

# Matching strategic ambition with academic performance

## *The challenge for universities*

It is now almost ten years since the 1997 Universities Act was passed into law, with a formal requirement for universities to introduce strategic planning. However, many institutions report difficulties in translating strategic goals into improved academic performance and a tangible advancement in their relative position.

Dr Orna Duggan



University strategic planning is a complex process. It involves many different constituencies and competing priorities, all to be delivered within a collegial environment, where consensus is desired but difficult to achieve. This notwithstanding, many universities have succeeded in introducing and embedding a regular planning cycle.

As the external landscape for higher education has become more challenging, some universities have extended the strategic planning process to the major academic and administrative units. This has provided the opportunity to cascade effective strategic planning throughout the University, but has created the requirement for mechanisms to ensure that these college or departmental plans will be both aligned with overall university strategic goals and complementary with each other.

The achievement of a coordinated approach between various strategic planning and strategic management activities represents a considerable challenge for Irish universities. The implementation of strategic planning structures has, in the past, run independently of management processes such as Performance Management, Enterprise Risk Management and Quality Assurance and Resource Allocation, all of which are required as a result of universities' statutory position. All of these activities address the same issues and priorities, and, if managed together in a coordinated, complementary way, could significantly reduce duplication of work, provide valuable insights to the strategy process, and provide the University's management team with timely, accurate information regarding the strategic positioning of the University at any time.

In reality, however, universities struggle to achieve the necessary coordination between

these management processes, thereby losing vital information and finding themselves in the dark when formulating plans, reviewing progress against strategy or making key decisions for the future.

This information deficit represents a major challenge for universities in Ireland today. However, by establishing an Office for Strategic Management, universities could ensure that key information is captured and assessed against measurable and realistic performance targets in order to close the gaps between strategic ambition, execution and academic performance.

From an international standpoint, this would have immediate benefits. In a climate of increased benchmarking, Irish universities face unprecedented pressures to achieve results that surpass anything achieved by the sector up to this time. However, their ability to improve performance and to achieve ambitious strategies is impacted by the lack of relevant, accurate and timely information on key strategic targets, management of risk and achievement of outcomes. By streamlining key functions, an Office for Strategic Management could provide a coordination role and act as a conduit for key areas of strategic management that would include university strategic planning, college and departmental planning, performance management, resource allocation, enterprise risk management and quality assurance.

While establishing this Office would bring together and streamline all key aspects of strategic management, it is important to outline that it would not involve the creation of new functions. Rather, it would provide leadership, guidance, support and communication in the complete strategy process from planning and resource allocation to performance and risk and quality management, without taking away direct responsibility or ownership from individual areas.

Through these functions, the Office would be responsible for ensuring that clear and appropriate targets are set in relation to the University's key strategic initiatives. It would also provide a central port through which all key information would be gathered and disseminated in relation to the achievement of these targets.

This would enable the University's senior management team to gain an up-to-date picture of the University's progress in relation to strategic programmes or projects and the impact of this progress in relation to its relative strategic position. Reporting directly to the President, this Office would provide regular management reports to support the University management team, while supporting academic and administrative management teams throughout the University.

The benefits of this are clear and tangible. The ability to maintain a dynamic strategic planning process, updated on the basis of real-time information about key opportunities, challenges and changes to the University's position, represents a major competitive advantage. It also provides the University's leadership with a central hub for coordination and communication to support the alignment, implementation and evaluation of all strategic initiatives.

To this end, the establishment of an Office for Strategic Management should be a key priority to ensure the successful delivery of strategic plans for Irish universities.

Dr Orna Duggan is a Manager in Prospectus. She has both understanding and experience of the national and international trends and strategic issues impacting Irish higher education.

Contact Orna by emailing [oduggan@prospectus.ie](mailto:oduggan@prospectus.ie)

### Article at a glance

**Many universities find it difficult to translate strategy into tangible academic progress.**

**This can be due to the difficulty in setting measurable and realistic performance targets against which strategic progress can be planned and reviewed.**

**An Office for Strategic Management could address this lack of information and clarity by providing a central function in which all strategy-related activities would be managed, coordinated and communicated for better delivery of strategy.**