

University of Limerick (UL)

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 develop the compact to incorporate greater use of data, and to focus on particular areas of priority. There are areas of significant progress, including the focus on improving research performance and the joint BA with Mary Immaculate College.

However, it is also noted that there are delays around initial teacher education restructuring. The HEA acknowledges the university's attempts to advance the process and urges all parties to resolve the outstanding issues as soon as possible and ensure that a Director of the National Institute for Studies in Education is appointed without further delay. The HEA also looks forward to further evidence of the development of benchmarking to inform the compact into the future.

In summary therefore, UL 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 commitment to benchmarking and to further develop this. UL 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.

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: minutes of bilateral meeting, 14 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, with the exception of the discussion on teacher education. A process auditor was also present at the meeting.

UL representatives

- Professor Don Barry, President
- Professor Paul McCutcheon, Vice President Academic & Registrar
- Dr Mary Shire, Vice President Research
- Mr Eamonn Moran, Programme Manager Strategic Projects

The HEA welcomed University of Limerick (UL) to the meeting and gave an overview of the strategic dialogue process and the context in which the process operates. UL 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 responding 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 of Limerick's performance:

- The University is performing strongly and provided a good self-evaluation report. The University has achieved most of its interim targets and provides context on areas where performance is behind expectation. It is clear that local engagement by the University is a strong feature of its performance.
- The HEA is aware that the University has put benchmarking processes in place, but would welcome more evidence of this.
- The HEA welcomes the University's focus on improving research performance.
- Plans for the National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE) do not seem to be moving forward adequately. This has been a long-standing objective of the University and its partners, and is an important part of the implementation of the national initial teacher education reforms. The HEA acknowledges the University's attempts to advance the process. The HEA notes that the University has indicated that it will withdraw from the process at the end of this year but the HEA hopes that a resolution of the outstanding issues will be possible.

UL opening remarks

The new UL strategic plan for 2015–19, *Broadening horizons*, extends beyond the compact (with quantitative targets beyond those set in the compact), but it does remain coherent with the compact. The strategic plan focuses on three main themes: building on UL's achievements, accentuating UL's distinctiveness (with a strong focus on research impact, industry engagement and employability, and campus development), and raising the international profile of UL.

UL is targeting software, materials, applied mathematics and health as areas for potential growth; and it is also working on attracting international companies to the region or, even better, to the campus.

UL considers that the biggest challenge it faces is in delivering a quality offering within constrained resources. The challenge is to provide students with a high-quality experience – that is a priority, but so too is improving research performance. Constrained resources are having negative effects across disciplines that rely on additional supports such as tutorials or laboratory resources, and they also lead to shorter library hours and less up-to-date ICT equipment.

Management of risk

A recent development in UL is the creation of a risk register that cascades to all levels in the organisation, along with the governance and audit functions involved. UL focuses on managing those risks that are within its control.

Cluster development and progress

The Shannon Consortium is working well.

UL has delivered the joint BA with MIC, which represents a significant curriculum delivered across both campuses. To progress this further will require an e-delivery model and this will require support.

The second planned deliverable of the Shannon Consortium is the development of a Limerick Graduate School that will market Limerick as a location of choice for postgraduate studies. The PhD offered by the proposed School will be delivered by the institution through the federated structure – students will be enrolled in their ‘home’ institution (UL, LIT or MIC) but will have access to all the services of the other institutions. The PhD experience will be uniform and the academic recognition will be through UL. At present UL have an institutional graduate school covering a broader range L9–10 including taught master’s degrees.

The cluster group meets on a quarterly basis. It is looking at mapping student progression and transfer pathways, and wants to reinstate a common access programme. The access programme was SIF-supported but once this funding ended, delivery of the programme stopped. The cluster has been valuable in building trust and increasing levels of collaboration between its member institutions.

Research and development

In relation to research and development, UL places particular emphasis on the quality and academic prestige of research, and also on working with industry. UL has reviewed its areas of strength and is focused on science and engineering.

UL has been very successful in gaining national funding for research and development projects, and was awarded €50m last year. The University is behind the national average in relation to H2020 funding, and is now making support available to staff to prepare projects, and to provide staff development activities. UL has also targeted the ERC as a source of research funding and grants, and is putting supports in place for academics to pursue these opportunities.

The University is seeking to broaden its research base and sees opportunities in the area between public health and clinical research where it has identified projects that it would like to progress. Research with involvement of the public and of patients is of particular interest. UL also has a clinical research institute jointly staffed and supported by the HSE.

UL has been looking at research impact case studies, as the metrics around technology transfer or economic impact can be a bit narrow. UL is also looking at other metrics that take a wider view of research impact – for example, that of the added competitiveness and impact of UL graduates on the companies they transfer to.

At a national level, the University takes the view that government investment in PhD students should be across all levels of research activity based on its merits.

Internationalisation and benchmarking

The University is looking at benchmarking its performance against international best-known practice. In doing so, it looks first to Irish examples, such as HEA data reports to benchmark against Irish institutions. UL also has a QS agreement to look at two Irish, two UK and two US institutions. The University acknowledged that it could have provided more information on benchmarking in its self-evaluation report to the HEA and intends to do so in future.

Teaching and learning

UL is progressing the transitions agenda (to improve the quality of the transition that students make from second level to higher education) and has made significant progress on CAO course range.

Teacher education

UL considers that the teacher education reforms for the Limerick institutions are at an impasse, and they cannot resolve them at this stage. UL have invested a lot in developing the discipline, and this needs to progress.

UL considers that there are opportunities with Galway and UCC, as envisaged originally in the teacher education reforms.

Further development of the compact process

The experience of the compact process for UL has been positive, so much so that it has copied the approach for its internal resource allocation model – with the University's strategic plan leading to devolved plans for each faculty. UL has considered linking faculty funding to performance, but that remains a complex issue.