

University College Cork Strategic Planning Procedure

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1.0 Reference Documents

1. Universities Act 1997
2. Conducting a SWOT Analysis (Appendix A and on Quality Promotion Website <http://www.ucc.ie/en/qpu/guidelines/sar/>)
3. Governance of Irish Universities, 2019 <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/05/Code-of-Governance-for-Irish-Universities-14.10.19-digital-1.pdf>

2.0 Benefits

Strategic planning:

- Provides a road-map to show where the university is going and how to get there
- Establishes a shared direction and focus
- Highlights and addresses organisational needs
- Sets realistic objectives that are demanding, yet attainable
- Improves integration and coordination of internal activities

3.0 Background

Strategic planning is a requirement for Irish Universities under the Universities Act of 1997. Section 34 of the act states that:

‘A governing authority shall, as soon as practicable after its appointment and at such other times as it thinks fit, require the chief officer to prepare a plan which shall set out the aims of the governing authority for the operation and development of the university and its strategy for achieving those aims, and for carrying out the functions of the university, during the period, being not less than three years, to which the plan relates.’

4.0 Definitions

- Vision: Where we want to get to
- Mission: What we do and who we serve
- Objectives/Goals: What is to be achieved
- Strategies: How it is to be achieved
- Plans: Actions to achieve the objectives/goals

5.0 Process Overview

5.1 The aim of strategic planning is to 'determine the direction and scope of the organisation over the long term, matching resources to the environment to meet stake-holders expectations'¹.



Figure 1. The Strategic Planning Process

The process of strategic planning asks three key questions of an organisation:

- What are we doing now? i.e. is what we are doing relevant; is it effectively and efficiently undertaken; does it give value for money and is it what we should be doing? This implies robust and honest processes of audit, review and analysis.
- Where do we want to go, what sort of organisation do we want to be? i.e. are there factors internal or external, which demand a shift in trajectory or momentum, a change in what the organisation stands for, or a refinement in aspirations? This implies clarity in aims, values and mission and a clear understanding of the environmental factors which normally create a dynamic for change.
- How do we get from where we are to where we want to be? i.e. aspiration is not sufficient of itself to deliver the desired future. Strategic planning implies action plans based on clear priorities.

5.2 The following characteristics are associated with strategic planning:

- Emphasis on Conditions in the External Environment: identifying and understanding conditions in the environment which have an impact on the institution. Since many of the changes experienced by higher education institutions are triggered by outside forces (e.g., demographic trends, government policies, shifts in occupational demands and changing public attitudes toward education), this emphasis on the external environment is fundamental to the process.

Thus, strategic planning looks outward at the external environment, monitoring major demographic, political, economic, social and technological trends that may hold opportunities or threats for the institution. Strategic planning also considers internal factors and it requires that they be balanced by an assessment of external realities.

¹ Source: Johnson and Scholes – Exploring Corporate Strategy

- Time Frame: Acknowledging the changeability of the external environment, strategic planning uses a 3-5 year planning time frame.
- A Dynamic Process: Because the external environment is rapidly and continuously changing and because it is impossible to predict future conditions with certainty, strategic planning is a dynamic, continuing process in which adaptations of the plan should be expected. For this reason, plans are reviewed and updated regularly.
- Emphasis on the Competitive Environment: Strategic planning stresses the importance of achieving a position or niche for the institution as a whole as well as for specific programmes. Through strategic planning, a university strives to distinguish itself from its competition so that the institution will be recognised for its special identity, character and areas of expertise.
- Allocation of Resources: To be effective, strategic planning must be integrated with budgeting so that the allocation of resources reflects the priorities that have been established, thus moving the institution in the direction it has charted.

5.3 It is important to have both top-down and bottom-up dimensions to the process. The former are about setting broad parameters as a guide to setting priorities. The latter is about obtaining colleagues' inputs to identify the appropriate strategic initiatives to achieve the desired future state for the University.

5.4 The involvement of key internal and external stakeholders is important for a successful strategic planning process.

5.5 The strategic planning process has three major steps:

1. Analysis
2. Choice
3. Implementation

6.0 Process Steps

6.1 SWOT analysis.

This process of analysis is described in detail on the Quality Promotion Unit website and is included in Appendix A.

The internal environment of the organisation is analysed by analysing Strengths and Weaknesses. Strengths and weaknesses can be considered under the headings of Strategy, Structure, Systems, Staff, Skills, Style (culture & management style) and Shared Values.

The external environment (environmental scanning) is analysed by analysing information about events and trends in an organisation's surroundings and capturing this information in terms of Opportunities and Threats.

6.2 Choice

Arising from the SWOT analysis, identify initiatives to meet strategic objectives while building on strengths, exploiting opportunities, addressing weaknesses and dealing with challenges/threats.

Choose initiatives based on Suitability, Feasibility and Acceptability:

Suitability: Do they capitalise on strengths and exploit opportunities? Do they address weaknesses? Do they deal with threats and challenges?

Feasibility: Are resources available or can they be made available? Will it work in practice? Can it be implemented?

Acceptability: Does it satisfy stakeholders? Is the level of risk acceptable?

Prioritise initiatives using the categories in the matrix below (figure 2).

Forecast the resources required (students, staff, space etc.) and complete the template provided by the Finance Office to enable the plans to be budgeted.

Review the draft plan (all members should be given the opportunity to review the plan).

		Importance	
		low	high
Feasibility	high	consider	do first
	low	don't bother	maybe later

Figure 2. Prioritisation Matrix

7.0 Implementation

7.1 Strategic planning is a continuing process, rather than a one-off brainstorming exercise and strategic plans are multi-year commitments to action. Implementation requires that the various proposed strategic initiatives are decanted into annual plans based on specific years. This is necessary to avoid ambiguity in relation to when specific achievements are intended - an over-optimistic concentration of actions in Year 1 or a rush to complete things in Year 4.

The first year's commitments will be the initiatives of highest priority based on impact, ease of implementation and affordability.

7.2 Clarity on who is responsible for implementation is critical and collectively agreed actions need to be assigned to a colleague's work schedule for successful implementation.

7.3 Document the strategic initiatives for each of the years of the plan. Initiatives should be expressed in specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound (SMART) terms.

7.4 Specify who is responsible for each initiative, determine a timeline for completion and identify the key performance indicators (KPI) and targets, if appropriate, for each initiative

7.5 When the plan is documented, circulate it for review and invite feedback.

8.0 Monitoring and Review

8.1 There needs to be an explicit monitoring and review process to ascertain progress and to undertake remedial action if need be. It is necessary therefore that

- The head of unit organises processes by the leadership team of the unit for periodic (at least once per quarter) monitoring.
- An end of year review is conducted on what was achieved; what was not achieved and why; how limited achievement could affect desired objectives for the year to come; and how the next year's strategic initiatives and objectives should be re-set.

- Accurate performance data in relation to key performance indicators is provided in order to assist the monitoring of implementation.

A checklist of questions to be considered and answered as part of the process is in appendix B.

Appendix A: SWOT

SWOT Analysis Guide

Based on the document produced by Des Lee of Futurscope Ltd. to support UCC's Quality Review process

SWOT is a tool of strategic analysis and has two elements: an external analysis of Opportunities and Treats, and an internal analysis of Strengths and Weaknesses.

Opportunities and Threats

The external analysis focuses on the external environment and the opportunities and threats that may represent. An opportunity is some feature of the external environment the department could take advantage of, e.g. an increase in research funding. A threat is some feature in the external environment that could damage the department e.g. a cut in funding. Features may represent both an opportunity and a threat depending on how it is viewed, the assumptions about what the future holds, or which aspect of the environmental feature is considered. For example, a change of government could easily be considered as both an opportunity and a threat.

Audit the Environment

Which environmental influences have affected the University in the past and which are likely to do so in the future?

This question serves as a generator of ideas about the kind of environmental factors that may be important for the University to analyse. Influences from the past are readily identified. Influences from the future are, of course, speculative. Some, like changes in demographics, are reasonably predictable. Others, like the impact of the internet, can only be imagined and will probably turn out differently than anticipated.

The Nature of the Environment

The following headings are useful for describing the external environment when considering opportunities and threats.

Political: HEA, college, change of government

Economic: funding, numbers of students, attractiveness of college versus jobs, ability to attract staff

Social: demographics, students working part time, student parents, student and staff attitudes, etc.

Technological: e-learning, data storage and transmission, different modes of delivery

Environmental: impact on costs, public opinion

Legal: Universities Act, health and safety, equality legislation

Market Analysis

The University operates in at least two recognised markets, for students and for staff. Those markets have all the features of a commercial market for products and services and can be analysed in similar ways. They have a supply and demand, a market price (which includes many non-monetary elements) and are affected by information, opinion, and image.

Competitor Analysis

There are many competitors for students and staff – other Irish universities, institutes of technology and PLC's. But the competition is also with international colleges and employers, both here and abroad. An analysis of the key competitors will give valuable information about the advantages the competitors have over the University and vice versa.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The internal analysis examines the University's strengths and weaknesses. A strength is something the University is particularly good at, e.g. student focus, research output. A weakness is something the University is not good at, e.g. attracting post grads, gaining research funding.

Resources

Analysis of strengths and weaknesses involves an examination of the adequacy of resources in terms of quantity, quality and availability. Adequacy is in terms of meeting the goals and objectives of the University, and meeting the challenges presented by the external environment as represented by opportunities and threats. Resources may be physical – buildings, office space, labs, computing facilities; informational – access to data, availability and usability of data; human – people and their skills.

Power

Universities differ in their ability to get resources. Some Universities have a high profile and are able, as a result, to command greater attention, get more resources, get decisions made in their favour and generally create a more favourable position for themselves. These differences in power are inevitable but have a significant impact on the ability of universities to take advantage of opportunities and to counter threats.

How powerful is UCC? In the national and international context? With the HEA? And with whatever other areas of significance?

Seven S's

The Seven S's is a convenient tool for examining the internal aspects of the University. Under each of the seven headings, what are the strengths and weakness of the University?

Strategy – does the University have a written strategy? Is it communicated to members of the University and others? Is it monitored? Is the strategy being worked?

Structure – a pattern of roles, both formal and informal, within the University. Does the structure support members of the University in meeting the University's objectives? Are there gaps? Do some roles conflict? Are the formal and informal roles compatible?

Systems – how work gets done. Includes manual as well as computerised systems. Are there clear systems of work that ensure that everything gets done in an accurate and efficient manner? Do some things get done twice? Do some things get forgotten or left out? What is the incidence of rework in which tasks have to be repeated because they weren't done properly the first time? Is adequate information available to enable each member of staff to carry out their function?

Staff – the right people in the right jobs. Does the University have the right number of staff, of the right kind?

Skills – Does each staff member have the skill set to adequately carry out their function?

Style – the way in which the University interacts interpersonally with customers and others. There is no one correct style, just appropriate styles for different situations. Does the University have an appropriate style?

Shared values – the underpinning values that drive our decisions and behaviour. These can be difficult to describe and discuss but can also be very powerful in explaining why we do things in certain ways and how we need to change to adapt to circumstances.

These seven headings are intended to organise thought, not to be exhaustive.

Appendix B: Strategic Planning Checklist

Questions to Support the Strategic Planning Process and to Test the Validity of the Plan

Analysis:

- Has an honest and critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses been undertaken?
- Has an honest and critical analysis of the external environment in terms of opportunities and threats/challenges been undertaken?
- Have the strengths and opportunities been validated with strong evidence (e.g. which would satisfy external international reviewers)?
- Does the SWOT clearly identify areas of competitive advantage nationally/internationally?
- Has the SWOT summary been validated with stakeholders?

Planning and the Identification of Strategic Initiatives:

- Have key internal and external stakeholders been engaged in the process?
- Have all levels of staff within the organisation been involved?
- Does the plan capitalise on strengths and exploit opportunities?
- Does the plan address weaknesses and deal with threats and challenges?
- Are resources available or can they be made available to support the plan?
- Are the initiatives 'stretching' but achievable within the planning period?
- Is the initiative aligned to a strategic goal?
- Has the plan been adapted to take strategic activities in the rest of the organisation into account?
- What programmes/activities are being discontinued?
- For new programmes/activities, is there strong external evidence of demand?
- Have risks to the successful completion of the plan been considered and have appropriate mitigation actions been considered?
- Has a budget, manpower plan been produced?
- Has the plan been communicated to everyone who needs to know about it?
- In communication, was feedback sought and have improvements and adjustments to the plan been considered in light of feedback?

Implementation:

- Have initiatives been prioritised, identifying the initiatives of highest importance, highest urgency and affordability for implementation first?
- Is the implementation plan documented? (the initiatives, who is leading them, the timeframe and the associated KPIs and targets)
- Are processes established within the organisation for regularly reviewing the strategic initiatives and for documenting progress?

Appendix C: Critical Success Factors for Strategic Planning

- commitment to action and support by senior leadership and management
- the involvement of those responsible for implementation at all levels of the organisation
- the involvement of key internal and external stakeholders
- realistic priorities and timescale
- decanting of priorities to named individuals with subsequent accountability
- an explicit timetable for completion of actions
- a robust monitoring and review process
- closed-loop processes arising from review to inform the revision of plans
- active and broad communication of the plan