This Forum Insight provides a short summary of the report, Building Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education 2013-18. Key developments in building digital capacity undertaken and coordinated by the National Forum are summarised in 5 areas: consulting across the sector and outlining a vision; understanding the digital landscape; structures and guidance frameworks; Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund projects; and perspectives of those who teach, learn and lead.

Introduction

Since 2012, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education has worked in partnership with students, staff, higher education institutions (HEIs) and policy partners to lead the advancement of national priorities for teaching and learning across the sector. In early 2019, the National Forum published Building Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education 2013-18, an overview of work completed by the National Forum, in collaboration with its partners and stakeholders, on building digital capacity in Irish higher education during its first five years. The report aims to allow work undertaken to date, and the perspectives of those involved, to inform future developments related to the digital dimension of teaching and learning in Irish higher education.

Consulting across the sector and outlining a vision

As an early priority, the National Forum conducted a broad sectoral consultation and published the Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World (2014), identifying ways the sector could build digital capacity to enhance the learning experience for students in Irish higher education. Four high-level recommendations were identified:

- Prioritise the strategic development of digital capacity in institutional and national policy and quality frameworks in a way that supports innovation for impact
- Strengthen and support collaboration within and between institutions, and with different parts of the higher education sector; develop shared policies and infrastructure that reflect the complexity of an increasingly digital world
- Develop a consistent, seamless and coherent digital experience for students in Irish higher education and actively engage with students and teachers to develop their digital skills and knowledge
- Develop a strong evidence-base for enhanced pedagogy

The National Forum has led the sector by providing a strong foundation for building digital capacity in higher education since 2014.

Understanding the digital landscape

A key step in laying a foundation for building digital capacity was to gain an understanding of the digital landscape across Irish higher education. This was undertaken through:

- A national review of Ireland’s higher education technological infrastructure (2016), enabling institutions to situate their technological infrastructure within a national context
- A national review of the policy landscape of digital teaching and learning (2017), exploring policy perspectives and practices re: digital teaching and learning
- A review of the learning analytics landscape (2017), informing developments to guide institutions and staff in the use of data to support student success
- A comprehensive, searchable national scholarship database, foregrounding Irish scholarship of teaching and learning
- The National Seminar Series (launched in 2014) shares research and practice interests; 234 seminars were organised between 2014 and 2018.

Structures and guidance frameworks for building digital capacity

Structures and guidance frameworks were put in place to ensure that digital developments at institutional level were supported and aligned at a national level:

- The National Professional Development Framework (2016) enables staff to engage in professional development activities; 17 open-access short courses, each leading to a National Forum digital badge, were designed by experts across the sector
- A national framework for digital skills, All Aboard (2016) developed a map of digital skills and literacies, supported by openly licensed resources and digital badges
- The Data-Enabled Student Success Initiative (DESSI) (2017) helps to develop institutional strategies for using data to underpin student success; the Online Resource for Learning Analytics (ORLA) has open-access guides and case studies to support DESSI
Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund projects

The establishment of the National Forum's Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (2013-2018) supported digital innovation and collaboration across the sector. A total of 32 projects were funded in 25 HEIs from 2014 to 2018, focusing on a range of National Forum priorities:

Embedding the National Professional Development Framework

- Aligning MU’s Accredited T&L Programmes with the National PD Framework (Led by MU)
- ATLAS (Aligning Teaching & Learning across the Technological Sector) (Led by AIT)
- Crannóg project for senior leaders (Led by NUIG)
- L2L (Librarians Learning to Support Learners Learning) (Led by DKIT)
- Online Programme for Graduate Teaching Assistants (Led by TCD)
- Professional Development Capacity Building in the Shannon Consortium (Led by UL)
- Teaching and Learning Champions (Led by LYIT)

Supporting enhancement in teaching and learning

- All Aboard (Led by NUIG)
- Digital Skills in Action (Led by IADT)
- ePortfolio Strategy to Enhance Student Learning, Assessment & Staff Professional Development (Led by DIT, now TU Dublin)
- Take 1 Step (Led by UL)
- TEL Tools (Led by CIT)
- Transformation through Collaboration (Led by UCC)
- What Works and Why (Led by DCU)

Supporting student transitions through digital

- Assessment for Learning Resources for First Year Undergraduate Mathematics Modules (Led by MU)
- Get Ready Education – A Learning Journey (Led by Sligo IT)
- My Experience (Led by GMIT)
- Student Success Toolbox (Led by DCU)
- TEAME (Transitioning to E-assessment in Mathematics Education) (Led by CIT)
- Y1Feedback (Led by MU)

Supporting the internationalisation of higher education through digital

- Digilanguages (Led by UL)
- Live and Learn in Ireland (Led by IT Tralee)

Enhancing teaching, learning and staff professional development within disciplines, through digital

- ChemE (Led by UCD)
- DSTEP (Developing Staff To Enhance Programmes) (Led by DCU)
- ePrePP (Led by UCC)
- GeoLab (Led by UCC)
- Levitus (Led by DIT, now TU Dublin)
- REX (Led by MIC)
- SPEEDS (Social Policy Education Enhancing Digital Skills) (Led by UCC)
- Street Law (Led by LYIT)
- TEAM (Technology Enhanced Assessment Methods) (Led by DKIT)
- Using Digital Technology to Enhance Inter-Professional Education’ (IPE) (Led by NUIG)

Perspectives of those who teach, learn and lead

Interviews with senior managers in 2014 and 2017 gave insights into building digital capacity in Irish higher education. The 2017 interviews revealed an increased understanding of the digital landscape and thinking about ‘digital capacity.’ The National Forum Associates identified priorities such as improving supports for digital teaching and learning, increasing the flexibility of professional development support, and emphasising digital teaching and learning.

A national consultation in 2018, informing the National Forum Strategy 2019-21, included a section on digital teaching and learning. 230 staff (including those who teach, lead and support learning) shared their perspectives. Areas of priority included a focus on digital teaching and learning, using student data to support learning, and addressing institutional differences on digital infrastructure and supports. A concurrent National Forum student survey engaged over 1,100 students. Areas of priority included having adequate digital infrastructure, supporting students and staff to build digital literacies, further progress in embedding digital technologies, and consideration of how all students can be supported to succeed in a digital age.

Conclusion

The 2018 EU Digital Action Plan outlines three priorities for the future: using digital technology for teaching and learning; developing relevant digital competences and skills for digital transformation; and improving education through data analysis and foresight. Ireland continues to set an international example by demonstrating how initial efforts within and between institutions can be consolidated at a national level. The critical application of digital technologies challenges many of higher education’s structures, assumptions, policies and procedures, not least beliefs and attitudes about the role and nature of higher education itself. The foundations have been laid, but our momentum must be built upon and the endeavour is ongoing. For a more detailed description of all of the work cited in this Insight, please see the full report: Building Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education 2013-18.