



TEACHING AND LEARNING IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION:
A ROADMAP FOR ENHANCEMENT IN A DIGITAL WORLD 2015-2017



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

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY



A Note from our National Forum Patron, Professor Mary McAleese

Digital technology is an important ally for higher education. That is the clear message of this extended roadmap document for building digital capacity in Irish higher education. It is also the clear message from the European Commission's recent (October 2014) High Level Group (HLG) report *New Modes of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. It is very encouraging and reassuring to see Ireland embrace the imperative of using the new technologies to advance the science of pedagogy, to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, to customise the student experience of both, to widen access, expand opportunities for life-long learning and continuing professional development, to promote diversity in the higher education sector, to lift local, regional and international collaborations to a completely new level and much more.

Investment in the new technologies is an imperative for Ireland, indeed for the European Union if the sector is to be fully fit for purpose and as modern and up-to-date as we can make it. It is particularly encouraging to see an emphasis in Ireland on a multi-dimensional approach to the use of technology in education, and the strong and categorical focus on listening to and working with students in pursuing all teaching and learning enhancement goals.

It is clear that there is a serious collective commitment among Irish higher education institutions to work together to embrace technology in education in order to build a stronger educational future. The work has already begun. But in order to fulfil its potential, educational and learner goals need to be right at the forefront of all deliberations and developments. The High Level Group wants to see the learner in the driver's seat when it comes, for example, to collecting, analysing and using data on his or her learning progression. This is one of the reasons why the National Forum's commitment to engaging with students in a partnership approach is just so heartening. The authentic involvement of students in an enhancement agenda that is fully inclusive, reciprocal and genuinely empowering can only lend strength to the journey on which we have embarked.

I look forward to a time and soon, when Europe will act more nimbly in its mainstreaming and widening use of technology to enhance learning. To make that radical but essential shift happen, I encourage the collaboration of institutional leaders, students, teachers and support staff, on whom the successful adoption of technology depends.

The Irish higher education sector has begun the journey towards transformation of our teaching and learning landscape. This extended roadmap provides a strong set of pointers to how the work can gather the sustaining momentum it will need to provoke the exciting transformative change that is possible and so vital to Europe's future.



CHAIR'S Preface

In this document we build on the preliminary roadmap published by the National Forum in May 2014¹ by highlighting key considerations which aim to address the challenges more explicitly.

This extended report has several aims.

- It **synthesises** the extensive consultation² and research undertaken as part of building the roadmap for digital capacity (digital capacity is defined as a **concept that refers generally to** the skills, competencies, attitudes, infrastructure and resources that enable people to work, live and learn in a world that is increasingly digital)³.
- It places the collective challenges and implications of digital capacity within a **wider framework** that connects bottom up and top down pragmatic actions. This framework speaks to our sector's shared vision of 'a [higher education] culture that fully embraces digital learning and digital innovation' (*Digital Roadmap – Phase 1* (2014)).
- It presents focused, action-orientated ways in which such a culture can be achieved, including an identification of **who are the key drivers for the different dimensions of capacity building**.
- It encourages and informs purposeful dialogue between key stakeholders within and across our institutions so that our agreed vision, principles and priorities can be translated into **tangible and transformative actions on the ground**.

Building digital capacity to enhance teaching and learning is going to involve the widespread development of teacher skills, an agreed common language⁴, a review of current infrastructure; a stronger set of specific supporting policies, collaboration across institutions and meaningful and ongoing inputs from diverse students across the sector. Engagement at the level of the disciplines is extremely important, because this is where meaningful pedagogical innovation and change happens: working at this level is likely to change the practices of individuals and to have an impact on learning.

Our sectoral consultations highlighted tensions and paradoxes associated with building digital capacity in Irish higher education. We have strong foundations and highly developed expertise on the one hand, coupled with serious resource challenges on the other; there is a need to respect and promote institutional, teacher⁵ and disciplinary autonomy while also transcending institutional and disciplinary boundaries in the interest of whole-sector enhancement; there remains a strong need to recognise that the human, relational aspects of excellent learning environments are not necessarily or automatically enhanced by technology, but that digital capacity nevertheless has powerful and ever-increasing

1 Full title: *Principles and First Insights from the Sectoral Consultation on Building Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education: Digital Roadmap, Phase 1*.

2 See Appendix 1.

3 Digital capacity can be expressed at the individual, organisational and national levels.

4 See Appendix 2.

5 Lecturers, University Teachers and other grades of staff involved in frontline teaching in the sector.

potential that must be embraced and utilised more fully; it is important to emphasise the differences between efficiency and effectiveness when exploring the possibilities of technology-enhanced learning; and it is also important to engage with both the opportunities and the hazards of learning in a world that is increasingly digital.

It is encouraging also to note that even though we are encountering the same challenges in embracing digital technology as those encountered in other countries – in many instances we are already finding ways of dealing with these challenges that distinguish the Irish sector as capable of offering global leadership in this space⁶.

There are aspects of digital capacity that can effectively solve problems of expansion, while also having an impact on the effectiveness of teaching and learning – but it is important to recognise that economies of scale are not a given.

All institutions must be free and empowered to determine their own strategies and directions within their particular contexts and to pursue their diverse, ambitious and challenging goals on the higher education landscape. Digital capacity should support vibrant teaching and learning strategies. But improving learning and teaching through digital capacity is a collective endeavour. By making improvements together, by building regional clusters and other partnerships we stand to enhance Ireland's higher education reputation in the wider European and international context as well as supporting the work of individual institutions.

Throughout the consultative process of developing this digital roadmap, one thing has been made repeatedly clear: 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. This extended roadmap brings together the know-how and expertise from across the sector to point to some of the most important ways forward.

Again, I am hugely grateful to Dr Terry Maguire whose leadership in developing this roadmap deserves very special mention. I acknowledge the dedicated work of Jim Devine, Kevin O'Rourke, Sarah O'Toole, Eloise Tan and Elizabeth Noonan, key members of the Forum team whose contributions to the research and thinking behind this roadmap document have been so substantial. I recognise with huge gratitude all the members of the Board of the National Forum for their energy, commitment and guidance. And I warmly thank all those very many teachers, students, managers, educational technologists and experts across the entire sector whose collaborative contributions to this process have provided real cause for optimism as we move to build digital capacity in Irish higher education.

Prof. Sarah Moore

Chair, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

6 See for example POERUP (2014) Policies for OER Uptake. <http://www.poerup.info/index.html>.

The Vision For Digital Capacity In Irish Higher Education

The cross-sectoral consultations that informed our preliminary roadmap gave rise to the articulation of an emerging, shared vision for building digital capacity that aligned with many of the issues and concerns identified in the national strategy for higher education.

This vision is outlined below:

The Irish higher education sector will be characterised by providing a HE 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
- 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 (HEI) to partner in a global landscape, building connections and developing a reputation internationally for innovation, digital fluency and cooperation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the major challenges facing 21st century higher education is finding a way to harness ever-increasing digital capacity to enhance student learning. One of the key goals of the National Forum is, via wide consultation, to create a digital roadmap to help to guide institutions and organisations in the development of local and national digital strategies and to ensure alignment, coherence and a sense of common endeavour at a sectoral level.

This document is designed to inform and guide senior managers, heads of department, schools or faculties and leaders within the higher education sector. It focuses also on systems-level higher education organisations, as well as representative organisations within the sector which together must take the lead in building digital capacity to enhance teaching and learning across the sector. The roadmap identifies the key priorities for change and provides an informed framework for supporting organisations in addressing these priorities.

Building digital capacity is about much more than developing a capacity for online course provision and the use of digital tools. It is about developing new ways of dealing with information, working and learning in a digital environment, using time and information differently, and developing new versatility when it comes to interaction in learning environments. Embracing the full potential of digital technology poses a challenge to many of our basic structures, our assumptions, our policies and procedures, not least regarding our beliefs and attitudes about the role and nature of higher education itself.

Principles underpinning the Forum's Digital Roadmap

The National Forum, through its consultancy processes, has identified a number of important principles upon which to base its four key recommendations. These principles are summarised below and are discussed in more detail in the document.

1. The need to integrate approaches to building digital capacity across the sector

Institutions have begun to articulate their own strategies for technology-enhanced learning, and many are working to engage in research, develop new approaches and build skills that embrace and exploit more fully the use of technology for teaching. By bringing together the sectoral expertise that informs this roadmap, the Forum aims to support, connect, and enhance efforts at local and regional levels, and to point to the collective ways in which the sector can work to build digital capacity to enhance and develop learning in Irish higher education.

2. The commitment to continuing engagement with stakeholders in the sector including employers, external communities, schools and further education providers; acknowledging that they are best placed to identify current needs, and thereby to scope a future vision for technology-enhanced learning

This document outlines how the National Forum's ongoing consultation process will seek to elaborate and develop policy and strategy over the coming months. It identifies the steps that will lay the

foundation for mobilising, energising and guiding the sector in a coherent way to achieve a measurable national vision for digital capacity in higher education. It acknowledges the newly emerging regional clusters as an important dimension of the sector's ability to build digital capacity.

3. The engagement of students as partners

The Forum considers that inclusion of the student voice is a key value in building digital capacity. We commit to seeking out students' perspectives on all aspects of the Forum's work plan and to develop ways to engage students as vital partners.

4. The use of learning spaces and digital capacity for rich learning

In general, the (re)design of space and its use (ownership and timetabling) are poorly represented in the discourse about learning in the digital age. Innovative design and use of space can accommodate formal and informal learning opportunities. Creation, for example, of 'studio' type spaces provides opportunities for 'group ownership' and for engagement in extended projects or 'blocks' rather than the highly segmented timetables that are more familiar to students.

5. The need to interrogate the myths and understand the realities associated with digital learning

Technology attracts fears and expectations in all fields, not least in education. Some persistent perceptions still thrive and need to be confronted with evidence-based approaches to understanding the rationale and the implications of embracing technology in appropriate ways. Persistent rhetoric has promoted notions that there are willing and waiting student markets for online courses across all cohorts and disciplines; that technology-enhanced teaching necessarily provides more cost effective ways of teaching and will automatically improve access to higher education; that students have unproblematic enthusiasm for learning online; that technology will, of itself, bring a change in the way people teach and learn.

Recommendations

The following are the four main recommendations of the National Forum, with each recommendation showing their intended outcomes. These recommendations and outcomes are explored in full in the document.

Recommendation 1: Prioritise the strategic development of digital capacity in institutional and national policy and quality frameworks in a way that supports innovation for impact

If Recommendation 1 is successfully implemented, the following kinds of outcomes can be expected:

- Every higher education institution in the sector will have a strategy and implementation plan for the development of digital capacity to enhance teaching and learning
- Strategies will be aligned across regional clusters or other multi-institutional partnerships, as appropriate
- Strategies will be realistic and clear about where institutions are positioned currently and will set real targets for where they want to be in 2017

- Departments/schools/faculties will take an active role in supporting and mobilising grass roots innovation to enhance teaching and learning
- Students, regardless of their registration as full-time, part-time or distance learners will have an improved, more integrated learning experience, enhanced with technology appropriate to their needs
- There will be increased use of active learning approaches to the student experience that harnesses the potential of technology, while building digital skills and confidence
- Higher education policies and funding will enable and support institutions in their commitment to build digital capacity
- There will be a more coherent approach and improved communication and transition between all levels of education, facilitated by the effective use of technology

Recommendation 2: Strengthen and support collaboration within and between institutions, and with different parts of the higher education sector; develop shared policies and infrastructure that reflect the complexity of an increasingly digital world

If Recommendation 2 is successfully implemented, the following kinds of outcomes can be expected:

- Higher education institutions will be able to work collaboratively to develop processes and policies that enable innovation and development in a regulated and increasingly digital world
- Institutions will pilot stronger team-based approaches (involving teachers, students, IT and academic support staff) to teaching and learning, curriculum design and programme development; new modes of learning and innovation should be integrated from the outset of such pilots
- Initiatives will be put in place that specifically provide opportunities for staff to appreciate and understand the complex policy environment within which they work (to include policies at institutional, cluster, national and international level)
- Evidence will show that departments take an increasingly active role in driving change within an institution
- Higher education institutions will ensure that when reviewing their technological infrastructure they give sufficient regard to an institutional strategy for digital learning/digital capacity building and develop a strategy for ongoing development

Recommendation 3: Develop a consistent, seamless and coherent digital experience for students in Irish higher education and actively engage with students and teachers to develop their digital skills and knowledge

If Recommendation 3 is successfully implemented, the following kinds of outcomes can be expected:

- There will be evidence of coordination across the range of actors including librarians, academics, IT specialists, learning support staff in the provision of a seamless digital experience for students
- Digital skills and knowledge development will be integrated into the national professional development framework

- Graduate attributes will incorporate digital awareness and literacy
- Institutions will adopt open education principles with regard to teaching and learning resources and practices
- Open educational resources will be developed and shared nationally through institutional or shared repositories
- The issues of copyright and intellectual property in higher education will be clarified at a national level

Recommendation 4: Develop a strong evidence base for enhanced pedagogy

If Recommendation 4 is successfully implemented, the following kinds of outcomes can be expected:

- Increased number of publications of relevant research by Irish academics (whether individually or in national or disciplinary networks) in high-quality international journals
- Networks have developed to maximise national impact and work collaboratively to enhance teaching and learning across the sector
- Increased engagement from teachers in networks and disciplinary groups
- Institutions are harnessing the potential of data analytics (which also encompasses the general use of statistical and measurement tools) to inform practice and policy
- National learning impact awards explicitly recognise evidence-based research that underpins the enhancement of teaching and learning and recognises where innovation has enhanced or transformed teaching and learning challenges



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