



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:
Moving Forward Together



Policy Perspective on Next Steps for Teaching and Learning



This *Forum Insight* provides an overview of the teaching and learning policy context at European and national levels, with particular attention paid to digitisation and the pandemic recovery. It then proposes related next steps for the future of teaching and learning from a policy perspective.

Teaching and Learning in the European Context

The development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) over the past two decades has transformed higher education across Europe, with respect to internationalisation, degree structures, quality assurance mechanisms and recognition of qualifications. The EHEA was proposed in 1998 through the Sorbonne Declaration¹, and the commitment to its establishment was then formalised through the Bologna Declaration² the following year. Enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching has been stated as the main aim of the EHEA³. As the initial goals of the EHEA (related to cooperation, trust, transparency, and structural reforms) began to be realised, attention gradually shifted in more recent years from structures and processes to enhancing the learning experiences of students within programmes of study.

The 2018-20 workplan of the group tasked with overseeing the Bologna Process, the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), involved the establishment of a Learning and Teaching Advisory Group at European level and the adoption of a structured peer support approach to foster mutual learning across countries⁴. It was the mission of the Learning and Teaching Advisory Group during this period to develop concise principles for innovative and inclusive approaches in learning and teaching, with actions and best-practice examples of how governments can support institutions to develop, enhance and implement strategies for teaching and learning within higher education institutions while respecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy. This resulted, most recently, in 'Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA', adopted by European Ministers in Rome in November 2020⁵. These recommendations, which arose from the peer support structures that had been implemented since 2018, focus on: making student-centred learning a reality; fostering continuous enhancement of teaching; and strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions and systems to enhance learning and teaching. The 2021-24 workplan of the BFUG's Learning and Teaching Advisory Group⁶ is now steered towards the realisation of these recommendations and includes an intention, reflecting priorities identified during the pandemic, to strengthen the resilience of

the higher education system, with a focus on future skills, high quality learning, teaching and assessment methods and strong links with research and innovation.

Teaching and Learning in the National Context

Ireland's National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (published in 2011) identified teaching and learning as the first of three interconnected core roles of higher education – the others being research and engagement. At the time, this explicit endorsement of the central place of teaching and learning within the higher education policy context was very welcome and there are clear links between the recommendations from this strategy and subsequent developments, such as the reform of the higher education landscape, the development of a higher education performance framework, the establishment of a national student engagement survey and, indeed, the establishment of the National Forum, in 2013, as the national body responsible for leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education.

In the years since the National Strategy was published, the action plans and strategy statements of bodies such as the Department of Education, the Higher Education Authority and Quality and Qualifications Ireland, as well as the Charter for Irish Universities, demonstrated a clear understanding of the importance of enhanced teaching and learning to national ambitions. Key national policies, such as the National Skills Strategy 2025, the International Education Strategy 2016-20 and the Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-26, in making reference to innovation, skills, employability, internationalisation, etc., also acknowledged the links to teaching and learning.

Among the six objectives of the National Skills Strategy, there are those that focus on: education and training providers placing a stronger focus on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy; the quality of teaching and learning at all stages of education being continually enhanced and evaluated; people across Ireland engaging more in lifelong learning; and active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market.

A key element of the National Skills Strategy was the establishment of the National Skills Council and Regional Skills Fora, which have since facilitated dialogue between employers and the education community. The recent Human Capital Initiative, established by the Higher Education Authority

1 See here: https://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/1998_Sorbonne/61/2/1998_Sorbonne_Declaration_English_552612.pdf

2 See here: https://www.eurashe.eu/library/modernising-phe/Bologna_1999_Bologna-Declaration.pdf

3 See Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué: https://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/YerevanCommuniquéFinal_613707.pdf

4 See Paris Ministerial Communiqué: https://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/EHEAParis2018_Communique_final_952771.pdf

5 See here: <https://ehea2020rome.it/pages/documents>

6 Dr Terry Maguire, current Director of the National Forum, is co-chair of the European Commission's 2021-24 Learning and Teaching Advisory Group.



to underpin the provision of additional capacity across higher education to meet priority skills needs for enterprise, has a dedicated pillar focused on innovation and agility and commands a total budget of €197 million over the 5-year period, 2020 to 2024. The 22 large-scale national projects funded through this Initiative include, for example, use of virtual laboratories in higher education, a new hub to upskill the building sector on green construction, and the establishment of Creative Futures Academy to support digital and screen culture, cinema, literature and broadcasting, art, design, and fashion.⁷

The International Education Strategy and the Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education both have an explicit education focus and, as such, naturally refer to teaching and learning in achieving goals such as providing a high-quality experience for all learners, fostering the internationalisation of higher education curricula, and improving language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment. Similarly, the consultation document of the next Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)⁸ has a focus on the importance of teaching and learning to underpin the global sustainability agenda, calling for the use of ESD research to inform teaching and learning and the embedding of ESD in curricula and pedagogies:

There is an opportunity in the next strategy to leverage the research capabilities of the higher education sector in particular, to inform policy in the area of education for sustainable development, as well as the teaching of and learning in relation to ESD at all levels.

Further focus should be given as to how trainers of educators can systematically provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning where pioneering educators can share knowledge while demonstrating how ESD can be integrated step-by-step into daily teaching practices, and also to how educators themselves can employ innovative pedagogies to empower learners to become agents of change.

The consultation document for the upcoming National Access Plan⁹ also highlighted the importance of whole-of institution approaches to access, which involve those who teach, focus on student success and are underpinned by Universal Design for Learning principles:

Over the period of the current National Access Plan there has also been progress towards the embedding of whole-of-institution approaches to access. This means making access the responsibility of everyone in a HEI – not solely access or disability officers but also academics, administration staff, etc. We have seen the development of student success strategies that focus on providing a quality educational experience for all students. We have also seen the strengthening of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles that seek to develop inclusive learning environments and practices for all students.

The landscape of Irish higher education has evolved significantly since the publication of the National Strategy for

Higher Education¹⁰ including the ongoing establishment of technological universities across the sector. According to the 2019 TU Research Network (TURN) Report, 'the TU concept is distinctive - a wide scope of levels of technological provision, rooted in regional connectedness, reaching out nationally and internationally through teaching, learning and research collaborations, and enabled by digital connectivity'. The accompanying Technological University Transformation Fund, representing a total Government investment of €90m over the three years 2020-23, responds to the recommendations of the TURN Report, including 'the development of more apposite career structures to correspond with the distinctiveness of TUs, balancing enhanced teaching and learning and research development, attractiveness to international high calibre staff, new support roles required to deal with increased digitalisation, the retention of industry expertise and the facilitation of adjunct staff'.

There is no question that teaching, learning and assessment have received a dramatic increase in attention since March 2020. The sudden closure of institutions and shift to online/remote learning brought previously taken-for-granted processes, structures and expertise to the centre of local and national decision-making, changing the tone of the conversation around teaching and learning. While prior policy narratives highlighted, in an aspirational tone, the need for more blended learning to meet societal and student demand for more flexible, open and distance learning, recent documents have taken a tone more rooted in urgent reality. The 2021-25 Apprenticeship Action Plan, for example, which is set to have a transformative impact on educational provision across higher and further education, states the following:

In acknowledging the practical and vocational aspects of an apprenticeship, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need to accelerate the ability of the apprenticeship model to facilitate access to new forms of learning and assessment, including blended learning. There is also a need to ensure that apprentices, training centre staff and employers are appropriately skilled to access digital learning and supports.

Recovery from the pandemic and supporting digitalisation have now become key policy foci nationally and internationally just as higher education enters a new era.

Digitisation and the Pandemic Recovery

Prior to the pandemic, the digital dimension of teaching and learning was building momentum nationally and internationally, albeit at a slower and more deliberate pace. The 2014 Report to the European Commission on New Modes of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education emphasised the importance of those who educate in higher education being well versed in relevant digital technologies and pedagogies. Similarly, the 2015 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area included guidelines focused on ensuring different modes of delivery, flexibly using a variety of pedagogical methods, and encouraging innovation in teaching methods and use of new technologies. Meanwhile,

7 See here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/4b006-minister-harris-announces-22-innovative-projects-to-be-funded-under-human-capital-initiative/>

8 See here: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/133067/647e4c20-78e0-49b0-948e-29fb9fa9ac9c.pdf#page=null>

9 See here: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/04/National-Access-Plan-2022-2026_Consultation-Paper.pdf

10 See here: <https://hea.ie/policy/he-reform/the-changing-landscape/>



at national level, Ireland's ICT Action Plan 2014–18 identified the enhancement of ICT capacity and awareness in the education system as one of its three strategic priorities while policy documents including the National Skills Strategy 2025 and the Internationalisation Strategy for Ireland 2016–20, and supporting documents such as Departmental Action Plans and Performance Frameworks, the Charter for Irish Universities and strategy of the Technological Higher Education Association all highlighted the importance of technology as a key driver of change and enhanced digital capacity and capabilities as vital to Ireland's future. The original remit and subsequent 2019–21 strategy of the National Forum also identified teaching and learning in a digital world as a key strategic priority.

More recently, the European Digital Education Action Plan 2021–27 (DEAP)¹¹ outlined the European Commission's vision for high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe over the coming years. The current DEAP builds on its previous iteration, which focused on three main priority areas: making better use of digital technology for teaching and learning, developing digital competencies and skills, and improving education through better data analysis and foresight. The 2021 DEAP is a call to action for stronger cooperation at European level to build on lessons learned during the pandemic and make education and training systems fit for the digital age. Its two strategic priorities focus on fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem and enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation. In addition, a new European Digital Education Hub, of which the National Forum is a member, has been established to link national and regional digital education initiatives and actors and to support cross-sector collaboration and new models for exchange of digital learning content, addressing issues such as common standards, interoperability, accessibility and quality assurance.

The EU's multiannual financial framework for 2021–2027, adopted in December 2020, together with the Next Generation EU recovery instrument, represent €1.8 trillion of funding to support recovery from the pandemic and the EU's long-term priorities across different policy areas. The green and digital transitions are policy priorities for the EU and likely to drive significant change in the coming years. Digitalisation is an essential component of the EU's response to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

Echoing priorities at European level, significant national attention, funding and effort is now being concentrated on the digital and green transitions, as well as recovery from the pandemic. The 2021 National Recovery and Resilience Plan¹² sets out Ireland's plan for mitigating the economic and social impact of the pandemic and making the Irish economy and society more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions. The Plan includes a focus on 'mainstreaming digital literacy and digital skills across all levels of the education system' in order to support the implementation of the digital reform and

transformation agenda into the future. Another focus is on 'equipping the Irish workforce with the necessary future skills that will be required to boost the innovation and productivity of the SME sector, and the provision of skills in support of climate action'.

The National Development Plan, published in October 2021 under Project 2040, provides for Exchequer investment of nearly €2.9 billion in further and higher education infrastructure, research and innovation, over the five-year period 2021–2025. This investment will cater for expanding enrolments, evolving skills needs, and the enhancement of digital infrastructure, including to support flexible provision and lifelong learning.¹³

Within this national and international policy context, Ireland is currently considering its best next steps for teaching and learning in higher education. As part of the national partnership project, Next Steps for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together¹⁴, some related policy considerations are now provided.

Policy Gaps and Next Steps

Although the National Strategy for Higher Education aimed ambitiously to plan for the two subsequent decades, many of its recommendations were well underway within the first decade and a renewed energy around the policy agenda specific to teaching and learning in higher education has been needed for some time.

In its 2021–23 Statement of Strategy¹⁵, Ireland's Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, echoed many of the ambitions endorsed by European Ministers through the 2020 Rome Communique, demonstrating alignment with respect to aspirations related to inclusive, innovative and international educational goals. The Departmental strategy did not, however, make the explicit links to teaching and learning that have been a hallmark of related European communications and workplans for the past two decades.

With the establishment of this Government Department dedicated to the needs of higher and further education, the General Scheme of the 2021 Higher Education Authority Act¹⁶ confirming the legislative importance of teaching and learning within higher education, and the National Forum about to be established on a permanent basis under the aegis of the HEA, momentum has been built and there is an opportunity to strengthen the thread of teaching and learning that currently weaves through all national policy imperatives.

The following are proposed next steps with respect to teaching and learning policy in Ireland:

Develop a national teaching and learning strategy with the support of a national working group

Current national policies and strategies aim, among other things, to foster employability and address skills gaps, facilitate

11 See here: https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en

12 See here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4939-national-recovery-and-resilience-plan-2021/>

13 See here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/774e2-national-development-plan-2021-2030/>

14 See here: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/our-priorities/next-steps-for-teaching-and-learning-moving-forward-together/>

15 See here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/strategy/>

16 See here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/70ed2-general-scheme-of-the-higher-education-authority-bill/>



the digital and green transitions, make learning more inclusive, equitable and accessible, and ensure higher education is international and outward facing. While many of these documents highlight the importance of teaching and learning, they often rely on an assumption that the teaching and learning aspect of their actions and recommendations will be taken care of at the institutional level. Since 2013, the National Forum and its partners have been supporting local higher education communities to enhance teaching and learning and interact with policy imperatives at national and local levels. In this context, the National Forum strategy has acted as a proxy document for a system-level teaching and learning strategy that draws together and supports related themes running through national agendas.

Just like those who embark on research, whose work is currently the focus of a national conversation on what shape the next research strategy for Ireland should take¹⁷, those who teach and support learning in higher education would benefit from a national policy base. A fully resourced national teaching and learning strategy could make the difference between teaching and learning being acknowledged as important and teaching and learning being strengthened and enabled to strive in an aligned, meaningful way towards central policy imperatives.

It is recommended that a national working group be established to ensure that the national teaching and learning strategy is rooted in evidence and in the experience of the higher education community, and to facilitate collaborative dialogue regarding how teaching and learning funding, structures and processes can best be shaped. To this end, members of the national partnership of stakeholders brought together under the Next Steps project could be invited to continue their collaboration as members of a national teaching and learning working group to inform the development and implementation of this national strategy.

Prioritise research into teaching and learning

Many partner inputs to the Next Steps project, including the perspectives of senior managers across the country, noted a need to monitor the impact of evolving teaching and learning practices to inform future decision-making. It was argued that if, as is anticipated, the future of higher education is to have a stronger online/remote dimension, including online/remote assessment, an evidence base will be needed regarding the nature and efficacy of new approaches and their impact on quality assurance, on student learning and engagement and on graduate outcomes.

In the context of the upcoming national research strategy, there is an opportunity to prioritise teaching and learning research. It is in the interests of national policy priorities to provide a dedicated annual funding stream for teaching and learning scholarship at local and national levels. There are also large-scale national data collection opportunities that are worth considering. The Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey provided robust evidence on the pre-pandemic digital engagement, experiences and expectations of close to 30,000 of those who teach and learn in Irish higher education¹⁸. A post-

pandemic iteration of this survey would provide an opportunity to better understand how the digital landscape has altered in recent years. Other annual instruments such as Studentsurvey.ie¹⁹ and the HEA's Graduate Outcomes Survey²⁰ may also be avenues to consider in building a robust ongoing base of evidence with respect to the efficacy and impact of evolving practices.

Prioritise learning technology/instructional design as a key skills need

Teaching and learning staff, and learning technologists/instructional designers in particular, became the frontline workers of higher education since March 2020. One result of this was that the existing shortage of learning technologists/instructional designers in Irish higher education was thrown into sharp relief. This skills shortage needs to be addressed with a sense of urgency at system level if there is to be a sufficient supply of expertise across higher education institutions available to support the development of agile curricula and the facilitation of online/remote learning and assessment. Further, provision needs to be made for an increase in related roles under the Employment Control Framework.

In Conclusion

The teaching and learning communities, structures, processes and practices underpinning the education of our learners have become increasingly visible since 2020. There is now an urgent need for the policy support for this central aspect of higher education to also become more visible. If engagement in, and commitment to, the enhancement of teaching and learning is to continue to be valued, and if the significant advances witnessed since 2020 are to be sustained, it is imperative that teaching and learning has purposeful, robust support at national policy level.

17 See here: <https://creatingourfuture.ie/>

18 See here: <http://teachingandlearning.ie/index>

19 See here: <https://studentsurvey.ie/>

20 See here: <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/graduate-outcomes/>