

Trinity College Dublin (TCD)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) has provided a clear, concise self-evaluation report with an update on all interim 2015 targets, as requested. There have been some changes to objectives since the published compact. The self-evaluation report is completed in full and colour-coded. The institution has achieved most of its interim targets and has provided context on areas where performance is behind trajectory. Some particular strengths of the current self-evaluation were:

- TCD has made substantial progress in reaching interim targets. In total there are twenty-four performance indicators across six thematic areas. Sixteen of the objectives are on target or exceeded (green), seven are partially achieved (amber) and only one has not progressed (red)
- TCD complemented and enhanced the compact report with a detailed 11-page covering letter which provided a more comprehensive update on their progress in 2015 and information on future plans. In addition, there is a 25-page appendix; an interim report on the Trinity Education Project (June 2016)
- Very significant progress is evident in the five areas of Access and lifelong learning; Research and innovation; Engagement; Teaching and learning (very strong); and to some extent Internationalisation. Trinity's performance in research is particularly commendable and it might be argued that their KPIs do not do justice to the substantial achievement in this space; however, the HEA welcomes the additional material provided in the accompanying letter.

The self-evaluation does raise issues for further discussion:

- As in Cycle 2, there is little progress on regional clusters. The progress that is apparent from the KPIs is based on bilateral initiatives/agreements between TCD and another institution (e.g. Marino), but any sense of a collective approach by all four Dublin institutions is notably absent. The SER noted that due to current and expected future high student demand there is no need to look at duplication with UCD. However, the focus on academic planning was also to consider opportunities to enhance quality and critical mass at undergraduate level; and in the case of a research-led university like TCD, to align undergraduate and postgraduate provision more closely. This in turn offers an opportunity to enhance competitiveness internationally. The HEA would welcome further discussion with TD on this issue.
- There is evidence that TCD is benchmarking itself against peer institutions, but as yet this is limited. It would be particularly important to see this developed further to ensure that there is a robust approach to interrogating and analysing how TCD's performance evolves against leading international HEIs.
- The University has provided helpful information on the progress to the TCD Education Project and the changes envisaged. One area of concern is that it appears that work to review and broaden the entry routes does not seem to feature. The HEA would welcome further discussion on this issue.

- There is no evidence of the current financial challenges facing the University and their impact on performance. The HEA would welcome further discussion on how the University is framing its ambitions in this context.
- On the transitions agenda, both UCD and Maynooth are capping and reducing entry gates. TCD didn't report on this, or address this national priority in any depth.

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

There are five regional cluster objectives and all five are commented upon. This area is the one under which the least progress has been made: two objectives are listed as achieved, two are partially achieved and one is not progressing.

In relation to one of those marked as achieved, the objective to coordinate an approach within the region to transfer and progression pathways, there are four sub-actions and it is noted that only one of these includes a cluster partner (UCD). The other three sub-actions appear to be TCD-only initiatives. Therefore, it would be helpful if TCD outlined how the progress described is benefitting the cluster as a whole.

In the Cycle 2 submission (end-2014 update), the objective of commencing a mapping of existing postgraduate provision was paused because of the complexity of systems, lack of dedicated resources and funding for a project manager. In the Cycle 3 update for end-2015 progress, this objective is red, on the basis that analysis suggested, to TCD, there was sufficient demand for places on courses and that a concern of unnecessary duplication is unwarranted. Additional information from TCD may be required on this issue.

In their covering letter an update is provided on initial teacher education. TCD describe 'focused and deep engagement' resulting in 'significant alignment in practices across primary, second level and art education PME programmes'. Teaching Council approval is outstanding. However, it should be noted that TCD goes on to question the value and benefit of the programme for students and institutions. (Similar reservations are outlined by UCD). As a result, TCD feels it may be more beneficial to deliver a joint PME with Marino (i.e. without other partners with whom they have collaborated with to-date). This warrants further discussion.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

There are four objectives relating to this domain. Three are listed as achieved and one as partially achieved.

In relation to the proportion of non-traditional entrants, TCD has exceeded the target set for 2014 (19 per cent) and increased it to 24 per cent for 2015. The result is that 23 per cent of new entrants to TCD are from non-traditional backgrounds (socio-economic disadvantage, mature students, those with a disability).

In relation to the Trinity Access 21 programme, a three-year partnership with Google and DEIS schools, progress is evident. Almost 100 schools have been involved in the first two years, developing innovative teaching practices to foster a college-going culture within schools.

In relation to the provision of flexible learning and not-for-credit modules: while progress is identifiable, the 2015 targets have not been met. TCD acknowledges this and feels that online courses and awareness of them will take time to become established.

Further information on this domain is provided in the cover letter, including information on TCD's involvement with College Awareness Week.

In addition, information is provided on the feasibility study (on enrolling high performing students from diverse backgrounds). Of 243 applications received in 2015, 21 students were admitted to TCD. An evaluation of the programme is under way.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

There are five objectives for this domain listed in the report. Four of the five targets have been met, with the remaining one partially achieved.

Developments in teaching and learning are provided in both the cover letter and the appendix submitted. TCD sees the Trinity Education Project work as part of the implementation of the transitions agenda. To summarise the report submitted (appendix dated June 2016), it is focused on:

- Developing the graduate attributes necessary in the 21st century
- Agreeing a set of curriculum principles and a programme architecture which will support the development of the desired graduate attributes
- Building on the quality of the current programmes. TCD acknowledge internal issues around complexity of processes and a need to simplify and streamline these.

In the cover letter, TCD states that it has committed to 'some reduction in entry routes for 2017'; however, no information on the scale of the reduction is provided.

TCD has completed the external review of the BESS course, with reviewers from Glasgow, Geneva, Paris and Amsterdam involved. A science review is pending implementation and a review of law programmes has commenced.

Opportunities for programme evaluations by students is one objective, and all three sub-actions are complete, indicating good levels of student engagement.

Some progress has been made in relation to improving the student experience by offering modules in entrepreneurship and innovation, with 30 students enrolled on an entrepreneurship module. One objective was to increase modules with activity in a virtual learning environment. Significant progress has been made and the 2015 targets have been exceeded. However, the covering letter notes that the next set of KPIs in a revised compact will address the area of technology-enhanced learning more fully.

It is evident that TCD is undertaking significant work around teaching and learning – building upon existing excellence, but also seeking to meet the challenges of a changing society. Clearly, significant emphasis is being placed on the Trinity Education Project (TEP), and the development of the proposed graduate attributes will be a key facet of this work.

At the Cycle 2 meetings the Expert Panel suggested that TCD could potentially be the sectoral leader in innovative teaching and learning, and while this is not addressed now, it might be a topic to explore further with TCD, particularly in the context of disseminating the best (or next) practice that arises out of the TEP initiative.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

There are four objectives listed in the compact for this domain and three of them have been achieved with one very close to being achieved. The four objectives are metrics in terms of research income; research productive staff; impact; and the availability of research papers online.

It could be argued that TCD's compact is not sufficiently reflective of the University's success in this area. The covering letter provides more details on their recent success, as requested last year. It is suggested that as a leading research university, the next iteration of the compact by TCD should seek to supplement the metrics-based targets with additional information that would allow the University to provide HEA with a more complete picture of development and success in research.

A new development for 2016 is included by TCD in its letter. This relates to a University Bridge Fund, a €60m venture capital fund available to research universities to invest in companies formed from HEI's. Note that €30m of the fund has been designated for investment in TCD and UCD.

In relation to research goals and its contribution, TCD indicates numbers of companies and number of jobs created, but the HEA would prefer to see more evidence from TCD on the contribution of the Irish higher education sector to wider economic and social impact.

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

Three objectives for this domain appear in the compact. Two of the 2015 targets are substantially exceeded, with one showing evidence of solid progress.

A target of 120 contracts with industry was exceeded by 20. Similarly, a target for 48 start-up companies to be enabled by TCD was exceeded by 24 (outcome of 72). In relation to the number of patent applications the target was 22, with an outcome of 17 at end-2015.

The covering letter provides additional detail. For example, industry funding in TCD is 60 per cent above the 2012 level; a new MoU has been signed with Intel; and record commercial income has been achieved, to name a few.

6. Enhanced internationalisation

Three objectives for Internationalisation are included in the compact, and two of these have been achieved with one very close to end-2015 target.

The target of increasing the number of inward non-EU students has been exceeded (2,000 outcomes against a target of 1,897). Likewise, the target for outward staff and student opportunities has been exceeded (447 outcomes, target 380). It should be noted that this outcome is almost exactly the target which had been set for 2016. The final objective which relates to the measure of international collaboration on research papers is well progressed (target of 55 per cent and an outcome of 53 per cent).

In its covering letter TCD notes the strategic importance of internationalisation to the University, and states that in 2015 the emphasis had been on recruitment and developing an institutional partnerships strategy. TCD notes that student satisfaction is benchmarked against peer institutions via the International Student Barometer (ISB). TCD outlines success in achieving student exchange targets and attributes this to a newly implemented marketing plan and improved curriculum mapping processes.

Finally, TCD states that implementation of the Trinity Education Project will further increase opportunities for internships and studying abroad.

7. Institutional consolidation

N/A

Additional Notes

TCD reported an accumulated break-even position for 2014/15 and is projecting a provisional deficit budget of €3.5m (funding statement) for 2016. The University is also projecting a significant deficit on a consolidated basis.