

**UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER**

**TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGY**

**2008/09 – 2012/13**

**May 2008**

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## **FOREWORD**

Any successful strategy needs the support of staff, students and managers across and within the institution. Like every good strategy its outcome depends on effective implementation. I am encouraged by the collective goodwill towards, and enthusiasm for, inclusive excellence and resolve to commit resources, time and effort toward the aims and objectives outlined in this Strategy. I thank all those colleagues who have contributed to its formulation, and I think even more warmly of those of you who will take responsibility for its execution.

**Denise McAlister**  
**Pro-Vice Chancellor (Teaching and Learning)**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The University's Teaching and Learning Strategy (2008/09-2012/13) sets out four key University-wide priorities for the next five-year period as well as two cross-cutting aims in support of them. Strategies and annual plans will also exist at the Faculty and School levels and these will be congruent and consistent with this over-arching Strategy. The Strategy also articulates with other institutional strategies, policies and plans, in particular, the Corporate Plan (2006/07 – 2010/11), the Widening Participation Strategy, the Collaborative Provision Strategy, the International Strategy, SUCCINCT 3, the Estates Strategy, SUPPORTIVE, and the Admissions and Selection Policy. It is a live document subject to formative evaluation throughout its duration, with adjustments and fine-tuning as appropriate.

The Corporate Plan (2006/07-2010/11) sets out the University's vision '**to be a university with a national and international reputation for excellence, innovation and regional engagement.**' It also sets out the University's intentions to:

- *provide excellent learning opportunities which are student centred and client focussed;*
- *undertake excellent research in selected areas of activity;*
- *maintain the University's position as a sector leader in widening access to higher education;*
- *establish the University as a sector leader in promoting creativity and innovation;*
- *conduct business in line with the University's core values and to the highest standards of corporate governance.*

The Teaching and Learning Strategy (2008/09 – 2012/13) articulates the University's specific commitments relating to learning and teaching which emanate from the Corporate Plan. An overview of the Strategy is provided in Figure 1 below. Four key aims are identified to realise the vision. For each aim there are several key supporting

objectives. Underpinning and supporting each of the four strategic aims are two cross-cutting strategic aims, each with their own key supporting objectives. Annual action plans will set out in more detail how these commitments are to be delivered, responsibilities for achieving them and key performance measures.

The next five years represent an unprecedented and very challenging opportunity to provide excellent teaching and learning provision given, inter alia, changing student demographics and patterns of participation, greater globalisation and internationalisation, and a review of variable deferred fees in the context of the commodification of higher education.

## **Consultation**

In April 2007 the University outlined its plans and timescales for the consultation process underpinning the development of the new Teaching and Learning Strategy (2008/09 – 2012/13). There were three phases to the consultation. In the first phase (Pre-consultation) the opinions and priorities of academic colleagues were obtained using the DELPHI method. The views of central departments were also sought and feedback obtained from various one-off events and the reports of working groups. It also has been informed by a wide range of recent relevant reports.\*

In the second phase (Formal consultation) the draft strategy was considered by relevant committees at Faculty and University levels. A dedicated website was set up for staff and students to comment. Formal meetings were held with faculties and the Students' Union and relevant central departments. The draft Strategy was revised in the light of the comments and feedback received. The finalised Strategy was endorsed by the Senate in April 2008.

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\* These include, inter alia, Designing Spaces for Effective Learning (HEFCE2006); Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: World Class Skills (Leitch Report 2006); Beyond the honours degree classification (Universities UK, 2007).

In the third phase (Post-consultation) the resourcing implications of the Strategy will be costed and Council's approval for the budget for its implementation sought on an ongoing basis.

Figure 1

OVERVIEW OF THE ULSTER'S TEACHING & LEARNING STRATEGY  
2008/09 – 2012/13

**VISION**

Our vision is to be a leading provider of professional education for professional life

**MISSION**

To provide excellent learning opportunities which are student centred and client-focussed

**We will realise our mission through the following four strategic aims:**

To enhance the quality of the student learning experience

To target, recruit, support and retain a diverse range of students

To promote and foster creativity and innovation in curriculum design and delivery

To promote learning, professionalism and employability through the integration of academic theory and relevant professional and vocational practice.

**In support of our key aims we aim to:**

Provide a supportive environment, in which teaching is recognised, valued and rewarded for all those who teach and support learning in the University

To enhance the quality of the physical and social learning environments for students and staff

Guiding Principles

## 2. CONTEXT

The University of Ulster is recognised locally and nationally for its high quality professional and vocational education. It also has a good reputation for innovation in curricula design and delivery. Its suite of taught programmes is characterised by a focus on the application of theory to practice and the provision of opportunities for students to undertake work-based learning and to study for coterminous awards. The University places a strong emphasis in working in partnership with employers, the community and voluntary sectors, government and accrediting bodies to contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of the region and to promote social inclusion. The University aspires to be the leading provider of professional education for professional life on the island of Ireland.

Ulster students benefit from participating in carefully designed and implemented learning activities that promote active and student-oriented learning and assist them in becoming independent critical lifelong learners. The University aims to provide a student-centred approach to teaching, learning and assessment by providing courses and programmes which are scholarship-informed, and where appropriate research-informed, and which are taught and supervised by those engaged in research and/or scholarship.

Feedback from surveys on quality of teaching and the student experience at Ulster demonstrate that overall levels of satisfaction are good. However, the data indicate that assessment and feedback are among the key areas where students express least satisfaction; we also know that there are strong linkages between assessment, feedback, student motivation and non-continuation. Research by Yorke and Langden (2007) and Carter (2006) suggest that teaching and learning strategies should be oriented to enhance the experience of all students, albeit with a particular emphasis on first year, first semester students. Over the next five years the University will aim to enhance the overall quality of the student learning experience.

Ulster welcomes diversity and inclusion. Students and staff come to the University from a range of backgrounds and cultures and with a wide range of academic and life experiences. This enriches life in the University for all. One distinctive contribution of the University of Ulster has been, and is, in it being accessible to people from all socio-economic backgrounds in this society, as individuals or as members of distinct issue groups. The University seeks, therefore, to create a learning environment which provides the necessary support for all students to achieve their potential.

Ulster has the third highest percentage of students historically under-represented in higher education in the UK and is nationally recognised for widening participation. However, its large and diverse and geographically dispersed student body makes student non-continuation and progression a challenge. For several years student non-continuation rates have been higher than our benchmark. This is both wasteful of resources and a demoralising experience for many students and their families. A key challenge of the University in the next five years is to design and implement more effective intentional interventions to deal with the multi-factorial nature of the problem. This will necessitate a comprehensive, integrated and co-ordinated approach, beginning with pre-entry and continuing through with recruitment, admissions, induction and transition. Successful implementation of the Strategy will, therefore, seek to maintain Ulster's position as a sector leader in widening access to higher education and through this reducing levels of social inequality and increasing care with difference through the active engagement together of diverse staff and student bodies.

One of the University's core strategic aims is "to establish the University as a sector leader in promoting creativity and innovation". Ulster traditionally has been viewed as an innovator and sector leader in curricula design and delivery. If this competitive edge is to be maintained the University's reputation as an innovative institution needs to be underscored and re-emphasised through infrastructural change and a re-envisioning of approaches to pedagogy, programme planning and design. A key focus, therefore, of the strategy will be to promote and foster creativity and innovation in curriculum design and delivery.

Within the context of the academic development and scholarly activity provided by its taught and research programmes, the University is committed to providing opportunities for its students to develop the skills, knowledge and personal attributes which will enhance their employability on graduation. Ulster places particular emphasis on integrating academic content with professional practice to consolidate and stimulate learning by permitting students the opportunity to reflect on the relevance of course content and to put what they have learnt into practice and to study for coterminous awards.

Currently some 48% of Ulster's full-time programmes have an integrated, work-based component and the University has one of the highest proportions of part-time students amongst Universities in the UK. Learning through work is a powerful tool for widening participation and employer engagement and addressing the regional and national government's agendas to improve skills and productivity in economically relevant subjects, in particular STEM skills, and to maximise innovation, enterprise and creativity. The University is also committed to the development of policies and procedures for the accreditation of prior and experiential learning and for work-based and work-place learning. Over the duration of the Strategy the University will promote learning, professionalism and employability through the integration of academic theory and relevant professional and vocational practice.

The University values all staff who support teaching and learning and is committed to rewarding, developing and supporting staff and acknowledges the need to recruit and retain the highest quality staff. It is conscious of the need to continually reinforce the parity of esteem which it accords to all three core activities, namely, teaching and learning, research and academic enterprise, and explore ways in which excellence in each of them and the synergies between them, may be demonstrated, recognised and rewarded.

The University also recognises that the good practice in teaching and learning currently demonstrated by many individuals and several subject areas is deserving of wider

dissemination. Improved mechanisms to share and further develop good practice locally, nationally and internationally will, therefore, be sought.

The University is also mindful of the demands which are imposed on staff's time in order to satisfy growing internal and external accountability requirements and to meet the accreditation requirements of Public, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies. During the course of the implementation of the Strategy, alternatives will be sought to reduce the burdens of bureaucracy (without compromising academic standards and quality) and to free-up academic and research staff time to focus on excelling at the core activities.

Finally, a supportive teaching and learning environment is crucial in providing students and staff with the support they need to learn and to teach. A welcoming environment promotes empowerment and confidence. It encourages inclusion and diversity and promotes experiences of inter-depending with different others. To achieve this a comprehensive and integrated approach to the quality of the student experience is required. Our most important interactions with students occur in teaching and advising. However interactions also occur in admissions, registration, student support, accommodations, finance etc. It is imperative that the encounters that students have with all employees are productive and courteous and personify Ulster's commitment to excellence and high quality.

The physical, social and technological environments are also central to the student learning experience. Well designed, flexible, technology-enabled learning spaces can help to energise, motivate and inspire learners and teachers. They encourage, facilitate and support collaborative and peer learning. Their flexibility aids personalisation and inclusion. In short, they are instrumental in changing practice. These are areas which will also need further improvement and investment over the next five years if the Strategy is to be successful.

### 3. CORE STRATEGIC AIMS

#### Strategic Aim 1

*To enhance the quality of the student learning experience.*

#### Key Supporting Objectives

- to provide a student-centred approach to teaching, learning and assessment;
- to provide increased opportunities for small group teaching;
- to provide a safe, yet challenging learning environment, that supports students to engage and learn with fellow students from diverse backgrounds and identities;
- to provide courses and programmes which are scholarship-informed, and where appropriate, research-informed, and taught and supervised by those engaged in research and/or scholarship;
- to focus on assessment as a means of promoting student learning as well as providing evidence of that learning;
- to provide opportunities for (peer) supplemental instruction targeted at high-risk modules and/or courses, not high-risk students;
- to develop personal tutoring/studies advice/peer mentoring systems which meet the needs of students;
- to enhance possibilities of EU and international exchanges and outreach for students;

- to ensure that learning resources in support of teaching and research degrees are accessible to all students;
- to develop and implement new ways of obtaining students' views on the quality of teaching.

#### **KEY RISKS**

- Failure to continue to achieve the national and international standards that demonstrate excellence in the University's learning opportunities
- Failure to secure the necessary quality and level of human and infrastructural resources to successfully implement the Strategy

#### **KEY INDICATIVE PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

- Student satisfaction ratings/surveys
- PSRB Accreditation visits
- QAA Audit
- Student Complaints
- External Examiner Reports

## Strategic Aim 2

*To target, recruit, support and retain a diverse range of students.*

### Key Supporting Objectives

- to promote outreach activities to raise aspirations of potential applicants and improve the number of applications from traditionally disadvantaged and excluded communities;
- to create a seamless transition between different forms of learning;
- to promote the development of students' key skills including numeracy and literacy to enhance their overall performance, their continuation and aid their progression into labour market employment and/or further study;
- to support inclusivity and diversity to underpin all aspects of the student experience, from pre-arrival to graduation;
- to improve student attendance since this is an indicator of student commitment and engagement;
- to facilitate transition and progression between HE and FE by continuing the promotion and development of progression pathways and agreements with collaborative partner institutions, in particular regional area-based Colleges;
- to increase the use of VLEs, mobile learning technologies, and blended learning approaches to make courses as accessible as possible;

### **KEY RISKS**

- Risk/Opportunity arising from failure to anticipate and respond to market demand from students, employers, government and other potential funders
- Failure to maintain and build upon the University's position as a sector leader in widening access to higher education
- Risk/Opportunity arising from University 's Collaborative Provision Strategy with the FE Sector
- Risk/Opportunity arising from impact of variable deferred fees and any further future deregulation.

### **KEY INDICATIVE PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

- Achievement against Academic Plan
- Student non-continuation and progression rates
- Employment Statistics
- Student Satisfaction ratings/surveys
- Percentage of students from low socio-economic groups

### **Strategic Aim 3**

*To promote and foster creativity in curriculum design and delivery.*

#### **Key Supporting Objectives**

- to identify and disseminate the means of promoting student creativity within subject curricula;
- to promote collaborative working within, and between disciplines, between staff and students;
- to promote multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary curriculum innovation and programme provision;
- to promote and disseminate effective innovations in the pedagogy of teaching;
- to encourage further risk-taking in curriculum development whilst at the same time conforming to the requirements of the academic infrastructure and accrediting and/or regulatory bodies;
- to ensure that appropriate recognition and (re)accreditation is maintained for all programmes, with positive outcomes from all external scrutiny and review;
- to enhance and extend the entrepreneurship agenda to include non-SET constituencies;
- to encourage and support curriculum innovations and other initiatives (eg Science Shop, Tutoring in Schools etc) designed to increase the employability of graduates;

- to remove administrative barriers to interdisciplinary development by continuing to develop and integrate University timetabling systems;
- to explore the possibility of developing a more flexible regulatory framework for academic standards and learning, teaching and assessment methods;
- to modify standards and quality assurance mechanisms and quality management procedures, as appropriate, to reflect the breadth of learning, teaching and assessment approaches being used;
- to keep under review established internal funding mechanisms in order to counter any perceived disincentives to collaboration between schools and faculties.

#### **KEY RISKS**

- Failure to motivate, facilitate and support staff to recognise the benefits of being creative and innovative.

#### **KEY INDICATIVE PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

- Employer Feedback
- Evaluation/Revalidation Reports
- New (and renewed) PSRB Accreditations
- Employment Statistics

## Strategic Aim 4

*To promote learning, professionalism and employability through the integration of academic theory and relevant professional and vocational practice.*

### Key Supporting Objectives

- to promote the development of the skills and attributes which will strengthen students' employability, including career management skills;
- to encourage curriculum innovations that are designed to increase professionalism and the employability of students and promote civic responsibilities within students;
- to widen and strengthen links with industry and local employers to meet local and regional skills needs;
- to increase and enhance work-related and work-based learning opportunities;
- to ensure that all students undertaking research degrees receive appropriate RSGST training and appropriate support;
- to broaden the skills and competences of research students in order to smooth the transition from doctoral study to subsequent employment;
- to embed PDP within all programmes;
- to monitor PDP in its role of promoting employability.

### **KEY RISKS**

- Risk/Opportunity arising from the need to maintain and build upon the University's reputation as a key provider of professional and vocational education.
- Risk/Opportunity arising from the effective management of quality assurance and accreditation issues, and in securing funding for the costs associated with more flexible and responsive design and delivery models.

### **KEY INDICATIVE PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

- Employer Feedback
- PSRB Accreditation
- Graduate Surveys
- Employment Statistics
- PDP/RSGST Uptake
- Percentage of programmes with work-based component

## 4. CROSS-CUTTING CORE STRATEGIC AIMS

### Cross-Cutting Support Aim 1

*To provide a supportive environment, in which teaching is recognised, valued and rewarded for all those who teach and support learning in the University.*

#### Key Supporting Objectives

- to enhance the teaching skills of newly appointed and experienced academic and other support staff by providing appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities;
- to promote and disseminate pedagogic developments locally and nationally by supporting the activities of the two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLS), the work of the Forum for Innovation in Learning and Teaching Support, and other related initiatives and activities (eg Subject Centres);
- to facilitate staff in developing and implementing e-learning through technical and pedagogical training and support;
- to encourage and recognise excellence in teaching and learning through awarding University Distinguished Learning and Teaching Fellowship Awards, and supporting actual and potential National Teaching Fellowship award winners;
- to ensure that teaching is properly recognised in staff remuneration and considerations for advancement/promotion (including readerships and professorships).

**KEY RISKS**

- Lack of buy-in to the Strategy by staff at all levels
- Risk/Opportunity arising from University's performance in recognising and rewarding all staff who contribute to the achievement of excellence in support of teaching and learning

**KEY INDICATIVE PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

- Staff Surveys
- Developmental Appraisal and Review Uptake
- Compliance with CPD Policy for academic and non-academic staff
- Annual Promotion and Advancement Statistics
- National Teaching Fellowship Awards

## Cross-Cutting Supporting Aim 2

*To enhance the quality of the physical and social learning environments for students and staff.*

### Key Supporting Objectives

- to continue to improve those processes, practices and functions that matter most to local, international, research and on-line students;
- to review space-management procedures to ensure effective decision-making processes;
- to accord the provision of social learning spaces a high priority in new designs and refurbishments;
- to progressively embed technology into learning and teaching spaces through the adoption of mobile, connected, support and visual and interactive learning;
- to review on an annual basis the achievement of service standards identified in the student and associated subsidiary charters;
- to ensure the continuing relevance of institutional-based technologies and support, and identify opportunities for greater flexibility in accommodating technologies preferred by learners;
- to enhance and extend ongoing efforts to mainstream equality and good relations by promoting positive attitudes to disabled people, and encouraging participation by disabled students and staff in University life.

**KEY RISKS**

- Lack of commitment to the Strategy by staff at all levels
- Failure to achieve an appropriate balance in investment in physical capital infrastructure and technology
- Failure to identify and manage the funds necessary to achieve the Strategy

**KEY INDICATIVE PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

- Staff Satisfaction Surveys
- Student Satisfaction Surveys
- Good relations surveys
- Equality and Equal Opportunities Monitoring Data

## **5. MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

The specific objectives as outlined in the Strategy will be reviewed and updated on an annual basis. This process of review and updating will include an assessment of the extent to which the objectives are being met and the introduction of further objectives, the latter reflecting both internally-generated objectives and the need to respond to governmental policy changes and/or initiatives. Implementation of the Teaching and Learning Strategy (2008/09-2012/13) will be monitored on an annual basis through the development of detailed annual action plans by the University Teaching and Learning Committee, which reports directly to the Senate. Responsibilities and actions devolved to faculties and/or directorates/departments will be monitored and evaluated by the University Teaching and Learning Committee through its consideration of structured annual reports from Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees and other relevant central departments.

The University Teaching and Learning Committee is responsible for reviewing the overall effectiveness of the Teaching and Learning Strategy (2008/09-2011/12) towards the end of the five-year period.

## **6. NEXT STEPS**

The Action Plan for 2008/09 will be finalised and presented to the University Teaching and Learning Committee in September 2008. During the academic year the Plan will be monitored and reported to the University Teaching and Learning Committee in September 2009. In each academic year thereafter similar planning, monitoring and evaluation arrangements will apply.

The Teaching and Learning Strategy (2008/09-2012/13) will inform the preparation and update of other relevant University strategies, and in particular, the Widening Participation, Collaborative Provision and International Strategies. Relevant risk

registers (at corporate, departmental and faculty level) will be updated to reflect the risks and opportunities arising from the new Strategy.

**Denise McAlister**  
**May 2008**

## Guiding Principles

In promoting the Teaching and Learning Strategy (2008/09-2012/13), the University acknowledges its key role in enhancing the experience of University of Ulster students. The Teaching and Learning Strategy, therefore, embodies a number of guiding principles which the University advocates and upholds for students studying at the institution, namely:

- that the learning and teaching opportunities afforded to students should challenge students intellectually, encourage reflective learning, and enable them to take their place and be at ease with 'diverse others' locally and internationally;
- that the learning and teaching is designed to develop the subject-specific and generic transferable skills necessary for academic success, future employment and active citizenship;
- that students should appreciate the importance of demonstrating high standards of academic integrity and ethical conduct in every aspect of their studies, research and professional practice;
- that the learning and teaching environment and the delivery of programmes and research student training is as supportive and inclusive as is reasonably possible;
- that it encourages approaches to teaching and assessment that foster student engagement, together with an awareness and understanding of the skills and attributes that they already possess and are developing;
- that curricula, teaching, learning and assessment methods take account of the diverse learning support needs of the student body;

- that in valuing lifelong learning deep approaches to learning are fostered which enable students to continue to grow, and develop on graduation into their chosen careers;
- that value is attached, and encouragement given, to scholarship in teaching, and the scholarship of teaching with staff integrating their own research and professional practice into all aspects of curriculum delivery, leading to research-informed teaching and evidence-based effective pedagogic practice;
- the creation of an atmosphere that provides a safe environment for experimentation and risk-taking for curriculum development, for teaching and assessment practices and for students;
- that in welcoming and celebrating the diversity of its staff and student body the University will endeavour to ensure that for all programmes of study, both classroom based and on-line, these guiding principles will apply.