

## Forum Insights for Teachers 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: institutions' Mission Based Performance Compacts and interviews with senior academic leaders. Mission Based Performance Compacts are part of the new performance based funding model introduced in Ireland, and in them, institutions describe their plans for modernisation of teaching and learning and for widening access and participation. 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

- This report addresses a leadership perspective on digital capacity from two angles. On the one hand, HEI strategies are now aligned with the National Strategy for Higher Education through 'Mission-based Performance Compacts' and our universities, institutes of technology (IoTs) and colleges have been asked to make explicit their goals for modernisation of teaching and learning and for widening access and participation.
- On the other hand, leadership for innovation and change that is sustainable, widespread, cross-institutional and that benefits all students in higher education (HE) is challenging.
- Building digital capacity, ... challenges us to address the complex and dynamic balance between innovation in academics' teaching practices and the changing expectations and learning experience of students (p1).
- The second report of the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education (2014) focuses specifically on 'new modes of learning and teaching in higher education' and asserts:
 

*There remains a culture of conservatism within European higher education which needs to change... [w]hile a broad range of good practice is already emerging across Europe, this is happening to a large degree in an unco-ordinated bottom-up approach. It is now time for governments and institutions to develop comprehensive strategies at both the national and institutional level for the adoption of new modes of learning and teaching within higher education.*
- The focus on digital capacity building has shifted decisively towards questions of professional development of academic staff in their teaching roles and to the organisational factors that must be addressed in order to embed changes of scale and sustainability.

- Significant digital capacity can only be built through sharing and alignment of perspectives that also include those provided by individual academic staff as practitioners, staff in learning support roles and, of course, students themselves (p2).

### Approach

- Mission-based Performance Compacts for 26 HEIs were examined in detail to elicit all references that can be considered to have a bearing on digital capacity and on the related ability to set targets for flexibility and diversity in programme delivery (p4).
- A consultation process involving one-on-one interviews with Registrars, also including in some cases staff with institution-wide responsibility for learning support. In all, 24 institutions participated in this process and interviews were conducted in May 2014 (p5).

### Findings

#### What do institutions' plans tell us?

- The overall pattern is something of a patchwork that does not present a picture of a higher education sector with a shared understanding or cohesive vision for digital capacity (p8).
- By far the greatest level of agreement, at 70% of HEIs, is on the importance of CPD for academic staff (p9).
- Further analysis is possible by looking at differences between the universities (7), the institutes of technology (14) and other colleges (5) (p11).
- HEIs, in the context of their Mission-based Performance Compacts were also asked to project student numbers out to 2016 including the numbers of students engaged in flexible modes of study. Responses range from a low of 9% to a cluster in or around 27%, with one outlier projecting 37% of students engaged in 'flexible learning' (p13).

#### What do interviews with Registrars and senior staff tell us?

- Emerging Themes:
  - A strong level of support is evident for academic staff CPD and for the professionalisation of the teaching role of academic staff.
  - Support is strong for collaborative actions on CPD mediated through the T&L Forum and also through the emerging regional clusters.

- o Learning innovation (digital) is taking place and bottom-up innovations are facilitated; there is little appetite for strategic (top down) initiatives at institutional level.
- 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 matters related to digital or online learning and digital capacity generally ('new modes of teaching and learning') should be brought systematically into the mainstream of institutional quality assurance processes (p15).
- Three concerns are dominant:
  - o Sustainability: ability to fund on an ongoing basis the necessary expansion of ICT networks/services/platforms.
  - o Managing the expectations of the 'digital student', consistent with those identified in the 2014 JISC study, including for example ubiquitous connectivity, ability to mix the use their own devices with those provided by the institution, consistent use of a VLE and engagement with academic staff who are confident operating in a digital environment.
  - o Scalability: current staffing levels for essential support staff (e.g., educational technologists) are too low to allow for any step change in the level of digital learning integration or for the scaling up of already established pilots (p16).
- There is strong agreement that academic quality assurance processes (course validations, departmental reviews, institutional reviews) provide a real opportunity for setting the agenda for 'new modes of teaching and learning'.
- There is also agreement that institutional strategy development should include consideration of new modes of teaching and learning, while ensuring that 'digital' is in its appropriate context and not perceived as an end in itself.
- There is a realisation that the time has come to move beyond current boundaries, albeit that this means advocating for more resources, creating stronger collaborative structures and extending educational technologists' roles in order to support and sustain initiatives of greater scale and impact (p18).
- 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 remains limited (p19).

## Conclusion

- Incremental building of digital capacity (for academic programme design, delivery, support and assessment) within the higher education system in Ireland and within individual HEIs is a work in progress, and both the Compacts and the interviews with Registrars indicate a supportive leadership stance.
- Proposals for building digital capacity, in development under the aegis of the National Forum, provide an opportunity to strike the appropriate balance between top-down and bottom-up initiatives, and to set tangible goals for a modernised digitally enabled HE system nationally.
- Notwithstanding resource constraints, Ireland is relatively well placed to take a strategic position on digital learning in higher education (p22).