

Forum Insights for Students in Higher Education

REPORT

Strategic and Leadership Perspectives on Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education

Jim Devine, February 2015

A report commissioned by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Introduction

This **Forum Insight** summarises the key aspects of a report commissioned by the National Forum. The report examines senior management and strategic perspectives on building digital capacity in Irish Higher Education. It does this by analysing: interviews with senior academic leaders and institutions' Mission Based Performance Compacts. Mission Based Performance Compacts are part of the new performance based funding model introduced for higher education in Ireland. What follows is a summary of the key points with cross-references to the text of the original report should you wish to read further.

Context

- A fundamental part of National Higher Education strategy challenges us to address the changing expectations and learning experiences of students, and technology can play a key role in addressing this challenge (p 1).
- The Mission-based Performance Compacts (2014–2016) contain a broad indication then of the issues that are being prioritised by your institutions and by the sector as a whole (p.3).

Approach

- The report also presents the insights provided by interviews with Registrars/VPs for Academic Affairs on how digital capacity is being developed within the institutions.
- The report also looked at Mission-based Performance Compacts for 26 HEIs to see what they said about technology and about using digital technology to help improve learning and learning experiences.

What do institutions' plans tell us?

- Institutions projected a growth in the number of students who will be engaged in flexible modes of study (e.g. on distance, remote or blended programmes, where students will access their education in more flexible ways). The percentage growth projected differs across the sector from 9% to 36% (p13).
- We don't yet have a strong shared understanding of or cohesive vision for how best to develop and use digital capacity for higher education (p.8).
- Institutions agree on the importance of continuing professional development for academic staff to equip them with the skills and capabilities for making the best use of technology (p9).

What do the interviews with Registrars tell us?

- Higher education institutions express concerns about three key things when it comes to using technology more effectively.
 - o Sustainability: ability to fund on an ongoing basis the necessary expansion of ICT networks/services/platforms.
 - o Managing the changing expectations of the 'digital student'.
 - o Scalability: current staffing levels for essential support staff (e.g., educational technologists) are too low to allow for any step change (p.16).
- Emerging Themes:
 - o There is a strong level of support for developing the teaching skills of academic staff to include greater capability in the use of technology for teaching
 - o A lot of innovation in the use of technology in teaching is already taking place and there is a lot of support for 'bottom-up innovations' where individuals and groups of teachers develop their teaching in new, interesting and effective ways, using technology.
 - o Institutions want to collaborate with each other within regions and across the sector to help develop these skills
 - o There is some support for collaborative, inter-institutional course design and development as one logical outcome of regional clustering.
 - o There is broad agreement that quality processes in higher education institutions should incorporate a focus on how institutions are using technology to enhance teaching (p15).
- Digital strategies (for design, development and delivery of academic programmes) are partial and fragmented. Alignment with overall institutional, regional or national strategies for higher education is still weak. While bottom-up approaches are strong, their ability to impact on the mainstream is still limited (p.19).

Conclusion

- From a leadership perspective, proposals for developing digital capacity, through the National Forum, will help build on the work of institutions to date and identify important actions for all institutions to enhance the student learning experience. Overall this report suggests that Ireland is relatively well placed to take a strategic position on digital learning in higher education. (p.22).