1. Introduction
This is the second commentary provided to the University of Ulster on its Teaching and Learning Strategy 2008/09 – 2012/13.

It is a qualitative perspective from someone outside the University and daily involvement in its activities. The University has its own internal processes for monitoring of spend and formal evaluation of progress against an annual Operational Plan. The methodology used for the commentary is based upon:

1. Desk-based review of documents provided.
2. A round of semi-structured face to face meetings with a set of questions (previously circulated).
3. The wider policy context that the University is operating within.
4. The previous commentary.

The University of Ulster, as with other UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), has been investing significantly in its teaching and learning, one of its three core activities, with internal spend being directed by external considerations such as the QAA, HEFCE circulars, DELNI, and internal priorities, part driven, by the National Student (Satisfaction) Survey (NSS), e.g. Assessment and Feedback for 2011/12 and 12/13. The purpose of this co-ordinated activity has been to support the ‘long and complex activity of embedding initiatives to enhance’ the quality of the student (learning) experience.

The commentary seeks to help the University of Ulster reflect on the effectiveness of the implementation of the strategy, and the impact of the work that has, and is being undertaken. The commentary also reflects back views and comments from the round of meetings with students and staff, not only on progress to date with the current strategy, but also on what remains to be done to meet and embed the current objectives, the lessons that should be learned from the current strategy, main changes that should be made in the new, and recommendations for the new strategy 2013/14 -. Comments are informed by wider ‘mainland’ (UK) developments of the HEA, JISC etc including recent research and evidence.

A number of suggestions are made on which the University is invited to reflect.

2. Strategic Planning and Process
Strategic Aims; Key Supporting Objectives; Key Performance Indicators
Emanating from the Corporate Plan, there appears to be a tight alignment between the aims of the strategy and the key supporting objectives as noted in the previous.

1 “the deliberate steps by an institution to bring about continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students”, QAA
commentary. The process to develop the strategy has led to strong ‘buy-in’ and ownership, important in the annual implementation as noted in the previous report.

3. Implementation of the strategy

Importantly, the strategy has responded to changes in the external and internal environment and has been progressed through an annual cycle of planning and reporting. From its Annual Planning, and from the Faculty Annual Implementation Monitoring; ‘Key Teaching and Learning Priorities, Activities and Performance Measures 2009/10’ and 2010/11 reports seen, it is clear that the University of Ulster is very responsive as an organization.

These reports (and the ones for the central departments) contain a considerable amount of new activities balanced between externally driven agendas such as the QAA’s Key Information Set (KIS) and Code of Practice for External Examining; ‘local’ (DELNI) context driven i.e. around widening access and participation, employability and sustainability as well as internally-driven ones such as those linked to the student experience, viz, the ‘Ulster Principles of Assessment and Feedback for Learning’. Activities from the previous year that are continuing are clearly identified as “Ongoing Action”.

The Faculty (and central department) performance reports provide a structure to report progress annually against KPIs. From those reviewed previously and for 2011/12, the Faculty (and central department) reporting is potentially problematic.

The layout of the reporting format appears to have changed over the years and although it has remained the same for 2010/11 as it was for 2009/10, the reason for the change, from using colours to indicate progress, to a ‘shading’ format, to an outsider, is not apparent and has not added anything.

There are strengths in the clarity of reporting enabling the reader to understand where a Faculty is and how far it has progressed against the ‘Faculty Performance Measure’:

- ‘All Schools have implemented the revised COP’ (p18 ADBE);
- ‘Action completed. Retention targets established for 2011/12 and disseminated to course teams’ (p20 FADBE);
- ‘The Faculty improved its semester 1 attrition rate by 1.4% on last year’s data. The Schools of Architecture and Design and the Built Environment achieved 2.2% and 2.4% improvement which are positive results’ (p21);
- ‘There was a 7.5% increase in the numbers of first year students passing at first attempt.’ (p 22);
- ‘No information was available Jan ‘12/ (p24).

There are however, a more than desirable number where (as an external reader) it is not evident exactly where a Faculty is and how far it has progressed over the year being reported on as there is no quantification of progress, an issue raised in the previous report:

- ‘…indicators are that revised Faculty attendance policy has improved student attendance’ (p20 ADBE). How much by and whether it was or wasn’t acceptable is not clear;
- ‘… all three Schools reported that courses were managing to maintain satisfactory retention targets …’ (p20). To an external reader it is not known what is ‘satisfactory’!
Furthermore, due to a number of factors such as ‘the centre’s ‘deliberate leaving to the Faculties to interpret how they will implement and respond annually to key agendas (a good thing) and variation in the language and the different words used for reporting, it is not only inherently difficult but also difficult, for an external reader, to get an overview of progress (a summative assessment) at the institutional level. Attempting to aggregate the results of the reports, for example using the ‘traffic light’ system would provide a more holistic overview of progress against the four Strategic Aims and two Cross-Cutting Aims.

4. Student voice: Engagement and Involvement

**Communication** From the round of meetings there was ambivalence in the reporting about communication: that it was better (by some) – and commended (by one student) - and that it was weak (by other students). It was acknowledged the University is trying hard to communicate. However, what was clear was that there is a problem of over communicating and “everyone feels ‘E-Bombed’”. There was strong annoyance from the students at the use of Rich Text Format (RTF) with its limitations.

**Engagement** Engagement (in different ways) is an important factor in student retention. Taken broadly, the University was commended by students for the range of things it gives students – and ways of involving them, from societies, sporting things, supporting health and training etc.

Perceived support from the University varied across campuses with a good working relationship with the Provost at Coleraine; Magee was “very different and visits seen as tokenistic but development has been prioritized to support it” and students in Belfast reported they didn’t “feel comfortable as foyer space was used for corporate functions”. Part-time and distance learners were not represented in the students met.

Students acknowledged however, that they had a responsibility too: “the Student Voice could be louder … the temperament varies across campuses”. The rotation of meetings by the Student Union around campuses ensures they have a good overall picture of all campuses.

In regard to other issues of engagement, students reported they had had some involvement in the work on transition to university, such as involvement in the Student Charter (“but no-one reads it”). There were concerns however, as noted in the previous commentary, that where students had been asked their views there was a sense they never got a response back, i.e. if their views had been acted upon. Students also reported some lecturers were resistant to change implying they had a particular (‘traditional) view of the staff: student relationship.

5. Student Experience

Strong evidence emerged from both the Student Sabbatical Officers and also the students that the student experience had improved over the period of the strategy but most noticeably recently.
In regard to Year 1 Students interviewed were very aware of

(i) how overwhelming university was at the start and that there is an issue to get new students to speak out in the first place and overcome their reticence to do so.
(ii) how year 1 and year 2 were very different.

They reported there was student-lecturer support (“like a partnership”) from the very start of semester 1 and that some lecturers made time to tell students to ‘go for things’. Students seemed to think lecturers were helping them much more in Year 2 – “they go the extra mile for you” (in year 2) and that they had much more personal contact. Whilst it was university policy to sign in for attendance, practice varied and there were issues with signing in and the use (and abuse) of ‘Turning points’ technology handheld sets.

Students liked the idea of small Group Teaching – a known predictor of learning gain2 but it had mixed responses with one student saying he had had none.

A student wheelchair user reported there has been a big improvement over the four years in accessibility and support (“not necessarily due to the strategy”) and that access to the timetable, e.g. through Blackboard had improved.

Asked about the University's work around the first year, the Teaching and Learning Co-ordinators reported there had been good progress reflected in better retention resulting from attendance monitoring and sharing of good practice. The group also noted students needed to be told why they had to sign in and that the work on ‘Early leavers’ was resource intensive.

General progress
In addition to the above comments linked to year 1/2, students also reported:

- There had been a lot of improvements in the last year especially from the Student Union and between Schools and Faculties;
- The University had involved them more in quality processes and this had been very valuable and student involvement in revalidation was seen as very positive: “it has raised some interesting issues”;
- A marked improvement in getting feedback to students (online, in class or in seminars) – within 3 weeks - and that the majority of lecturers were good (some exceptional) but that there were still some who were poor and didn’t give any feedback (Teaching and Learning Co-ordinators said that from the academic perspective the drive on assessment and feedback was being successful as the Faculties had been given ownership of it, it had been resourced, it had been bottom up, and there were structures to support it);
- that Employability was seen to be critical and “the links to industry are one of the best things the uni has” and Guest speakers and evening events much appreciated;

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2 See e.g. Dimensions of quality and Implications for ‘Dimensions of quality’ Gibbs, G, HEA research series (2012)
- The EDGE Award – “an extra thing for going the extra mile” such as being a volunteer was very good, available to all 2nd and 3rd year students and was seen as very good as were workplacements;
- that they knew about the HEAR and what it was for;
- Class Reps were working particularly well and ‘much more switched on’ reporting not only issues that need addressing but balancing them with positive comments as well “but some lecturers were not communicative”. (There was concern some reps were only doing it for their CV and were not active and that the University should monitor this). Having an induction and getting all reps together was good;
- All agreed the Study Advisors were a good idea; are mandatory at Magee, variable at Jordanstown and varied in general;
- Personal Tutoring is very very good and is so beneficial. They can be sent a text or emailed. Whilst lecturers were generally more than happy to answer questions, in one survey of students 90% hadn’t asked because they were embarrassed;
- More of an open door policy with lecturers;
- The way they are graded was better (!);
- Big positive change is the focus on developing skills.

**Postgraduates:** The Sabbatical Officers and students did not have much to say about postgraduates! Other comments from the meetings stated they are ‘the lifeblood’ of the university and that the university is doing well in terms of PhD students and the support given to them. Postgraduate students had reported positively in the last institutional audit.

6. **Supporting the strategy implementation**

**CHEP**

Implementing Teaching and Learning Strategies requires pro-active support. CHEP has a key role to play in academic development supporting the academic staff ‘at the coal face’ in delivering the annual targets, changing practice ‘on the ground’ and changing the culture especially given that each year additional activities are added in the annual faculty plans to existing work.

Units such as CHEP in the earlier phase of being established inevitably have issues of ‘gaining traction’. It is clear that having ‘got off to a slow start’ it has, despite its Head being absent, made good progress this year e.g. the CHEP PG Research “has helped staff do research proposals and is starting to be successful”. It is clear from the annual reporting that some Faculties are making efforts to increase engagement with CHEP, strategically at the Faculty level.

Given the importance of CHEP to the implementation of the strategy it is not so obvious that this effort to engage is being done consistently or with the desired outcomes. Its successes are mixed, as borne out in the two annual performance review documents and from the comments from the face to face meetings where it was reported that the “mandatory and auditable” Peer-Supported Review Scheme is not working and Research Institute staff were not engaging. Of those aware of CHEP there was a view that it was seen as staff development whilst its focus should be *academic* and *professional* development; it should be using internal sharing of best practice not bringing in externals and that more resource was needed to support
it. Furthermore, the Professional Standards Framework is not being engaged with but it was suggested it would be in the future. Whilst the Research/Scholarship-informed teaching was in the annual Faculty reports, as a target, there were no references to this (in the 2011/12 Faculty reports), and in the meetings it was reported not to have taken off due to an overemphasis on Research and the Research Institutes\(^3\). There was also confusion about it and “Jo typical at the chalkface was unlikely to be engaging with it” and CHEP. In regard to its engagement with postgraduates it was not effective from the research point of view and PhD students had tried to avoid it: “it didn’t have a good press”!

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The use of technology plays an important part in the strategy, student learning, and teaching. Student comments included:
- Despite shortcomings ‘the uni is getting there’ and one lecturer was using Youtube;
- Students viewed the university as having a poor understanding of social media and reported there were 15 Facebook pages but there should only be one. There were mixed views on the use and value of Twitter;
- A strong view that personal emails were preferred and not the university one;
- No access to wireless; can’t print wirelessly;
- Students wanted their lecture notes on Blackboard before a lecture “but old schoolers” wouldn’t let them;
- Students were not really aware of the new online Study Skills Resource;
- Support for students with learning difficulties was particularly good if you went and asked for it;
- No social space in Coleraine;
- The Student Portal and Library website was very confusing and badly designed – “daunting”. Students find it inaccessible and "Study Skills is buried". It got the ‘thumbs down’!

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

- There was concern about ISD and IT systems not talking to each other and some ‘real disconnects’ and negative impact on premium MBA students where accounts were blocked.

FINANCE/RESOURCE

- There is a tension round the control of university finance, and wanting to reduce staff budgets, with Research Institutes being able to carry over and use monies for ‘special cases’ and to pay for externals to come in or PhD students to teach. This was seen to be an issue.

7. Lessons

From the round of meetings a number of possible lessons that the University could learn from were raised:

By students
- There was a sense the University is not supporting the students or is expecting too much from the Student Union and they would like more support from the university (the door is open to developing the students as partners theme);

\(^3\) This is consonant with reported research - (See Competing research agendas, Gibbs, G; p 38)
Importantly, there is a need to ensure the curriculum and all courses/programmes are current and staff are up to date: students cited a number of examples where what they were learning in class was out of date (which they had found out through placement); the software used was 8 years old and other examples. In contrast, a new animation course was very good and up to date;

- The structure of the academic week could be improved – ‘spread or condensed’? e.g. Thursday all students are in 9.0 – 7.0 and Wednesdays and Fridays 9.0 – 11.0. It could be spread out to 2 structured days!
- Study Advice should be mandatory; it is so beneficial;
- To improve the message about Peer Mentoring. Students were not clear about it or what it was. Students never used it;
- The University could use Social media to communicate as it provides the ideal medium to report University successes to students.

By staff

- Consult staff more. Ownership and buy in is not always good. The new Employability and Marketing Department’s new 5 year strategy appeared to have had little consultation and yet potentially significant impact on teaching and learning: a senior member of staff said, “I was just given a copy of it”;
- Retention has been a major and very significant issue. The continuation of interviewing early leavers was questioned in terms of the trade-off between continuing to interview them (resource intensive) and what more could be learnt? There was a mixed response to the value of the interviews: on the one hand it was reported a lot of analysis had been done but no key conclusions reached but on the other hand there was a categorical answer that 2 things had been learned, students left because they had made the wrong choice (for whatever reasons) or because of personal circumstances;
- Differentiate between priorities and on-going actions; (It was reported that Working Groups generate new strategies and work and it’s not clear how they integrate. Workload becomes a real issue. “There is so much stuff coming down, there is overload”);
- Develop an institutional approach to undergraduate research: “It is currently difficult to get students to do research and ‘get dirty handling data’ at undergraduate level”.
- Speed up groups looking at IT: they were reported as being very slow.

By the reviewer (and more generally)

- The ‘innovations’ aspect is not drawn out clearly in the Research Strategy nor the focus on creativity in the curriculum in the Teaching and Learning strategy. Developing a dialogue and identifying the synergies would be of value.
- Ensure strategies are congruent and aligned; the new IT Strategy 2010-2015 may need realignment to support the new Learning and Teaching Strategy given the immense and rapid changes in technology;
- The number of Key Supporting Objectives might benefit from being reduced;
- To make the annual targets SMARTer with the expectation that most will have a quantifiable figure in the annual report (Key Faculty Actions);
- To reflect where the responsibility for setting, monitoring and reporting some areas of activity best lies – with the centre or Faculties? e.g. should there be ‘universal’ institution-wide targets, or Faculty, targets such as Faculty retention targets? (see p 20FADBE - “To improve retention rates, course retention targets for courses will be established across the Faculty (2011/12)”;
- In regard to CHEP, ‘Central’ units invariably have a legitimacy issue with Faculties/Schools often arising from differences and disjoints in priorities (the Faculty’s cf those of the ‘Centre’) and issues such as time or lack of Time.
all, the key issue of increasing engagement with staff ‘at the chalkface’ is cracking the ‘what’s in it for me?’ by busy academics who have their academic work, teaching, research and administration. Professional development will be driven by ‘messages from the centre’ and perceived relative value around Research vs Excellence in Teaching and Learning vs ‘3rd Mission’ vs ‘Internationalisation’

- There appears to be an issue with the number and frequency of changes with the Teaching and Learning Co-ordinators!

8. What should continue
The following it was suggested should continue.

- Broadly, Strategic Aims 1, 2, 3, and, Cross-Cutting Aim 1 and 2;
- The strategic aims on research, in part as a vehicle to enhance quality;
- Developing the notion that innovation is more than just being about business but rather a way of seeing the world;
- “Social learning and ICT in support of that and the pilots DM doing”.

9. What should be dropped
This is an important issue since year-on-year items have been added to the workload of Faculties and staff. This is a matter of concern, and reflected in views about workloads and levels of stress. Although more difficult to answer, responses included dropping:

- Overteaching and over assessing as reported from External Examiners;
- Overlap of provision across campuses e.g. psychology in Coleraine and Magee and staff have to travel. Computing is offered on 3 campuses; could save on time and stress.

It was noted that some things would drop from the Teaching and Learning Strategy since it would be relocated into the new Widening Access Strategy and reported separately. Likewise, areas of overlap such as Access and Distributed Learning, and CPPD (especially important in Lifelong Learning and with Teaching and Learning) would drop off.

10. Overall Assessment (of Institutional Performance) and Conclusions
There is evidence in the documentation, and from two rounds of face to face meeting that the University of Ulster has had, during the period 2008/09 – 2012/13, a very focused strategy for its Teaching and Learning based on four Strategic Aims and two Cross-Cutting Aims: the structure with limited aims is uncomplicated and clear, reflects the priorities of the University and is worthy of note. The process of developing the strategy through a thorough iterative consultation process, as previously noted, can be viewed as being in the best practice mould, and importantly a key contributor to the success of the strategy. The strategy has been, in essence, an enhancement strategy, and staff in the face to face meetings saw it as successful overall: (the University) has “come a long way in this strategy”; “Everything around Learning and Teaching in the institution is very well managed; “the strategy processes are very sound”; “there is frequent monitoring and reviewing of the strategy and Denise keeps a very close eye on implementation through the Teaching and Learning Committee and reporting of the strategy”.

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The outcomes and impacts are more difficult to assess in any coherent way. It is problematic to provide a precise quantification of overall progress against the Strategic Aims with the current reporting method as previously noted.

Faculties appear to be moving at different speeds as regards implementation and embedding, as is not surprising. The University is identifying areas that require action (in line with UK practice\(^4\)) such as one school that was 5% below its NSS national subject benchmark.

What is clear is that the university has made considerable efforts to improve the focus of the university’s activities onto the student and learning, strengthening the student voice, engagement and representation. This is evidenced through the student survey on the quality of Teaching; Class Representation module (to get student feedback); involvement of the students in work on assessment and feedback etc. The Sabbatical Officers’ and the students’ feedback above indicates, that particularly in the Academic Year 2012/13 the enhancement work in the Strategy is having a clear, positive, impact on the student (learning) experience.

11. Future Considerations (Recommendations)

Resulting from the current strategy and commentary above, the University may wish to:

- Make the final annual performance reports for 2012/13 provide summative reporting and an overall assessment of each activity against the key performance indicators. This would provide an overview of progress;
- Maintain the broad current direction: “The ‘old’ strategy was very positive … we should keep moving with core elements to achieve it” (But it needs a refresh);
- Reflect on the metrics used to ensure the experience students have across the campuses, in partner institutions and in ‘offshore’ (mainland/overseas) operations is (broadly) comparable;
- Look carefully at the number of agendas and realistically assesses how many it can move forward at any one time;
- Ensure students in partner institutions are given every opportunity to progress on to the University of Ulster. The methods of engaging with students from partner institutions is an area to consider given partnerships are a central element of the University’s strategic work into which a considerable amount of resource and effort is put. The visibility of the partner colleges (including Queen Anne Business School) should be increased on the University’s website and other communication channels;
- Continue with the increasingly positive student focus and on giving more responsibility over to, and engaging students more, i.e. responding to their request to have increased student involvement in the University of Ulster’s educational enterprise. It may wish to carefully consider the platform/s it uses, how it is using students (the purpose of the involvement needs to be clearly explained to the students) and being clear why they are in committees. (Students were of the view the strategy should be ‘Learning and Teaching’ rather than ‘Teaching and Learning’; the Teaching and Learning Co-ordinators the opposite). Overall, continue and develop further the ‘students as partners’ theme.
- Consider the language of the strategy since it is not accessible to the students;

\(^4\) See e.g. 6. Reviewing teaching quality indicators annually p22; Implications of ‘Dimensions of quality’ in a market environment op cit
- Ensure that students receive clear responses and feedback when their views are sought on what action will be taken as a result of their feedback (This is often along the lines of ‘You said …’ – ‘We did …’);
- Give careful consideration to how currency of the curriculum is maintained and proximity of staff to the realities of the ever rapid changes to those work environments where their disciplines are located and applied;
- Consider /rethink how they communicate /have more targeted communication (with both staff and students);
- Roll out workplacements to all courses and students (as policy) thereby providing equity of provision;
- How much value and what new can be learnt from further interviewing of early leavers beyond oversight monitoring;
- Build on CHEP’s growing successes but note it does need to do much more work to show its value. Consider how far its orientation is ‘staff development’ and how far ‘academic and professional’. The University may reflect on:
  (i) the value of having a ‘hub and spoke’ (centre-Faculty) model whereby School/Faculty champions with particular expertise/interests were seconded in to CHEP thereby driving engagement and providing School/Faculty based legitimacy and respect.
  (ii) The purpose of the distinguished teaching awards, and the value to reorient them, away from individuals to (the effective operation of) ‘Teaching Programme Teams’ and/or outstanding degree programmes in line with recent research5 to support improvement in the NSS;
- Develop a coherent approach - engaging students in the discussion - to investigate the opportunities, use and deployment of technology/social media to rethink the relationship between the physical and virtual learning environment to support both cross campus and (virtual) social learning. Most especially, the thinking should take on board a location independent model i.e. it should not be focused only on the campus/es but take on board delivering a learning environment and support to ‘offshore’ partners such as in the Middle East or elsewhere as well. The University will benefit from considering the philosophy and practice of Open Educational Resources (OER) for teaching and learning (as opposed to closed systems such as Blackboard) and aligning its development to wider UK and global developments such as Cloud based, and the opportunities recently announced by the Open University’s Future Learning initiative for UK HEIs to buy into. Within the above develop a discourse on digital literacy;
- Review how it is communicating not only with staff but particularly students through social media and where the ‘Student Portal and Library website’ fits;

2. THE NEW STRATEGY (2013/14 - )
This section provides a short commentary on the new strategy for the University of Ulster.

1.1 Managing Institutional Change/ Strategic Change Management
Managing strategic change is now arguably one of the biggest challenges facing UK HEIs. It was reported that structured change had been defined and now needed managing. The University may wish to

5 Impact of teaching development programmes in higher education, Parsons, D HEA research series (2012)
consider the value of situating the new strategy within a developmental framework/theme, or “overall change strategy”.

- **Business operation**
  Organizational efficiency is paramount in the current climate of resource constraint. The interlinkages between structures, processes, strategy, operational plans and how staff will deliver the strategy require careful attention.

  There are a number of considerations regarding lean operation that the University may wish to consider:
  - What is centrally managed and what devolved to Faculty;
  - The volume of work;
  - The overhead on the number of working groups and other fora.
  - Reflect on an explicit approach to improving quality on a reducing resource base;

- **Business intelligence / Monitoring Strategic Change**
  The case for robust business intelligence based on timely, accurate, institutional data and evidence could not be stronger in the current environment. The current annual reporting format is not – to an external reader – readily digestible, and from the management point of view, of concern. There is no accurate, quantifiable, clear topology of how the implementation of the strategy has been across the campuses – Magee, Coleraine etc.

1.2 **Brand**

  “(We should) Define our brand unashamedly. We should be about what we are and what we are proud of. Our students are very mixed. We must know our market that we are serving. We have morphed and we have an identity issue”! – inter alia – clarify the University’s USP, what makes it unique, distinctive and its market niche.

1.3 **The University’s value proposition:**

  From discussions, with staff (limited admittedly), it is apparent that whilst the University has three routes for promotion, and one member of staff was promoted on her work in teaching and learning, there remain (as in many UK HEIs), issues around the perceived and relative values accorded to staff undertaking research and in the Research Institutes and those “on another island” in teaching and learning. “Just because staff are not in the REF they should not be considered/feel less valuable”. Questions could be asked: is teaching and learning undervalued in comparison to research? Is teaching over recognised and over valued or under valued? The development of a shared culture that arose from internal debates and engagement of staff in what the relationship means between scholarship, research and teaching\(^6\) and the application of that to supporting learning in the University of Ulster, would be highly beneficial: where is an individual academic’s perception of that value?

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\(^6\) *As has been taking place on the mainland for some time*
1.4 Main Opportunities

The new strategy may well benefit from taking account of the opportunities with the parallel development of the new campus such as:

- Being centrally located being open to our community and “having it flow in”;
- delivering a new campus and having a new inspirational learning environment and using the space to support new approaches to learning and having ‘Research-transition’ spaces;
- Re-thinking how learning will be taking place;
- Generating cross faculty interactions at new interfaces of interaction⁷.
- Bringing the proximity of employer partnerships linked to the EDGE Award closer (and facilitating workplacements);
- Adopting a Change Academy model to support the relocation by leveraging the experience gained in the Retention Change Academy thereby getting the new campus off with some oomph!

The new strategy presents the University with a number of opportunities:

- To (re-) clarify what the purpose of the strategy is - to provide an enhancement to the student learning experience? To provide a “coherent overall approach to the development of quality in teaching, in the new market environment” ensuring quality enhancement initiatives are focused on “variables known to improve student learning gain”⁸ or ..?
- To reflect on and take account of recent research, especially Implications of ‘Dimensions of quality in a market environment’ identifying the quality variables of value to the University of Ulster and focus the strategy on improving these;
- Strengthen the students as partners/students as change agents theme and pro-actively involve them in policy and strategy development, co-curriculum development, in processes (e.g. quality such as validations/reviews), and key School/Faculty and Institutional level partnership activities such as engagement as active learners and engagement in quality processes

“Students are a much underutilised resource …Improving students’ effectiveness as learners has more impact on performance and learning gains than does improving teaching or improving curricula”;

- Improving and sharpening the dovetailing around the University’s key agendas/ strategic areas i.e. research, widening access (and internationalisation) and teaching and learning. (It appears portfolios are currently shifting and overlap issues being resolved and lines of management reporting); synergies need to be sought and articulated jointly and having an opening statement in each strategy indicating how it interlinks with other key strategies would be useful;

⁷ See for example "Building Bridges for Regeneration: negotiating language and culture change to support cross-School development in a ‘hothouse’ environment of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial activity" (The University of Wales, Newport)
⁸ Dimensions of quality in a market environment, Gibbs, G p 20 + p42)
• Reframing, clarifying, drawing out and jointly articulating the synergies between research, scholarship and learning and teaching⁹;

• Given the new QAA code Chapter B4: Student support, learning resources¹⁰ and careers education, information and guidance will have more prominence in future Institutional Reviews ensure there is a clear student support strategy linking directly to the Teaching and Learning Strategy;

• Locate the relative and desired orientation between, arguably an old paradigm, of students and employability where they study at university “to get a job” with a new one, of students and entrepreneurship, and creating the jobs and work of the future;

• Consider the interplay between innovation and creativity;

• Be smart (er) in strengthening the alignment between internal agendas with external agencies, especially the HEA/Change Academy/Leadership Foundation, VITAE etc to actively seek and leverage external support, opportunities and funding. Examples might include:

  (i) Investing in and developing academic leadership to support desired change;

  (ii) Building on the important work in the ‘Ulster Principles of Assessment and Feedback For Learning’ take advantage of the HEA’s new A Marked Improvement Transforming assessment in higher education programme and benchmark Ulster’s position using the ‘Assessment Review Tool’¹¹

• Improve communication. The University needs an internal ‘marketing’/publicity strategy to constantly communicate, and convey its actual values (and not only espoused);

• Bolster CHEP, for example better aligning CHEP funded projects through calls/bids to strategic objectives (If this is already happening it is not apparent from a reading of the documents reviewed);

• Supporting and engaging academic staff more who are under increasing pressure and be able to answer the ‘what’s in it for me?’ question (lack of engagement attributed to the lack of time may be considered a reflection of an individual’s prioritization of time and perceived value of use of time)!

• To further embrace and exploit new ways for learning and teaching and the use of new technology/social media; look at the opportunities and use the concept of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to build on the pilots/experiments in recent years of teaching from one campus and having students at others and develop a more coherent model of support and delivery for ‘remote’ students.

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⁹ See for example Linking research and teaching in Wales: Developing undergraduate research and inquiry; Linking discipline-based research with teaching to benefit student learning

¹⁰ “investing heavily in learning resources reduces the need for teaching and reduces overall costs without compromising quality” p19 Implications of ‘Dimensions of quality’ in a market environment, Gibb, G.

¹¹ http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/assessment/A_Marked_Improvement.pdf
1.5 Barriers
The University is invited to consider potential barriers:
- That staff either have no actual or sense of ‘space’ to be able to undertake additional work and feel under increasing pressure (i.e. workload/contract issues).

1.6 Risks
- Of overly investing in ‘bricks and mortar’ in the new campus and not in the virtual;
- The transitional period needs managing;
- That existing aspects of the current organization and campus are transplanted to the new campus and stifle or misplace opportunity;
- That in the new strategy staff do not either buy into or understand it. (“The strategy is seen ‘so much as in a box’ There must be a common language to understand it because depending on which box you are in means something different”);
- There are no consistent messages coming down about research and teaching and learning. (“The message needs to be that the two are equally valued and this is a serious problem for ‘Jo typical’ staff. It is worse now because of the pressure of the REF”);
- The gap (a healthy one) between what is being taught and what is happening in the real world must be reduced and staff must be up to date on the literature/leading/researching in their own fields
- Of an overpacked curriculum;
- Of not pushing internationalisation in a global world.

1.7 Policy context Northern Ireland: DELNI
The HE Strategy: Graduating to Success sets the strategic context for the University of Ulster’s new strategy. The following were highlighted as important:
- Fee paying students will expect more;
- From the Widening Access point of view there is a need to resource smaller ‘chunks of learning’ and expand Foundation degrees;
- Internationalisation and outward student mobility increased;
- Employability must feature, especially the post graduate aspect and work based learning opportunities should be included in every course;
- Support internationally excellent and world-leading research and development;
- Build upon and increase sustainable knowledge transfer activities;

Gabriel Jezierski
Cardiff, December 2012
Appendix A  2011/12 Reports

Strategic Aim 1:  Frequency of reporting on ACTIVITIES (All Faculties)
Strategic Aim 2: Frequency of reporting on ACTIVITIES (All Faculties)

REPORTED NUMBER OF TIMES

- Retention and Progression
- Academic/Study Skills
- CPPD
- Review FTUG
- Monitoring Attendance
- Timetabling
- Other

REPORTED NUMBER OF TIMES

Series 1

RETENTION AND PROGRESSION
APL
REVIEW FTUG
MONITORING ATTENDANCE
TIMETABLING
CPPD
ACADEMIC/STUDY SKILLS
OTHER
Strategic Aim 3:  Frequency of reporting on ACTIVITIES (All Faculties)

Strategic Aim 4:  Frequency of reporting on ACTIVITIES (All Faculties)
Cross-Cutting Aim 1: Frequency of reporting on ACTIVITIES (All Faculties)

Cross-Cutting Aim 2: Frequency of reporting on progress (All Faculties)