteful or unnecessary duplication. Students seem to pick their HEI based on either a very particular course or a particular transport route from where they live. The HE/FE linkage has been very useful, as historically the focus had been on mature students and school leavers, but not on FE. All the partners are progressing this agenda, for example by developing a web portal to better inform student decisions. They now have a full working model of the portal, but this needs an institutional home and longer-term planning. On enrolment planning, the partners have been looking at trends and accessibility. The cluster is also examining its role in responding to the Government's action plans for jobs and the skills fora.

Teaching and learning / transitions agenda

MU affirmed that quality of teaching and learning is a core value in its programme of institutional expansion and reform. The new MU curriculum has added flexibility to allow students to engage and adjust their choices if things don't go to plan for them. There is an evaluation and monitoring framework in place, led by a specific researcher, to monitor and record such developments. MU also described their entrepreneurship modules, which are open to all students. For some, such a module is elective; for others, it is credit-bearing and embedded in the programme. These modules are proving popular with students.

On the transitions agenda, MU see student choice as important. The university has adopted a strategy of offering simple choices on entry. The evidence to date suggests that students are embracing the model. The process also unlocks faculty innovation, allowing students to specialise as they progress.

Research & development / engagement

MU reported that it is reviewing its research activity and the ways in which its value and quality are measured. The external funding streams and support for the implementation of plans has changed. For example, the support for PhD students has been reduced, and there is less support for basic research in non-prioritised areas. MU now has better supports and an improved offering with structured PhD programmes, taught models, supervisory teams, and remediation measures where needed. This programme of reform is almost complete. MU is of the view that resources are a challenge here too – the national funding model for PhDs needs more consideration. One thing that could really change the environment is a regional approach to the taught doctorate, and MU feels that this deserves consideration, including consideration of models based on professional formation rather than structures.

On engagement, MU feels that it is behind on the aspirations it had in 2012. However, the university is investing in the curriculum and making changes. MU has always had a significant number of students doing BA programmes, and the university is keen to improve the employment opportunities for these students – for example, by convincing employers and others of the quality of these graduates. The university will foster student engagement with real workplaces and real communities, will continue transferring academic and problem-solving skills to the workplace, and will further promote experiential learning.