

National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) provided a very clear, concise and reflective self-evaluation report setting out a strong performance. The institution has achieved most of its interim targets, and provided context to those that are not fully delivered. Several initiatives are under way, such as a new strategic plan until 2020. This strategy will focus on growing the cohort of taught postgraduate students, including both EU and non-EU students. Shannon College of Hotel Management has been fully integrated as a school of NUIG and the integration with St Angela's has been moved out to September 2017.

Some particular strengths of the current self-evaluation were:

- NUIG report making progress on the West/North West regional cluster, with governance structures in place.
- With the agreement of the HEA, NUIG added two further targets to its compact last year – these were in the area of student entrepreneurship and innovation and in that of gender equality. The University regards its performance as exceeding expectations.
- High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation. A key priority for the University has been to enhance their research performance, grow research income and build a research profile in select priority areas of expertise.
- Performance on internationalisation. NUIG has performed strongly in this area in 2015.

There are some issues arising from the report that the HEA would like to explore further with the institution. These include:

- Institutional consolidation. The University has achieved the targets set out for 2015, namely the completion of Heads of Agreement. However, there have been further difficulties and the deadlines have been pushed out. The HEA would be interested to engage with the University on the current position.
- Enhancing and aligning regional programme provision and commitment to the regional cluster.
- Evidence of a strategic approach to 'enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange' and scope for the University to have greater strategic impact within this domain, both in its own right and in collaboration with cluster and other partners.
- Overall performance is high in the areas of 'participation, equal access and lifelong learning' and 'teaching and learning', but there are specific issues highlighted below that might warrant further dialogue between the HEA and the University.

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

Member institutions of the West/North West Regional Cluster include NUIG, GMIT, IT Sligo and LyIT. NUIG has five compact objectives under this domain. Across the five objectives, NUIG is reporting four targets achieved, and one target ‘partially achieved’.

NUIG reports making progress on the West/North West regional cluster: governance structures have been put in place, some progress has been made on coordination of academic planning, a Regional Skills Forum West has been established, and a manager appointed (hosted by NUIG).

The ‘partially achieved’ target related to the objective to ‘engage in strong collaboration and knowledge exchange with strategic partners and contributing to social and economic development through the rapid translation of research’. On this, NUIG reports that the consortium is well established and developing a good pipeline of technology transfers.

The target to develop a single face to enterprise in the areas of research and technology transfer (UL/NUIG Alliance) has been superseded by Knowledge Transfer Ireland Technology Transfer Strengthening Initiative Cycle 3. NUIG argues that this target is no longer relevant.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

NUIG has six compact objectives under this domain. For these, the University is reporting five targets achieved and one target exceeded.

NUIG has exceeded its quantitative 2015 targets for part-time enrolments (by 39 students) according to the self-evaluation report. The document provides some national benchmarking evidence that indicates that NUIG is performing above average for enrolment of flexible, part-time learners (17 per cent against a national average of 16 per cent for the university sector). A reference is made to ‘new programmes to be made available online and via blended learning – in continuous development and review’ and it would be useful to have additional information on these new programmes. The four remaining objectives are in relation to access and outreach. While all the targets have been marked in green (i.e. achieved), some issues for further reflection include the following:

- Objective 3: why has there been no estimated growth in the number of outreach centres (i.e. 3 at baseline and 3 maintained)?
- Objective 4: the number of schools participating in developmental programmes has decreased by 1 and while the numbers participating have increased; it is unclear as to why one school is no longer involved.
- Objective 5: the final target differs to the wording in the original compact. It appears that a focus on the ‘increased awareness by students of supports available to them’ has been dropped, which is a cause for concern. Additional information is offered in the commentary to state that a new website and marketing initiatives have been developed for the Centre to increase student awareness, but it is unclear why has this been removed as a final 2016 target?
- Objective 6: Not clear how students have been tracked over time using the SRS. Has there been an additional tagging exercise (other than the Equal Access Survey) to highlight students with disabilities? What ‘process’ has been developed to actively monitor SWD student retention and progression?

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

The University has eight compact objectives under this domain. For these, the University is reporting 7 targets achieved, and 1 target ‘partially achieved’.

Objective 1: This relates to NUIG’s ‘Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) Strategy’ and has been reduced from the original compact and no longer includes additional detail on a ‘revised strategy in place for period 2015–2017’. It is not clear if it has been revised to commence in 2016/17 instead. Since no interim targets were noted in the original compact, the progress made in this area is unclear.

Objective 2: The development of desired graduate attributes and roll-out to students has not been fully achieved, and more clarity on the methodology used for this exercise would be welcome – for example, administrative data, survey data, and interviews. It looks like this objective has not been achieved and evidence of substantial progress is not clear.

Objective 3: Targets appear modest, and since there is no difference between the interim (end-2015) and final (end-2016) targets, the desired numbers have already been reached.

Objective 7: The final target has been revised downwards (from 95 per cent to 90 per cent uptake of first-year orientation programmes). This is unusual given that the current interim commentary highlights that uptake is currently over 90 per cent. The commentary indicates that this is due to a change in CAO acceptance dates and the subsequent fragmentation of intake.

The need to enhanced or align regional programme provision is not sufficiently discussed. NUIG comments on programme duplication and this warrants further discussion.

The process of curricular reform is interesting and important and it will be interesting to discuss the extent of progress and its breadth. Is the reported progress local to Arts or institution-wide?

Overall the evidence offered here indicates that good progress has been made on NUIG’s measures/objectives. The commentary indicates that significant curricular review and reform have taken place in 2015 and are ongoing for 2016 in relation to objectives 4, 6, 7 and 8.

3. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

This theme, along with internationalisation, appears to be one of NUIG’s best performing areas of progress against its compact objectives.

NUIG has six compact objectives under this domain. For these it reports 4 targets exceeded, and 2 targets ‘not met/substantial progress made’.

NUIG’s Research and Innovation Strategy (as part of Vision 2020) involved comparisons with peer institutions at national level and aims to enhance the University’s research reputation in their areas of expertise. It would be useful to hear more on NUIG’s plans to improve or progress benchmarking for research and beyond.

NUIG’s commentary supports its achievements in these areas. However, the University notes that objective 5 (to get 25 per cent of PhD students to complete on time) remains a significant challenge. Further discussion on the underlying factors and the institutional response is required.

NUIG has signed up to the internationally recognised Athena SWAN Framework, which promotes innovation and good practice in the employment of women in science, engineering, technology, medicine and mathematics in higher education but were unsuccessful in the first round of the Athena SWAN accreditation scheme (2015).

4. Enhanced engagement with enterprise and the community and embedded knowledge exchange

NUIG has eight compact objectives under this domain. For these it reports 6 targets exceeded, and 2 targets 'partially met'.

The objectives can be broadly categorised along three themes: knowledge exchange, assisting enterprise/employers and supporting the community.

In relation to objective 1, NUIG's self-evaluation codes its performance as 'target partially met' and cites staff vacancies and priorities being diverted to other activities as the reason for this. The number of licence and option agreements has dropped from the baseline of 10 to 6 (against a target of 13).

Objective 2 relates to the number of start-up companies for which, against an interim 2015 target of 5, NUIG reported none achieved. The 2016 target has been modified downwards from 5 to 3 and the commentary section documents the reasons for this.

There is confusion around objective 4 in that the interim and final targets stated in NUIG's compact and self-evaluation analysis do not match.

While NUIG has documented evidence of a strategic approach to the development of this thematic area, arguably quantity is emphasised over breadth and quality. As noted in previous feedback, participation in Springboard is a key area (and NUIG is a provider), but there is no reference to it in the self-evaluation. There is scope for the University to have greater strategic impact within this domain, both in its own right and in collaboration with cluster and other partners. For that reason, this section could benefit from some additional consideration.

NUIG's engagement performance and entrepreneurial education activity is strong. Undertakings are leveraged across teaching and learning, research, civic engagement and meeting regional and national employer needs. The continued development of this approach will be of particular interest to the HEA as it seeks to understand how HEIs can move beyond traditional and somewhat narrow measures of knowledge transfer (like licences and patents), to a broader vision that sees knowledge transfer as an important part of the teaching and learning strategies of the higher education institutions.

6. Enhanced internationalisation

NUIG has performed strongly in 2015 in the domain of enhanced internationalisation. It has four objectives in this area and across these objectives, for which it reports all have been achieved.

NUIG's benchmarking observations indicate that it is applying 'the most rigorous definition of an "international student"' – (i.e. not domiciled in the Republic of Ireland on a full-time home campus basis).

NUIG believes that the integration of Shannon College will not be unfavourable to the achievement of targets for internationalisation. However, the University did not comment on the opportunities through the integration of St Angela's College.

7. Institutional consolidation

NUIG has two compact objectives under this domain, for which it reports both have been achieved.

NUIG's two objectives for institutional consolidation centre on the full integration of Shannon College and St Angela's College. The University has achieved the targets set out for 2015, namely the completion of Heads of Agreement.

NUIG highlights that a five-year strategic plan is being finalised with Shannon College which will run until 2022.

In relation to St Angela's, the commentary notes that other significant milestones have been reached – such as the agreement to establish a Centre of Excellence in Home Economics, increased capacity for research and a promotional path to professorial level for St Angela's staff.

Additional notes

NUIG reported an accumulated surplus position of €5,400,000 for 2014/15 and is projecting a break-even budget for 2016.

NUIG has added two additional institutional objectives in line with its Strategic Plan 2015–2020, Vision 2020:

(8) Embed a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation among students

NUIG has one objective in this area (to embed a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation among students) and the targets here were exceeded. As a result, the University reports that a focus on student entrepreneurship and innovation will become a key strand of the University's innovation offering over the lifetime of the compact.

(9) Gender Equality

NUIG has one objective (to afford men and women equality of opportunity in their careers) and reports exceeding its targets as well as including additional targets for 2016. A Gender Equality Task Force was established and conducted a review of the University from a gender equality perspective. In addition, a new Vice President for Gender Equality and Diversity was appointed to oversee the implementation of the Task Force's recommendations.