University of Limerick (UL)

Strategic Dialogue Cycle 3: reflections on performance

Overview

University of Limerick (UL) has provided a good self-evaluation report providing an update on all interim 2015 targets, as requested. The self-evaluation report is completed in full and colour-coded. The University has achieved most of its interim targets and provides context on areas where performance is behind trajectory.

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

- UL has provided specific and positive updates on its work to improve retention rates, to implement the transitions agenda and workload management. There are some concerns on retention and data fluctuations.

- While the current compact has been referred to in the University's new *Broadening horizons: 2015–19 Strategic plan*, some more information on how the new strategic plan maps or influences this or a future compact would be useful.

- There is some reliance on data or tables that are not sufficiently explained or related to self-evaluation specifics. As a result, some of the achievements listed are not supported by sufficient explanatory evidence and some responses to challenges are not elucidated sufficiently either (research centres p. 31, 'a slow start' p. 33.)

- Plans for the National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE) do not seem to be moving forward.

- Greater use of international benchmarking would be helpful.

- Managing cluster activity and developing links and improved collaboration in other directions simultaneously must be challenging. It would be interesting to discuss prioritisation and these relationships.

- How is the regional cluster deepening and broadening? Are there any plans on internationalisation, shared programmes, enterprise engagement or income or resource sharing?

Self-evaluation report – domain level review

1. Regional clusters

UL sets out eight objectives for its performance within regional cluster settings. This broadly revolves around the Shannon Consortium, UL's strategic alliance with NUIG and the University's role in teacher education. The Cycle 3 self-evaluation codes progress as green for seven of these objectives and amber for one.

The objective coded amber is the plan to establish a centre of excellence in teaching and teacher education in partnership with MIC: – the National Institute for Education Studies (NISE). There is a delay in the operationalisation of NISE's governance structures relating to the recruitment of the Director. In its self-evaluation, UL notes that the MIC/ HEA/ DES dialogue is under way and flags its concerns about the delays and its implications for NISE's future sustainability. Progress has been achieved in the other two components of this objective (CPD development and TUS interface).

With respect to the other objectives, UL notes that the objective of launching the Limerick Graduate School by the end of 2016 is on target. Its co-development of programmes with other institutions is progressing more or less as planned. In some instances, wider events have affected original plans. For example, UL advises that regional cluster activity is impacting its engagement with NUIG – for example, in the alignment of CPD awards.

Under Objective 7, UL refers to its Springboard+ activities and the regional coordination through *Limerick for Engineering* and *Limerick for IT*. Given the recognised success of these initiatives, more information on their 2015 activities may have been worth including.

Objective 8 concerns inter-institutional collaboration in technology transfer services. Progress in this reflects the consortia being supported in TTSI 3. UL advises that the originally planned shared UL/ NUIG interface is not proceeding because they are in different TTSI consortia. This is an accurate reflection of the landscape rather than a lack of progress on the part of UL. IT Tralee's engagement with UCC under TTSI 3 appears to be a new development. UL's engagement with LIT on tech transfer and the operation of the New Frontiers Entrepreneur Development Programme are positive.

2. Participation, equal access and lifelong learning

UL has six objectives under this heading, all of which are coded green in their Cycle 3 self-evaluation report. It has met its target for 28 per cent non-standard entrants to its undergraduate programmes (not broken down any further) by the end of 2015. The University does however advise of challenges in relation to mature students and advises of initiatives to deal with this. It is worth noting that UL's 2015–19 Strategy – for its target to widen the diversity of the undergraduate student population – aims to increase the percentage of full-time non-standard entrants to undergraduate programmes to 28 per cent of overall intake by 2018.

The University has established the planned Education Assistive Technology Centre, and in doing so has been aided by some support through the HEA clusters funding. UL is now seeking a corporate sponsor for the Centre's programmes and further development. It has also put in place its planned dedicated Continuing Professional Education unit. Linked to this, it reports that all UL courses are now compliant with the approved policy for positioning CPD awards within the NFQ (exceeding both its end-2015 target (50 per cent) and its end-2016 target (90 per cent). It has also exceeded its end-2015 target for flexible learners (18 per cent against a target of 15per cent). However, as with Cycle 2, it warns of a drop-off following completion of the DES-funded programme for maths teachers. The *National Plan for Equity of Access 2015–19* sets a 22 per cent target for flexible learners.

Retention

In its self-evaluation report, UL provides detailed information on its efforts to improve retention rates (Appendix 1 of its report). Under the broad banner of Student Engagement and Success (SES) and based on international learnings (especially in the UK), a unit has been created to support students' first-year experience and their retention. The University also hosts five learner centres and an educational developer is supporting staff on relevant issues. On top of this, it is clear that there is comprehensive activity under way in each of UL's faculties to monitor and address any retention issues.

Transitions

UL also provides an update on its work to implement the Transitions agenda (Appendix 2 of its self-evaluation report). It advises that, as part of this, the 73 programmes offered in 2015 will be reduced to 42 by 2017. It details its entries in the 2017 CAO Handbook including, for example, its new BA Arts offering (LM002) that will replace nine previously offered programmes. The University plans to monitor the impact of common entry programmes on student recruitment and performance over the coming years.

3. Excellent teaching and learning and quality of student experience

There are 11 objectives in this section, all of which UL has coded green in its Cycle 3 self-evaluation. The compact and constituent objectives are informed by the University's 2014–18 Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy. UL also advises that this strategy is reflected in its 2015–19 Strategic Plan.

Under Objective 3 for 'broadening' modules, it appears that roll-out may be slightly slower than expected, but progress has nevertheless been made. Excellence and innovation in pedagogy with regard to Objective 5 (graduate attributes) are being supported through a number of initiatives such as the UL Specialist Diploma in Teaching, Learning and Assessment (due for launch in September 2016). In terms of staff teaching qualifications and recognition (Objective 7), UL advises that its planned development of a competency framework has been superseded by the work of the National Forum on a national framework. UL is a partner in the Forum-funded development of a national digital skills CPD framework.

With respect to supporting first-year students, a revised student adviser system will be launched in September 2016. As noted under Section 2 above, comprehensive work is under way both through a dedicated Student Engagement and Success Unit and within the faculties to enhance student retention rates. UL advises that its first-year retention rate was 91 per cent in 2010/11. It also notes that, as per the 2015/16 HEA return, its current retention rate is 90 per cent: 'a significant improvement from previous year'. For comparability purposes, it could help to clarify if this refers to all students or just to first-years. UL points out that this is the university average.

While a bit delayed, the Sports Arena extension and pitch development planned for 2015 (Objective 8) are now proceeding, with the extension due for completion in January 2017 and pitch development in early 2018.

In line with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education's *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, UL has taken steps to improve its programme review system (Objective 9), grading and assessment regulations (Objective 10) and student satisfaction with taught modules (Objective 11). While it is not fully clear that the details of each planned 2015 target have been met, it is apparent that work is under way to advance all objectives. To implement Objective 11, UL's Module Satisfaction Survey is being extended to all taught modules this year.

4. High quality, internationally competitive research and innovation

UL has eight objectives in this section of its performance compact. In its Cycle 3 self-evaluation, it has coded progress against four of the objectives as green and the other four as amber.

In terms of publications and citations, its level of research activity is broadly in line with the revised targets (amended on the basis of changes to the Web of Science database and UL's own revision of its

list of high impact book publishers). It reports that it has also met its doctoral enrolment target, with 179 enrolled against a target of 169.

There has been slightly less success in the strategic development of the University's research capability (Objective 3). Its end-2015 targets comprised:

▪ Secondments and exchange programme in place and annual targets established

▪ Nine (cumulative) externally funded academic appointments

▪ Annual review of training programme.

UL reports that it is on target for the recruitment of externally funded professors (seven Bernal professors, one funded by the HRB and one for STEM education). However, it advises that its planned secondment and exchange programme has not materialised because of funding constraints; and for that reason it is using sabbatical policy to work around this. With respect to the third strand, the University states that 'training programmes have been reviewed and updated where required'. More information on this would have been useful.

The University's planned strategies for its priority research areas (Objective 4) are also proceeding somewhat slower than originally planned – this is due to a decision to merge MSSI and the Stokes Institute into the Bernal Institute. This restructuring is also having a knock-on effect on the planned benchmarking review. Now that there is a new research strategy in place (*Excellence & Impact 2020*), it is not clear whether or not the benchmarking will proceed. The strategy for the new Health Research Institute is due for formal approval in 2016.

Research capital plans are proceeding on course, and the extension of the Applied Materials Research building and the Bernal Institute have been completed. Construction of the Clinical Education Research Centre at University Hospital Limerick started in June 2015 and will be complete by November 2016, while the second phase of the Glucksman Library and Information Services building went into construction in April 2016.

With respect to UL's success in securing non-Exchequer research income, its industry income is ahead of target, although its Horizon 2020 income is behind. It would be interesting to hear further of the steps being taken by the University to address this and what its expectations are for improved performance. The University's commercialisation outputs are on target, with its LOAs (Licences, Options or Agreements) at 29, well exceeding the target of 9. UL plans to issue a new Knowledge Transfer and Engagement Strategy in 2017.

Lastly, in relation to its enterprise formation supports, UL is on target for numbers of entrepreneurs trained and the coordination of campus-wide entrepreneurship activity. It is behind on the numbers of start-up companies supported by its incubation centre Nexus. It explains that this is due to slower than expected turnover in the centre and flags that the 2016 target is unlikely to be met.

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

UL's commercialisation and start-up activities have been dealt with in the preceding section. This section therefore covers wider engagement – for example, placements and civic engagement. It has nine objectives in this section, eight of which it has coded green and the other is addressed in Section 2.

The scale of the University's cooperative education (that is, employer participation/placements) continues to grow. The University is also working to enhance quality in this area through surveys and through the introduction of employability statements. Its original plans to set up a regional employability working group have been superseded by the Regional Action Plan for Jobs and the Regional Skills Forum, and UL is active in both of these.

UL is extending its physical support for industry through the acquisition of some Shannon Development space. It is also showcasing the impact of its research on industry through the promotion of research impact case studies.

The University is actively engaged with the community and region. It has brought its civic engagement activities under one coordinated banner (www.ul.ie/engage) and promotes its campus as a key element of the Shannon region, having opened its visitor centre in 2015. Along with other regional stakeholders, UL participates actively in regional development plans – for example, *Limerick 2030: an Economic and Spatial Plan for Limerick*.

7. Enhanced internationalisation

UL has set itself six objectives under this section, all of which it has coded green in its Cycle 3 self-evaluation. It is implementing its international education 2015–2020 business plan, and a university-wide task force, chaired by the UL President, has been established to drive the plan. It reports that its targets for inward and outward mobility of students have been exceeded. As also reported last year, UL has introduced an internationalisation module as a core module in its Specialist Diploma in Teaching and Learning. The one target in this section that it hadn't met last year – staff mobility – has been met this year.

7. Institutional consolidation

UL has set no objectives or targets for this section.

Additional notes

UL reported an accumulated break-even position for 2014/15 and the university is projecting a break-even budget for 2016.