



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:

Moving Forward Together



Perspectives and Priorities of Senior Managers Across Irish Higher Education on the Digital Dimension of Teaching and Learning Pre- and Post-2020



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This *Next Steps Insight* provides a brief overview of the digital dimension of the pre-2020 teaching and learning context, and the views and priorities of institutional senior managers in the years leading up to the pandemic. A summary is then presented of the perspectives of senior managers across Irish higher education in 2021 with respect to what they have learned through the shift to online/remotely teaching and learning and what needs to be prioritised into the future.

Background

Since its establishment in 2013, a consistent focus of the National Forum, along with its partners and stakeholders, has been building digital capacity and capabilities across the sector by fostering engagement with innovative pedagogies, and the technologies which support these, and encouraging a culture of openness with regard to teaching and learning resources and practices in Irish higher education.

Taking an open and inclusive approach, the National Forum conducted a sectoral consultation throughout 2014, which involved a nationwide survey, focus groups and individual interviews with those who teach and students across the country, as well as input from international experts. This national consultation focused on four interlinked themes (digital pedagogy, digital literacy, technical infrastructure, and system and policy infrastructure) and resulted in the publication in 2015 of the Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World¹. The Digital Roadmap sought to support, connect, and enhance efforts at local or regional levels, and help to point to the collective ways in which the sector could work to build digital capacity to enhance the learning experience for students in Irish higher education.

The vision set out in the Digital Roadmap, agreed by the sector, was as follows:

The Irish higher education sector will be characterised by providing a higher education learning experience and environment in which:

- There is a culture that fully embraces digital learning and digital innovation and its contribution to realising transformative goals articulated in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030.
- Digital platforms, resources and tools are utilised to enhance teaching, learning and assessment, to connect teachers and students, and to increase the level and quality of learning-related communication.
- Digital literacy and digital skills for teaching and learning are developed, supported and fully embedded.
- Students will have access to a range of technological supports and resources to enhance their learning in a manner that enables them to become lifelong learners in the digital world.
- Teachers will be fully enabled to use digital technologies/resources where appropriate, in order to enhance student learning within their disciplines.
- Institutions collaborate with each other, and with the schools and further education sectors in order to build digital capacity for teaching and learning, with students as key partners in the process.
- Institutions collaborate effectively at the international level in both research and practice relating to technology-enhanced learning, for example through the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 initiatives, enabling Irish higher education institutions to partner in a global landscape, building connections and developing a reputation internationally for innovation, digital fluency and cooperation.

Acknowledging that we could all be using technology more effectively to improve the way we teach, and to enhance or transform the ways in which students are enabled to engage with their learning, the Digital Roadmap provided the foundation for developments in digital teaching and learning since 2014. In the years between 2014 and 2020, students, staff and entire local and national teaching and learning communities invested time, thought, effort and resources into realising the vision of the Digital Roadmap and much had been achieved by the time the pandemic struck.

As was voiced in the initial lessons learned shared by sectoral representatives in May 2020², although institutional closures

1 See here: <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2015-Teaching-and-Learning-in-Irish-Higher-Education-A-Roadmap-for-Enhancement-in-a-Digital-World-2015-2017.pdf>

2 See here: <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2020-Reflecting-and-Learning-web-ready.pdf>



were unforeseen, much of the work of the sector in the years leading to 2020 enabled and empowered the higher education community to respond in an informed and cohesive manner to the unexpected situation in which it found itself. Robust and relevant knowledge and experience had been developed which was transferred, re-purposed and re-imagined as necessary when the context of teaching and learning was suddenly transformed.

Perspectives and Priorities of Senior Managers Prior to 2020

As part of the consultation that informed the Digital Roadmap, in May 2014, individual structured interviews were held with senior managers across 24 HEIs to gather their insights on building digital capacity in Irish higher education. The findings of these interviews were reported in 'Strategic and Leadership Perspectives on Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education'³. While senior managers at the time clearly articulated a recognition of technology's potential as an ally of teaching and learning and as an important dimension of strategic development for HEIs, their reflections also highlighted deficiencies and challenges that the sector needed to address. It was clear that the potential of digital had not yet been fully realised. We were cautioned, however, against building digital capacity for its own sake and encouraged to develop a clear picture of how and why technology needs to be embraced in the interests of excellent teaching and learning.

In April 2017, to inform the second strategic phase of the National Forum, time was taken to consider progress against the vision and recommendations in the Digital Roadmap and senior managers from 30 HEIs took part in follow-up individual structured interviews to share their perspectives on developments since 2014 and their views on how digital could and should be shaped into the future. A subsequent report, 'Building Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education 2013–18: National Developments and Key Perspectives', summarised preceding developments and outlined the views of senior managers at that point in time⁴. According to this report, senior managers in all but four institutions indicated in 2017 that 'digital capacity' had permeated discussion of strategy and planning in their respective institutions. Further, all senior managers noted progress in at least one of the following aspects of change since 2014:

- embedding of digital practices more deeply where they were already established;
- extending the reach of existing practices to encompass a greater number of staff, students and modules;
- scaling up of online course provision to meet flexible learning needs and to open up access to a wider range of programmes, at either undergraduate or postgraduate level.

Two challenges that had been identified by senior managers in 2014 were considered to warrant continued attention three years later:

- adequately planning, designing and funding ICT infrastructure;
- scaling up digital initiatives in the face of ongoing system rigidities.

New themes identified by senior managers in looking beyond 2017 included:

- supporting the professional development of those who teach, including the centrality of digital capability, shifting the focus from technology to the people who engage with it;
- optimising the use of data, such as learning analytics, to foster the success of all students;
- supporting staff and students to engage with technology-enhanced assessment;
- a focus on learning design, including innovative design, digital learning experiences and delivery models.

The importance of re-articulating a national vision for digital teaching and learning was highlighted by senior managers, to gain a clearer understanding of what might be achieved by fully embedding digital in teaching and learning.

In response to these insights from senior managers, the following high-level aims were included in the 2019-21 strategy of the National Forum⁵:

- Consolidate and continue to lead ongoing efforts to enhance the digital skills, confidence and competence of all those who teach and learn in Irish higher education.
- Rearticulate a national vision for digital teaching and learning which is collaborative, responsive and adaptable to institutional contexts.

In addition, the National Forum and its sectoral partners conducted a national survey of the digital engagement, experiences and expectations of close to 30,000 students and staff in late 2019⁶.

The 2017 interviews with senior managers also indicated that thinking about 'digital capacity' had evolved in the direction of organisational transformation and understanding and managing organisational change with regard to digital was considered an area that deserved focused attention. It could not, of course, have been anticipated at the time the dramatic levels of change institutions were to undergo just a few years later.

Post-2020 Priorities and Perspectives of Senior Managers

As part of the national partnership project, Next Steps for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together⁷, it was decided to hold a third round of interviews with senior managers across the sector to continue the conversation on digital teaching and learning and to better understand how the sudden shift to online/remote education had impacted senior leadership

3 See here: <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2014-Strategic-and-Leadership-Perspectives-on-Digital-Capacity-in-Irish-Higher-Education.pdf>

4 See here: https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Digital_Overview_2018_AW_180219.pdf

5 See here: https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF_Strategy_2019-21_AW-Web.pdf

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

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



thinking and views of the future. In all, leaders across 31 higher education institutions participated in structured interviews in May 2021. Interviewees included presidents, registrars and vice presidents for academic affairs. In some institutions, senior staff with responsibility for teaching and learning also joined senior managers in the interviews. The choice of who to be interviewed was left to individual institutions⁸.

Below is a summary of key reflections arising from discussions with senior managers with respect to what they had learned from their experience as higher education senior managers since March 2020 and implications for the future of teaching and learning in Ireland.

The pandemic context drew attention to existing strengths and weaknesses.

As was found from insights shared during the initial months of the pandemic⁹, senior managers noted that how well individual departments and institutions were positioned to support students and staff through this crisis was influenced by the investment of time and resources in digital (and non-digital) teaching and learning structures, resources and communities that had already taken place. The ability to adapt and supplement existing resources, communication channels and decision-making structures was central to ensuring the success of collective institutional endeavours after 2020.

Similarly, where barriers related to practices, resources, structures or institutional culture had delayed progress in recent years, this was exacerbated when pressure was put on the institutional system through the move to online/remote learning.

Delivery definitely depended on the level of confidence staff had in Blackboard. Prior to Covid 20% of staff used it regularly - they were definitely better off than staff who had just used it as a repository.

Optimising the balance between online/remote and face-to-face teaching and learning into the future will not be a one-size-fits-all decision.

Perhaps the most persistent question for senior managers as they returned to a degree of on-campus learning in 2021 was how the balance between online/remote and face-to-face teaching, learning and assessment should be optimised immediately and into the future. It was acknowledged that while the affordances of online/remote learning are many, the on-campus experience is also crucial and can be especially important for cohorts such as undergraduate students, international students and students who benefit from specific in-person supports and services. Similarly, some subject areas face stronger challenges than others in the remote/online context.

Those interviewed had mixed views and intentions, reflecting a variety of institutional considerations and priorities. It was clear that such decisions would be made at local rather than national level, taking into account the composition of the given student body and the needs of individual student cohorts, the disciplinary makeup of the institution and the needs of individual subject areas, and the infrastructural and resource opportunities and constraints within the local context.

There is a diversity of thought, from programmes where the best way was considered to be teaching on campus to those who want to see more online which they consider to be revolutionary and effective.

Further national guidance and dialogue would be welcome in priority areas.

While senior managers recognised that some issues need to be considered and supported at local level, there were topics for which further national guidance and sectoral dialogue were sought. These included those that have been given dedicated focus in recent years by the National Forum, QQI and other bodies, such as:

- Quality assurance guidance for less traditional modes of teaching, learning and assessment.
- A shared terminology and understanding regarding less traditional modes of teaching, learning and assessment.
- National guidance on policies and practices related to copyright, intellectual property rights and data security and protection.
- National guidance on academic integrity and online/remote assessment, including proctoring.

There was consensus that if less traditional and more inclusive, flexible approaches are to become more embedded within institutional strategies and quality assurance process, it is imperative that, locally and nationally, a shared language is in use and robust policies and practices are in place to underpin quality learning experiences and outcomes.

We need to have better alignment and agreement around blended learning at a sectoral level.

There are some misconceptions now around ownership of materials that we need to resolve.

The pandemic context accelerated progress towards existing ambitions, but difficult decisions and conversations remain.

More varied, authentic assessment approaches, including those enhanced by technology, have long been an ambition of those invested in the enhancement of teaching and learning. Similarly, agile higher education curricula characterised by multiple learning pathways, universal design and the ability for students to access learning in a manner that suits their individual circumstances have been pointed to as necessary to meeting both economic and social policy ambitions.

Flexibility emerged as possible in response to the emergency context since 2020 and great strides have been made. The sector was provided with a glimpse of the kind of flexibility that is possible in order to achieve the vision of inclusive, accessible, lifelong learning opportunities that meet the needs of all.

We have accelerated our online strategy; we accelerated ten years in the last ten months.

A concern was voiced by senior managers, regarding whether and how this positive momentum could be sustained in the long term. The question was raised as to whether the injection

8 See the appendix for a full list of 2021 interview participants

9 See here: <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2020-Reflecting-and-Learning-web-ready.pdf>



of funding, attention, and agility in sectoral decision-making that made change possible since 2020 would endure.

A number of topics were raised as needing attention at the system level if positive transformation was to gain meaningful traction in the years ahead:

- The need to ensure the workload models of staff who teach allow them the time and space to continuously upskill and enhance their approaches to curriculum design, teaching and assessment.
- The need to ensure that consideration is taken of staff and student well-being within an increasingly online/remote digital context.
- The need to build capacity in learning technology and learning design so that there is an adequate pool of experts available to meet the expanding needs of institutions.
- The need for further dialogue with professional and regulatory bodies to consider how learning outcomes and professional competencies can be developed, supported and assessed through more authentic, inclusive, equitable educational approaches.
- The need to build capacity in change management. While understanding and managing organisational change was a theme mentioned as deserving of attention by senior managers in 2017, the pandemic context, added to the ongoing re-shaping of the higher education landscape, amplified the need to prepare for the unexpected and navigate uncertainty with clarity of purpose.
- The need for sustained funding and policy support for all aspects of teaching and learning. If, as most senior managers intend, the future of teaching and learning in Irish higher education is to leverage technology to make learning more inclusive, accessible and flexible for all, this will require significant and sustained system-level support to address issues such as digital literacy, digital equity and digital infrastructure in an informed, consultative manner.

Blended learning requires more preparation, shouldn't be 'can you pay me more to work longer hours', we need greater investment in the sector to get better staff/student ratios and better technological based learning.

We need more engagement around online and blended learning at a sectoral level with the professional bodies.

New evidence is needed to inform ongoing decisions

While considerable evidence was built prior to 2020 regarding the characteristics of excellent teaching and learning, the roles of learning technologists, the professional development needs of those who teach, assessment and feedback practices, and staff and student digital engagement, experiences and expectations, senior managers pointed to the importance of building new evidence for a potential new context.

Most institutions conducted local surveys and evidence gathering exercises in order to inform local decisions since 2020. However, the need was highlighted for a more substantial evidence base at national and local levels. It was argued that if assessment practices are to change and online/remote learning is to become more embedded in the long term, the nature of related adjustments and the impact of related approaches on

quality assurance, on student learning and engagement and on graduate outcomes needs to be monitored on a continuous basis.

We don't want to see a knee-jerk reaction to online learning that is not based on real research.

In Conclusion

The last decade has seen significant advances in the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education and, while the direction of travel has remained clear throughout, the pace of change accelerated in 2020. The benefits of online/remote teaching and learning have long been known but never experienced by so many. There are now important decisions to be made across institutions. As one senior manager put it, 'We need a culture change in higher education to cope with the new technological reality and the flexibility needs of students into the future'. This culture change will require a shared understanding and language, collaborative dialogue, national guidance and evidence, and robust policy support at system level.



Appendix: Senior Managers who Participated in Interviews in 2021

We would like to express sincere gratitude to the staff in leadership roles across our HEIs who took the time to engage in interviews to inform this work during a very busy period in the academic year cycle.

Senior Managers who Participated in Interviews in 2021

Institution	Interviewee	Position/Title
University College Dublin	Professor Marie Clarke	Director of Centre for Higher Education and Dean of Undergraduate Studies
Trinity College Dublin	Patricia Callaghan	Academic Secretary
University of Maynooth	Dr Alison Hood	Dean of Teaching and Learning
University College Cork	Professor John O'Halloran	President
NUIG	Professor Pól O'Dochairtaigh	Deputy President and Registrar
University of Limerick	Professor Kirsten Mey	President
Dublin City University	Professor Lisa Looney	VP Academic Affairs
RCSI	Professor Cathal Kelly	President
Sligo IT	Dr Brendan McCormack	President
	Professor Jacqueline Mc Cormack	Vice President (Online Development)
	Dr Gavin Clinch	Head of Online Learning (Student Experience)
	Dr Niamh Plunkett	Head of Teaching and Learning
	Dr Perry Share	Head of School of Business and Social Sciences
Athlone Institute of Technology/Limerick IT/Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest	Dr Niall Seery	TU Project Director
Dundalk IT	Dr Michael Mulvey	President
	Dr Sheila Flanagan	Vice President and Registrar
Letterkenny IT	Dr. Paul Hannigan	President
	Dr Billy Bennett	VP Academic Affairs and Registrar
GMIT	Dr Orla Flynn	President
Carlow IT	Dr Patricia Mulcahy	President
	Dr Gina Noonan	Head of Centre for Teaching and Learning
	Dr David Denieffe	VP Academic and Registrar
IADT	Dr Andrew Power	Registrar and Vice-President for Equality and Diversity
Waterford IT	Professor Willie Donnelly	President
Athlone Institute of Technology/ Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest	Ms Frances O'Connell	VP Academic Affairs and Registrar
	Dr Nuala Harding	Head of Department of Learning and Teaching
Marino Institute of Education	Professor Teresa O'Doherty	President
St Angela's College Sligo	Dr Edel Mc Sharry	Acting President
NCAD	Professor Sarah Glennie	Director
Mary Immaculate College Limerick	Professor Eugene Wall	President
Carlow College, St Patrick's	Dr Margaret Murphy	Assistant Registrar for Academic Affairs
Dublin Business School	Mr Andrew Conlan-Trant	President
	Mr Neil Gallagher	President
	Mr Joe Gorey	Principal
IBAT College	Dr Finbar Murphy	Registrar
	Dr Brid Lane	Head of School
National College of Ireland	Ms Gina Quin	President
IICP College	Dr Aine O'Reilly	Quality Assurance Manager
Griffith College	Professor Diarmuid Hegarty	President
	Ms Alice Childs	Learning Technologies Manager
	Dr Tomás Mac Eochagáin	College Director, Director of Academic Programmes
Hibernia College	Dr Mary Kelly	Head of School of Education
MTU	Dr Áine Ní Shé	Registrar and VP for Academic Affairs
TU Dublin	Dr Mary Meaney	Registrar and Deputy President