



NATIONAL FORUM FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES ON DIGITAL CAPACITY, TUESDAY 9TH MARCH 2015

Summary of Key Points

A strategic leadership panel was convened to generate dialogue and offer perspectives on a number of the questions raised by the Forum publication, *Strategic & Leadership Perspectives on Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education* (Dr Jim Devine, February 2015).

Professor Sarah Moore welcomed all in attendance and opened the panel discussion with some prefacing remarks on the place of technology in teaching. Based on the extensive consultation and research national and internationally, three key messages were highlighted to position the discussion:

- Technology in teaching is not a magic bullet, nor is it the holy grail – teachers and learners and their human interactions remain central
- Technology in teaching still holds enormous untapped potential – there is a wide range of valuable resources that can be utilised creatively in the interests of teachers and learners
- Strategic leadership is crucial in enabling digital capacity

Dr Jim Devine put the report into context, describing it as presenting a “snapshot in time” based on the strategic leadership interviews and the current institutional compacts which underpin the report. A key message from the report is the unanimous agreement on the value of CPD, including digital pedagogy, for academic staff. Despite pockets of innovation within institution, there is still little evidence of initiatives of significant scale and effect and many senior staff are concerned that they do not have a clear picture of what is actually happening. The analysis of the institutional compacts showed anomalies in how part-time and flexible students are reported with consequences for funding. Emerging areas such as OERs and Learning Analytics do not appear to be part of the leadership consciousness.

Leadership Panel

The leadership panel had been invited to response to preparatory questions with the aim of providing a leadership perspective on how issues could be moved forward for the sector:

1. How can an appropriate focus on ‘new modes’ of teaching and learning be systematically integrated into existing academic quality assurance/enhancement processes? (Response by Dr Larry McNutt)
2. Developing a shared vision and goals for digital learning nationally – is this a realistic aspiration/how might it be approached? (Response by Prof Mark Brown)
3. What is the unit of change within HEIs (faculty/school/department) and what actions can be taken to improve team processes in designing or updating academic programmes? (Response by Dr Fiona Farr)



4. What impact at institutional level should be expected from investment in CPD for academic staff (teaching, learning, learning design), and how would this impact be measured?(Response by Prof John O'Halloran)
5. How can technology be used appropriately to provide flexibility and what kinds of learner stands to benefit most? (Response by Prof Vincent Cunnane)
6. Are our HEIs ready for informed engagement with the international trend towards 'analytics' in HE? (Response by Jim Devine)

Dialogue

The session was streamed to facilitate remote participants and a Twitter feed allowed questions to be posed following each presentation, which were then presented to the panel and audience present in plenary format. The following questions were raised:

- a. The Strategic Perspectives Report suggests that VLE's are not mission critical at undergraduate level? What are students saying in ISSE?
- b. Can quality assurance include encouragement of HR processes to ensure parity of esteem between teaching and research?
- c. What is the one action leaders could take to release academic staff to be more flexible?
- d. Is it possible for Faculty/Departments to break out of silos?
- e. Should we not separate teaching and research? Are they not relying on different business models?
- f. How can the disconnect between the teaching and learning on full-time on-campus programmes and that of on-line programmes be overcome?
- g. How can the gap between the use and awareness of the potential of learning analytics be addressed?

Conclusion

Professor Sarah Moore, offered her thanks to members of the Panel for their insightful observations on the questions posed and their contribution to progressing ideas for addressing the issues identified at sectoral level.



Part 2: Extended Summary

The questions, respondents and key points were as follows:

1. *How can an appropriate focus on “new modes” of teaching and learning be systematically integrated into existing academic quality assurance/enhancement processes* (Response by Dr Larry McNutt).

Using the analogy of the skeleton Dr McNutt emphasised the need to regard quality frameworks as providing a strong core, around which the more connected practices of teaching and learning, including digital learning can grow like connective tissue. He emphasised the importance of developing clarity around curricular models and their underpinning philosophy, and cautioned that the capacity to innovate was not precluded by quality frameworks. He noted the large number of modules already accredited across the higher education system which could be developed further through imaginative teaching, learning and assessment practices.

2. *Developing a shared vision and goals for digital learning nationally – is this a realistic aspiration/how might it be approached?* (Response by Professor Mark Brown)

Professor Brown spoke about the need to decouple digital capacity and digital learning and the importance of being alert to multi-faceted entities and the inter-changeability of terminology in use. He questioned whether the focus on digital learning was the endgame or a vehicle towards some larger goal for a vision of teaching and learning? He also drew attention to the important institutional interplay between vision (how things might be) and mission (how things will be achieved), the latter being inextricably linked to particular institutional cultures, practices and the actions of individual stakeholders. Consequently he argued that there is not a singular path and that multiple pathways or resistance and action may lead to better envisioning. He proposed three practical steps:

- Digital Compass: initiative to promote innovative institutions and academics through developing national guidelines for a common language for decision-making
- Develop national benchmarking toolkits unique to Irish context focused on enhancement
- A range of planning toolkits for different contexts: difficult futures and different programmes

3. *What is the unit of change within HEI’s (faculty/school/department) and what actions can be taken to improve team processes in designing or updating academic programmes?* (Dr Fiona Farr)

Dr Farr opened her response by drawing attention to the significance of the discourses that surround the digitally learning as evidenced by key words from the Strategic Perspectives report, and personal disciplinary experience of planning a Technology Enhanced Learning proposal for funding. The examples demonstrated how at leadership level there is aspiration and good will towards change but little evidence of a systematic approach to support change. Whilst at disciplinary level there is evidence of knowing what the destination is, but little sense of how to get there and understanding



of who is responsible. The ecology of institutional change is complex, however a number of levels are important in achieving integration:

- Whilst learning support professionals, academics and students have an important role to play, so too do Deans of Faculty and Heads of School
 - The departmental and disciplinary setting is the locus for contextualising practice, where teaching innovation takes place and where potential for scaleable change exists through networks and communities of practice
 - The presence of TEL strategies along with appropriate CPD frameworks aligned with strategy and founded on clearly defined outcomes in terms of implementation in the teaching environment.
4. *What impact at institutional level should be expected from investment in CPD for academic staff (teaching, learning, learning design), and how would this impact be measured?*(Response by Prof John O'Halloran)

Professor O Halloran began by asking the audience what role might students play in staff CPD? – as a way of emphasising that there can often be large gaps between what we believe and know. Citing the extrinsic drivers for change including the Hunt Report and the intrinsic motivations of academic staff towards the potential of innovation, he considered the value of CPD and certification for academic staff. Using an ecology metaphor he argued that diversity bestows stability, and in relation to teaching and learning enhancement: technology allows diversification drawing on teachers skills, attitudes and expertise. Whilst disciplines “home” pedagogy technology can be seen to be on the outside. A recent survey on Technology Enabled Learning (n=840) in his own institution had demonstrated that staff can be unaware and/or unsure how to use VLE’s effectively and how to access training to support the development of their skills and expertise. He advocated an emphasis on academic practice based on the integration of teaching and research as a positive model for promoting, supporting and enhancing academic CPD provision.

5. *How can technology be used appropriately to provide flexibility and what kinds of learner stands to benefit most?* (Response by Prof Vincent Cunnane)
6. *Are our HEIs ready for informed engagement with the international trend towards ‘analytics’ in HE?* (Response by Jim Devine)

Dr Jim Devine focused on the importance of addressing the question of data held within existing institutional systems, which in another context might be called business intelligence. Drawing attention to the impact of the student digital footprint on the campus, he suggested that it would be rather naïve to assume that such data would only be used benignly. The current position within Irish HE is one where analytics is everyone’s business and yet nobody’s business as demonstrated by its lack of visibility within institutional strategies and policies. Examples of explicit policies internationally include the work of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) on data analytics,



the ELESIG discussion paper and the Open University Ethics Policy for Data Analytics. Developing a national approach to learning analytics is an important topic he suggested, and one which the National Forum could play an important role in, in fore-grounding a debate before the matter becomes critical.