

Forum Insights for Teachers in Higher Education

REPORT

High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education

Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions (June 2013)

http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc/modernisation_en.pdf

Key Insights for Teachers

Introduction:

This Forum insight paper provides a very brief summary of the High Level Group Report on the Modernisation of Higher Education. For full details, please refer to the link to the full report, provided above. We have highlighted the parts of the report that we think are particularly useful for teachers in higher education to consider, but the summary provided below is not exhaustive. Rather it provides a brief flavour of the themes and priorities emphasised in the report.

Background:

The European Commissioner for Education, Culture, multilingualism and sport, Androulla Vassiliou set up the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe. This group (chaired by Prof Mary McAleese) was asked to put the quality of teaching and learning at the top of their agenda for change and it makes a range of important recommendations that provide a strong guide for the ways in which teaching and learning in higher education can be enhanced throughout European Higher Education Institutions. The work of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education work will be guided and informed by these recommendations.

'New methods in teaching and learning are being developed in ever more higher education institutions. Examples that proved successful are cooperative teaching and learning methods as well as problem-based learning, exposing teachers and learners to real life situations, challenges and cases.'

Some important aspects of the report:

The report highlights the importance of parity of esteem between teaching and research, supporting and professionalising teaching in higher education, fostering active learning and focusing on teaching and assessing both discipline-specific and generic learning outcomes:

Teaching and research

- Teaching and learning is a core mission of higher education
- Teaching and research are mutually enhancing and complementary activities.

Supporting teaching in higher education

- 'Academic staff entrance, progression and promotion decisions should take account of an assessment of teaching performance' (p.33).

- The enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education is effectively supported by national frameworks, such as Ireland's National Forum (<http://teachingandlearning.ie/>), and the report recommends the establishment of a European Academy for Teaching and Learning (p.56).
- Every institution should develop and implement a teaching and learning strategy.
- Excellence in teaching should be recognised and rewarded, e.g. through fellowships and awards.
- The report recommends that 'higher education institutions should develop and implement holistic internationalisation strategies' to include, inter alia, 'student and staff mobility (incoming and outgoing), [and] the international dimension of curricula' (pp.50–51).

Professionalisation of teaching

- Teaching in higher education should be professionalised. 'All staff teaching in higher education institutions in 2020 should have received certified pedagogical training', and 'continuous professional education as teachers should become a requirement for teachers in the higher education sector' (p.31).
- Professional teacher training will enable staff to address effectively the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student body, utilising innovative pedagogies and learning theories.
- Teaching staff should be supported to 'develop the skills for online and other forms of teaching and learning opened up by the digital era' (p.49).

Fostering active learning

- 'Teaching and learning in higher education is a shared process, with responsibilities on both student and teacher to contribute to their success' (p.18). Within this context, student feedback should be sought and used to enhance teaching and learning.
- Teachers and students are engaged in the co-creation of knowledge: 'a good teacher, like a good graduate, is also an active learner, questioner and critical thinker' (p.13).
- Teaching should be student-centred, and course design should require 'the active involvement of students in the learning process' (p.71).
- 'Curricula should be developed and monitored through dialogue and partnerships among teaching staff, students, graduates and labour market actors, drawing on new methods of teaching and learning, so that students acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability' (p.41).

Learning outcomes

- Teaching, learning and assessment should be focused on students' learning outcomes, which should include 'transversal skills, or soft skills' as well as discipline-specific knowledge and skills (p.36).

- Learning outcomes should be 'developed in partnership by all faculty members involved in their delivery' (p.43).
- Interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning should be adopted in order to enhance students' learning outcomes (p.47).
- Teaching staff and institutions need to provide clear and transparent information on courses of study, including module descriptions and learning outcomes (p.71)

Questions for teachers - raised in the high level report

My professional development needs

How comfortable am I with recent teaching concepts, such as student-centred teaching and learning, competences and learning outcomes, etc.? Would my teaching benefit from professional training, mentoring or other support in this area?

Would a teaching portfolio allow me to better reflect on my own teaching methods, objectives and achievements and thus foster constant improvement of my teaching performance?

My focus on students as partners

How can I make sure that my teaching puts the students at the centre of the teaching and learning process?

How can I reach out to students to engage them actively and make them understand that successful teaching and learning at tertiary level requires strong personal commitment from both sides?

In the spirit of seeing students not as passive recipients of knowledge, but as responsible partners in the teaching and learning process, how can I involve them in the permanent improvement of my course design?

My focus on student support

How can I offer adequate counselling to my students, throughout their studies, to help them map out their individual learning itinerary and assume responsibility for it?

Orientation phase

How can I provide clear and transparent information on my study offers, including module descriptions, learning outcomes, and employment perspectives after graduation to prospective students, e.g. through the website of my institution?

How can I provide prospective students with any information on available self-assessment methods that would allow them to check their affinity and talent for the subject in question, the required previous knowledge, etc.?

Course design

How can I make sure that my course design encourages and requires the active involvement of students in the learning process, e.g. through innovative forms such as problem-based and research-based learning, self-organised working groups, team work on research projects, tutoring and mentoring activities for the students, etc.?

Is the course I am delivering part of an integrated curriculum which has been jointly designed by all members of staff involved in delivering the programme, based on a modular structure and agreed learning activities which will allow students to achieve clear and assessable learning outcomes?

How can I organise my teaching in such a way that it will not simply provide my students with facts and knowledge, but confront them with questions that are bigger than the course itself?

Will my teaching lead students to questioning their preconceived ideas and thus to a deeper understanding of the issue and to 'self-thinking'. Will it stimulate critical and inquisitive attitudes among my students?

Course delivery

How can my teaching take into account the ever growing heterogeneity of the student body by using different methods, new media, new modes of delivery (such as blended learning), etc.?

How does my course encourage my students to be aware of and to draw not only on my own teaching and research, but also of fellow academics within and beyond my institution, including international academics?

How will my teaching impart, apart from the body of knowledge of the given discipline, generic and language skills and stimulate personal development ?

How does my teaching provide a research-rich and interdisciplinary environment to students?

How does my course provide my students with a sense of global connectedness and an understanding of how their subject is viewed in different parts of the world?

How does my course encourage community engagement and a sense of active citizenship among my students?

Assessment

How can I adapt my assessment formats to reflect the new pedagogical approaches, such as problem-based and research-based learning? Would presentations, role plays and case studies help me to measure the individual student's progress in the acquisition of certain competences?

How can I make sure that the number of exams is kept to a reasonable minimum so as not to distract students from their learning and research?

Enhancement

How can I systematically demand student feedback on their learning experience in my courses? How can I use this feedback to constantly improve my teaching performance?

Would I benefit from exchanges with colleagues on latest developments in curricular design, new modes of delivery and assessment, and from peer reviewing of my teaching?

