

University College Dublin (UCD)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

University College Dublin (UCD) provided a very clear, concise and reflective 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. All sections have been completed, reporting progress against the 2015 targets as set out in the published compact.

Some particular strengths of the current self-evaluation were:

- In addition to the self-evaluation report, UCD submitted a seventeen-page commentary on progress to the end of 2015 alongside Strategic Plan Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).
- UCD have prioritised Excellent teaching and learning and quality of the student experience and High-quality, internationally competitive research and innovation. This is a strong statement on strategic mission and prioritisation.
- The HEA also notes the strong role of the University in supporting the transitions agenda.
- Consistent with this mission, strong progress has been made in teaching and learning and research. Progress has also been made on objectives for engagement, internationalisation, teaching and learning and access.
- UCD has identified a set of ten international universities against which it is benchmarking itself. Some discussion on the metrics (e.g., use of QS/THE) and comparators will be useful.

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

- The update provided by UCD in the self-evaluation report is brief for some domains and no commentary is provided in some areas, beyond quantifying the progress made. In general, this is balanced by the supporting letter, but gaps remain.
- For example, an objective under teaching and learning is flagged as status red: the establishment of the ILIAD centre. Despite progress being reported under this heading, UCD has decided not to proceed with the development of ILIAD. Note that no information is provided on this decision.
- Regional cluster progress remains lacklustre. Two elements of the regional clusters objectives, are flagged as status amber (a joint Professional Master's in Education and an MOA with IADT). Progress is also unclear in relation to the arrangement with NCAD.
- Under Engagement, the target for the number of UCD research partnerships with industry of greater value than €25,000 has been flagged amber; and while the interim target has been met, UCD has now decided to focus on a smaller number of more significant partnerships.
- In respect of Internationalisation, it is not clear that the incoming and outgoing balance is appropriate, particularly given the historical strength of UCD in this space.
- The University has shared its further work on benchmarking, which they had noted as progressing at the last meeting. It would be helpful to understand how the University intends to put this

into practice, and how it will share the findings. The HEA notes the reservation that some of this material is considered confidential and proprietary and would be anxious to understand this more fully. From the perspective of the HEA, the more the University is able to publish the findings of its benchmarking the more it will enhance transparency and accountability in the system.

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

Within this domain, five objectives are identified in the compact and addressed in the self-evaluation. Two performance indicators within these objectives are marked as amber. Firstly, the programme of work relating to the Institute of Education (TCD, UCD, NCAD, MIE) remains at a preparatory phase. Approval from the Teaching Council for the joint Professional Master's in Education (PME) remains outstanding [Note that the wording for the update on the IoE is almost identical to TCD's]. Critically however, the University now questions the value of the proposal, and the same reservation is also voiced by TCD. More progress has been reported in relation to the CPD objective – a paper was presented to and broadly welcomed by the Teaching Council in December 2015. There has been an agreement to align training components across the four institutions for the PME credit structure and this should be welcomed.

The second area where progress has been slower than planned was the agreed framework for module sharing with IADT. Progress on a formal MoU has been paused to allow development of activity including a Master's in Spatial Arts and Visualisation (jointly run with NCAD) which will have its first intake in September 2017

Another positive development is the tripartite master's (UCD, NCAD and IADT) which is scheduled to have its first intake in 2017.

As previously reported, notwithstanding the positive initiatives highlighted above, and the fact that they are marked green, progress on the trilateral collaboration (UCD, IADT, NCAD) appears slow overall. The commentary acknowledges difficulties in aligning academic calendars and processes with NCAD and IADT, which limits the possibility for widespread shared activity. However, UCD does not see this as particularly significant and believes that the programmes offered and students attracted differ between the institutions.

The commentary also notes positive collaboration between UCD and TCD including an MSc in Comparative Social Change which will commence in September 2016. Initial meetings have taken place with a view to developing access and student transfer pathways.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

As with the previous report, one overall objective is identified in the compact and is reported on in the self-evaluation. At end-2015 the university's participation rate for underrepresented groups stood at 27.2 per cent of the undergraduate population.

This objective is marked in green with the overall target for underrepresented groups exceeded by 124 to the end of 2015. The only cohort not to exceed its target is the mature/older learners, which fell by 23 per cent from the baseline – consistent with national trends on participation of this cohort.

The commentary outlines initiatives undertaken to reinforce the concept of a diverse student body. In December 2015 a new Access & Lifelong Learning Centre (ALL) was opened which is designed as a

'bridge to the university' for students from a variety of backgrounds. Services offered by the Centre include:

- A range of pre-entry initiatives including alternative admission routes such as HEAR, DARE, Mature Years
- UCD Open Learning – a pathway to part-time undergraduate education
- Lifelong learning opportunities
- Assistance with the transition to life in university.

Outreach activity is also focused on attracting students from underrepresented groups and work has led to collaborations with schools and community groups in the Dublin and Leinster areas. Activities include summer schools, tutoring schemes and parent forums.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

Within this domain, five objectives are identified in the compact and each of these are addressed in the self-evaluation. Overall, much progress is reported on four of the five objectives. This is the only section of the self-evaluation to have a performance indicator marked as red, as UCD has decided not to proceed with the establishment of the Learning Innovation and Academic Development Centre (ILIAD). No further information on the decision is provided.

The ISSE score and student ratios have been maintained at 68.9 and 1:8.6 respectively. Further detail is provided in the accompanying commentary. A review has taken place of the University's Professional Certificate/Diploma in University Teaching and Learning with a view to the development of a comprehensive CPD for academic staff at all levels. Participation in courses has increased at all levels.

An extensive orientation programme has been established for incoming first-year students prior to the beginning of the first semester with introductions to the academic and other staff. In addition, orientation events are held throughout the first semester, including sessions on Library and IT services. Mental health drop-in sessions are timed for particularly stressful times and the peer mentor system runs in tandem with the above initiatives. These initiatives are part of the 'Focus on First Year' which has been running since 2010.

Two UCD academics completed a national study in June 2015 on non-completion across the sector for the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. As part of this work, new UCD-specific data was collected. The report contains a large qualitative component which provides a 'voice' on why students decide to leave their chosen course.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

Within this domain, five objectives, with many sub-actions, are identified in the compact and all five are reported in the self-evaluation. All objectives are listed in green and as having been achieved. While there is limited elaboration provided in the self-evaluation, of note are:

- 16 ERC and 80 Marie Curie Awardees, ahead of the 2015 target of 70 prestigious awards
- Number of staff who participated in innovation programmes is 109, ahead of the 2015 target of 60
- 529 students participated on innovation modules, ahead of the target of 245.

Further information is provided in the commentary on the critical role of research and innovation across the University – from individual researchers through groups, to start ups and to larger-scale collaboration with industry. Regardless of the stage or type of research, excellence and impact are the key features. On the research side, UCD (along with three other Irish institutions), is now ranked among the top 50 performing institutions for H2020 awards. UCD does sound a note of caution, however, in that in an uncertain funding environment there is a question the sustainability of this level of success.

UCD believes that the objectives outlined in *Innovation 2020* are closely aligned to its own *Strategy 2015–2020*, which builds on previous success and outlines a plan for the coming years which it believes will deliver greater impact through engaging with enterprise. Key goals include driving the quantity and quality of outputs, with a key focus on broadening commercialisation across all significant research areas.

The University Bridge Fund is a €60M venture capital collaboration between UCD and TCD which is available to benefit all third-level institutions in the country. The initiative brings together public, private and international investors under one umbrella. The aim of the fund is to translate academic research into high quality jobs.

The performance on innovation module participation needs some additional context as the target (529/245) was significantly exceeded.

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

Within this domain, one objective is identified in the compact and is reported on in the self-evaluation. The interim targets set in the compact have been exceeded to the end of 2015. By the end of 2015, 22 licence agreements were reached, well ahead of the target of 15; and the target of 50 research partnerships with industry of value greater than €25,000 has also been met. However, this objective is marked as amber and the focus is now on a smaller number of more significant partnerships. Of note is the number of enterprise and community engagement events which at 85+ is some 65 ahead of target.

Specific examples of industry engagement are included in the commentary. In 2015 UCD signed an agreement with IBM in education, research and innovation with other agreements expected in 2016. UCD also secured the largest SFI industry investment awarded – €11m between the State and Ireland's energy companies.

6. Enhanced internationalisation

Within this domain, two objectives are identified in the compact and both are reported on in the self-evaluation as having been fully achieved. In the case of the number of international students targeted to come to UCD in 2014–15, the target was over-achieved by 889 students. Overall student numbers participating on an Erasmus programme increased slightly to 588, above the target of 580.

Further detail is provided in the commentary on both objectives. On the objective of increasing numbers participating in the Erasmus programme, a significant promotional campaign has been undertaken to ensure targets are met and ultimately exceeded. Initiatives have included an increase in the number of promotional talks, pop-up 'Study Abroad Fairs' throughout the campus, exchange academic coordinators at school level, and an expansion of the destinations available. Early indications are that over 630 students will participate in an Erasmus exchange in 2015/16.

The increase in international student numbers is related to the targeting of specific markets through UCD's network of Global Centres and the growth of the US Study Abroad programme. Scholarship campaigns have also been developed to encourage UK students to come to UCD, while processes have been streamlined to facilitate smoother admission of non-EU students.

The internationalisation section seems to be slipping slightly, albeit from a very strong historical base. The 2015 report seems a little less prioritised or strategic. It would be interesting to know if this signifies any reprioritisation or strategic rebalance.

7. Institutional consolidation

The self-evaluation outlines the progress made to the end of 2015 with the objective reported as status green. UCD references the report on the UCD–NCAD relationship, which was submitted to the HEA, and notes that the recommendations from this report are being addressed by two working groups. Progress appears to have been made on a number of areas, including the extension of the MoU between UCD and NCAD to September 2018 to facilitate discussion on a new MoU, and also on a shared summer school establishing strategic partnership with Temple University planned for 2017. However, in the additional commentary UCD states that, following confirmation from the HEA that no funding is available to support consolidation activity, the discussions on a merger with NCAD were halted. The focus is now on closer engagement through the regional cluster and engagement with NCAD as a recognised College of UCD.

Additional Notes

UCD reported an accumulated surplus position of €796,000 for 2014/15 and is projecting a break-even budget for 2016.

In the commentary, an update is provided on the implementation of the transitions agenda with UCD reporting that the number of undergraduate courses has been reduced significantly from 86 in 2009 to 41 by 2017. Programmes have been restructured to allow entry via broader discipline areas, providing students with an opportunity to experience wider areas of the curriculum during the early stages of their programmes before specialising later.