Forum Insights for Managers 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 (IoT) 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, and the perceptions of Registrars and others in academic and/or learning support leadership roles is valuable in elaborating an understanding of gaps between aspirations and reality and about how they can be bridged. (p1)

Approach to Analysis
- Mission-based Performance Compacts for 26 HEIs were examined. These included 7 universities, 14 institutes of technology and 5 other colleges (four representing Teacher Education and the National College of Art and Design) (p4).
- Compacts were examined to identify all mentions (in any section) relevant to digital capacity. Where institutions documented specific targets, these too were noted separately. A template was designed incorporating a total of 12 categories under which mentions and targets could be recorded (p5).
- The Registrars/VPs for Academic Affairs were invited to engage in one-to-one interviews as opposed to meeting as a group, an approach that proved to be both welcome and successful. In all, 24 HEIs participated. Interviews took place either face to face, by videoconference or by telephone. Interviews lasted from between 30 to 40 minutes (p7).

Analysis and 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).
- What is evident is the gap that exists between intentions or aspirations (expressed as 'mentions') and the ability of HEIs to attach explicit targets to them for the period covered by the Compacts up to 2016. This may reflect uncertainties about resources (staffing, under the Employment Control Framework (ECF), or budgets in general) or a lack of clarity about the specific actions that might be required to turn aspirations into reality (p8).
- By far the greatest level of agreement, at 70% of HEIs, is on the importance of CPD for academic staff; however only 40% of institutions have been explicit about their targets in relation to this. There is even less agreement across the other categories (p9).
- Further analysis is possible by looking at differences between the universities (7), the institutes of technology (14) and other colleges (5) (p11).
- Overall, this first cycle of Mission-based Performance Compacts presents a picture of a higher education sector adjusting to new strategic imperatives while at the same coping with unprecedented staffing and budgetary constraints. Institutional consolidation and clustering are dominant drivers of change with impacts expected in how academic programme portfolios are planned and delivered. Digital capacity features in the Compacts as an important but as yet not fully defined enabler of such strategic change (p13).
- HEIs, in the context of their Mission-based Performance Compacts were also asked to project student numbers out to 2016 under three categories: full-time, part-time and remote. They were also requested to project the numbers of students engaged in flexible modes of study and to indicate what percentage of overall enrolments such students would comprise. 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) (see table p 14).

What do interviews with Registrars and senior staff tell us?

Semi-structured interviews with Registrars, also including in some cases academic managers involved in institution-wide learning support roles were undertaken. The interviews covered the following broad areas:

Issues explored with Academics in Senior/Strategic Roles
Concerns and aspirations for the higher education sector when it comes to enhancing teaching and learning in an increasingly digital age.
Opportunities for developing a sectoral approach to building digital capacity in Irish higher education.
Examples of practice either nationally or internationally?
Specific actions in support of digital capacity building that are tangible/possible and that are realistically achievable within the current challenging operating environment at either INSTITUTIONAL or SECTOR levels.
Challenges: Specific digital capacity building actions that may be desirable/urgent but difficult to undertake at this time?

Emerging Themes:

- A strong level of support is evident for academic staff CPD and for the professionalisation of the teaching role of academic staff.
- There is some support for collaborative, inter-institutional course design and development as one logical outcome of regional clustering.
- 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).

Concerns to be addressed

- Sustainability: ability to fund on an on-going basis the necessary expansion of ICT networks/services/platforms.
- Managing the expectations of the 'digital student'.
- Scalability: current staffing levels for essential support staff (e.g., educational technologists) are too low to allow for any step change (p16).
- Concern seems widespread about what is perceived as poor/limited use of VLEs (often used merely as repositories for very basic content). (p16)

- Poor interoperability of VLEs is also regarded as a potential obstacle to inter-institutional collaboration (p16).
- Concern was widely expressed about inbuilt rigidities in the system as a whole. These are often seen to drive institutional behaviours, but not in a way that supports flexibility for students or develops the aspirations for the diversity espoused in the National Strategy for HE (p17).

Meaningful actions at sectoral or regional cluster levels

- Strong support is evident for inter-institutional programme development and delivery. (p17).
- There is also strong support for sector-led CPD, centred on enhancing learning design. (p17)
- Also required, and best addressed at sector level, is the benchmarking of practices in order to build the evidence base and cost models/business cases for different kinds of digitally supported pedagogical practices (p18)

Meaningful actions at institutional level

- 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 (p18).
- Registrars agree that HEIs tend to rely on a strategy that supports bottom-up initiatives. The roles of 'champions' and 'educational technologists' are widely understood and supported, (but need to be reviewed in light of current developments). (p18).

Conclusions

- What is evident from both Compacts and interviews is that digital strategies (for design, development and delivery of academic programmes) are partial and fragmented. (p19).
- 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 is supported by institutional leaders (p22).
- There are as yet few metrics and only a poor understanding of the impacts that could be anticipated if systematic efforts were to be made to achieve digital capacity at scale (p22).
- Proposals for building digital capacity being lead by 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 (p22).