

University College Cork (UCC)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3 Reflections on Performance

Overview

University College Cork (UCC) provided a very clear, concise self-evaluation report setting out a strong performance. The University has achieved most of its interim targets, and provided context to those that are not fully delivered. The University is progressing across the compact domains in research, knowledge transfer, internationalisation, and access. Some particular strengths of the current self-evaluation were:

- Good use of benchmarking, both national and international, for teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer and regional engagement and international orientation.
- Evidence of stretch targets, careful analysis of outcomes alongside institutional self-reflection.
- UCC provides a strong report of performance in respect of teaching and learning, retention and progression, Bologna and the student experience.
- UCC also demonstrates strong performance in respect of community, engagement, region and enterprise, it would be good to test how this might be further leveraged with cluster partners into the future. The research mapping pilot might be one aspect that could contribute here.

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

- Cluster progress, while becoming more evident, remains slow.
- A national issue for Irish higher education is the ongoing management of the student experience in the context of strong student numbers and tight financial conditions; and how the institution monitors and evaluates and the strategies it uses to sustain quality. It would be helpful to discuss the UCC approach.
- UCC continues to perform well; in the future retaining momentum may not be a sufficient indicator of progress, so how might an institution continue to test itself?

Self-evaluation report - domain level review

1. Regional clusters

There are three objectives under this heading. Only the objective on shared academic planning has been marked green. However, the research mapping exercise under this objective is stated as mostly completed.

- UCC does make reference here to the complexity of the cluster (geographical and numbers of HEIs) and that a subset of the cluster partners with focused initiatives would be more practical.
- With regard to the objective for the creation of a formal regional cluster, the 2015 target completion of a progress review of the delivery of the work plan and implementation of agreed project continues to lag behind envisaged timelines. The IT Tralee led project funded under the NFTL which was planned for the 2015 only commenced in 2015.

- The cluster has initiated the process of appointing an independent chair of the Cluster Steering Group.
- With regard to the objective to improve student pathways, the 2015 target to develop a uniform access/progression scheme for the cluster is considered to be problematic because of the large geographical area. UCC states that the approach of developing focused local progression schemes with shared learning is a more pragmatic target.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

There are five objectives under this heading and 2015 interim targets appear to have been met in all five. Reference is made to various data sources which provide additional information.

- From HEA statistics, mature student numbers have decreased slightly (by 9 per cent) over 2014/15, and this reflects a regional and national trend. The reasons for this may vary – for example, the restrictions on supports available to SW recipients who wish to return to higher education; alternatives to full-time study such as Springboard; and more recently, more employment opportunities.
- The number of students with disability reported differs from the HEA's own statistics – 232 reported by UCC for 2015, while HEA's figure is 332. In any event, the target of 185 for students with a disability target has been exceeded.
- UCC PLUS + programme – the target well exceeds 2016 target.
- UCC envisaged a doubling of labour market activation numbers in 2016/17 over 2015/16 (73 to 150). From HEA data there were 88 participants enrolled in courses approved under the 2015 call. However, out of 13 proposals submitted in the 2016 call, only 3 courses were approved (65 places in total).
- A slight concern is that labour market activation measures are naturally a response to the employment situation and the level of funding available may decrease as the employment situation improves with funding diverted to up-skilling or re-skilling initiatives which would be categorised under flexible/part-time provision. UCC has projected increases in numbers on labour market activation programmes and may need to look at these again in the light of the improving employment situation.
- There are a number of student retention initiatives in place, and the retention rate from first year stands at 91.6 per cent.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

There are six objectives under this section, four of which are marked green and two amber.

- In relation to the objective to strengthen the integration of research, teaching and learning through the greater engagement of researchers in teaching activities and by maximising opportunities for students to participate in research programmes throughout their undergraduate studies, the expected mapping exercise looking at the extent and quality of student research in current undergraduate programmes is expected to take considerable amount of time and to require a greater deal of coordination, and for that reason the 2015 target was not achieved.
- In relation to the objective to improve student satisfaction, engagement, and employability, the number of student peer support volunteers achieved was 283, just short of the 300 target.

- Note that this target had already been achieved in 2014. The HEA also notes and commends the finding that 94 per cent student satisfaction score was achieved in the UCC 2015 student survey.
- As part of the 2014 SER, UCC requested that two targets be revised, one was to reduce the percentage of academic staff engaged in professional development from 70 per cent to 60 per cent. However, notwithstanding this reduction, UCC's 2015 target update indicates that over 70 per cent of staff are engaged. UCC also requested that with regard to the objective of playing a leading role in teaching and learning support, the original 2015 target to secure non-Exchequer funding for NAIRTL would be replaced by a target to rebrand NAIRTL. The 2015 report confirms this rebranding but non-Exchequer funding has also been secured.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

There are three objectives under this heading, all of which UCC has classified as green.

- The 2015 target of establishing 50 industry contracts was well exceeded, with over 90 research contacts having been executed with key industry partners.
- Horizon 2020: 21 awards were secured with financial drawdown of €7.3m, representing a higher than average success rate in terms of applications made across all EU countries – 18 per cent; average is 12–14 per cent.
- UCC states that it has secured new research awards to the value of €116m, an increase of 41% over the last five years.
- The final overall report on the comprehensive University-wide review of research will be published in late 2016.
- The research focus was very UCC-centric, with no references to any collaborations with CIT or IT Tralee or to a broader cluster or regional agenda. While UCC is clearly the strongest research performer in the region, it would be interesting to know whether or not there is scope for further engagement with the regional partners in this area.

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

There are six objectives under this heading, of which UCC has classified five as green and one as amber.

- With regard to the objective to further develop innovation and entrepreneurship, and the 2015 target to embed entrepreneurship education in all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, UCC states that substantial progress has been made. UCC also indicates that, given the imperatives of the SW Action Plan for Jobs, it was focused on further collaborative activities to generate higher levels of potential start-ups. There is no reference though to the undergraduate programmes.
- Corporate social responsibility – UCC reports an energy usage reduction of 23.4 per cent against a target of target 18 per cent.
- UCC should be commended on the significant amount of collaboration, at a regional, community, employer and cultural level.

6. Enhanced internationalisation

There are three objectives listed under this heading, two of which UCC has classified as green, one as amber.

- As per HEA statistics, there appears to be significant growth planned in both EU and non-EU student numbers in 2016/17 over 2015/16, but these are projected to fall back to 2015/16 levels in the following academic year, 2017/18. More detail on this would be useful.
- More detail on the programmes/initiatives used to attract students from international markets would be useful.

7. Institutional consolidation

There are two objectives listed under this heading, one of which UCC has classified green, and one amber.

- UCC states that it has achieved 4 per cent price savings by availing of contracts under the Office of Government Procurement.
- UCC reports substantial progress under the objective to establish itself as one of the six centres of excellence for initial teacher education. The actual 2015 numbers of students enrolled in the Professional Master's in Education was 37, against a target of 40. The target is expected to be achieved in 2016/17.
- UCC has provided information on its Workload Management System – Academic Work Distribution Full Economic Costing.

Additional notes

UCC reported an accumulated deficit position of €5,317,000 for 2014/15 and the university is projecting a deficit budget of €800,000 for 2016.