

## University College Cork (UCC)

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### 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 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 discussion at the bilateral meeting, have shown that progress can be demonstrated across all compact domains. The university continues to perform well against the majority of the objectives of the compact. The university uses data to inform goal-setting, measures progress and provides international context to many of its goals. The university has set out how it seeks to stretch performance where possible, and the implementation of a major research performance review (using international benchmarks) is an important such example. UCC has made less progress than previously hoped in respect of the regional cluster and has set out its views as to why. However, the university has collaborated more successfully in respect of the local skills forum for the South-West. Finally, the university has signalled the fragility of performance in the context of the constrained resources available to fund its ongoing operation.

In summary therefore, UCC has demonstrated very good progress against mission-coherent objectives through an analytical and probing self-evaluation report and use of 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. UCC 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, 12 September 2016

### In attendance

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

### UCC representatives

Dr Michael B. Murphy, President

Professor Caroline Fennell, Senior Vice President Academic and Registrar

Mr Diarmuid Collins, Chief Financial Officer/Bursar

Dr Rónán Ó Dubhghaill, Vice President for External Relations

The HEA welcomed University College Cork (UCC) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which the process operates. UCC is commended on its strong progress and for a self-evaluation report that 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:

- UCC is continuing to deliver on the majority of its compact objectives; in areas where progress has been slower than expected, the University offered reasonable explanations
- The University's concerns over the increasing risks being faced by the institutions including the following:
  - At an institutional level, the overall fragility of the present performance, arising from both the increased workload being taken on by the University (particularly but not limited to increased student numbers and research performance), and the continual reductions in public funding since 2009
  - The University's concerns that the student experience is being affected by declines in the number of staff available to teach and support students, and by the diminishing quality of the University's capital infrastructure
  - The underlying problem that contract research is not fully funded (and in some cases is significantly under-funded), which creates further strains on the University's financial health and research performance.
- The difficulties in making progress on cluster objectives, and the extent to which the two skills fora located within the cluster may offer a better approach to progress in the short-term.
- The review undertaken by UCC of its research performance, and the robust way in which this was carried out; and the potential for using the results of this review to help inform understanding of Ireland's strengths in research.
- The ongoing process of using benchmarking to inform assessment of UCC's performance.

## Cluster development

UCC noted that some progress has been made in respect of cluster performance, and considers that the areas of most progress were around links and pathways with further education and in respect of discussions on research strategy.

UCC noted, however, that there were difficulties inherent in the cluster, arising in particular from its large geographic scale, and more generally from the extra efforts required from the University to drive cluster performance, at a time of many other demands on its severely constrained resources.

However, UCC noted that the work of the two regional skills fora located within the cluster has offered an opportunity to make progress to address the skills agenda in a smaller geographic region (the South West) with fewer HEI participants, but including further education and business participants.

## Research and development

While noting that compact commitments on research development are being met, the University raised two overarching points:

- They expressed concern that the national agenda focus on selected priority areas was putting other areas of internationally excellent research at risk. UCC has undertaken a robust research review modelled on the UK RAE which shows that a number of UCC's very high-quality research strengths fall outside the national priority areas. This is a concern for the University and also for Ireland as a whole.
- The University also indicated that the governance of research needs consideration nationally. It noted the costs it incurred arising from inadequate research overhead provision, and pointed out that roughly two thirds of the state core grant is required to cross-subsidise underfunded research.

## Quality of student experience

The University noted that there is a continuing high level of satisfaction reported in surveys of UCC students. However, the University expressed its own concerns on the need to avoid complacency in this matter. The strong student satisfaction returns may reflect the fact that most undergraduate students have no opportunity to compare their experience in higher education with any other provider. The University has had to take difficult decisions which have resulted in reduced teaching capacity with knock-on implications in terms of student support.

## Participation and access

UCC noted the work they have undertaken in improving pathways to higher education from further education. They are concerned that they are delivering a range of provision below level 8, which is not recognised by the HEA for funding purposes. HEA explained that this was a deliberate policy focus to support diversity of provision within the sector but noted that this could be considered as part of the future review of the funding model.

UCC also noted some inconsistencies in the access data provided and undertook to revise this.

## Internationalisation

UCC indicated that its approach to internationalisation extends beyond a simple focus on international student numbers. While the University plans to continue increasing the number of international students in Cork in coming years, it is also focused on creating international linkage to support

research collaborations and enhance performance. However, UCC noted that shortcomings in its IT infrastructure, particularly in its ability to provide WIFI in all parts of the campus, impedes efforts to enhance internationalisation.

UCC also noted some inconsistencies in the international data provided and undertook to revise this.

### **AOB**

The University noted its concerns on the overall fragility of their performance – the University’s staff have made a huge contribution to address the funding and staff cutbacks, but this cannot be relied on indefinitely. The University has made efforts to diversify funding, but these are not adequate to make good the funding reductions and to provide for future increases in student numbers. The University considers that decisions on the Cassells report are urgently required.