

A national dialogue on enhancing teaching in higher education: moving towards an Irish framework of professional development

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Introduction

Globally, there is a growing awareness around the need for professional development pathways that provide recognition for those engaged in teaching and learning and serve as a mechanism for enhancing the quality of teaching sector-wide. The 2013 European Commission report on Modernising Higher Education made clear recommendations in this area:

“Recommendation 1: Public authorities responsible for higher education should ensure the existence of a sustainable, well-funded framework to support higher education institutions’ efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning... Recommendation 4: All staff teaching in higher education institutions in 2020 should have received certified pedagogical training. Continuous professional education as teachers should become a requirement for teachers in the higher education sector” (European Commission, 2013, p.64).

The *Modernisation of Higher Education* report is one of many international reports on the need to professionalise teaching in higher education (European Science Foundation, 2012; Norton, A., Sonnemann, J. and Cherastidham, I. 2013; OECD, 2010). Within the Irish higher education policy context, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* recommends that “All higher education institutions must ensure that all teaching staff are both qualified and competent in teaching and learning, and should support ongoing development and improvement of their skills” (DES, 2011, p.62). While international and national reports call for systematic approaches to professional development in teaching, countries are presented with the opportunity to develop national responses that are relevant to their own needs and existing higher education systems.

In this policy context, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education was established in 2013 by the Minister for Education and Skills in Ireland to enhance the quality of the learning experience for all students in higher education. The Forum leads the national research and policy agenda in matters related to teaching and learning and serves as a funded advisory body to the Higher Education Authority in Ireland. The Forum is committed to transparency, inclusiveness, and sector-wide participation for all stakeholders in its approach to research and policy development.

The development of a cohesive national professional development framework in relation to teaching in higher education is a core research and policy initiative of the

Forum (National Forum, 2014b). Having adopted a phased approach to the development of a national framework, this paper reports on findings from the first and second phase of the project (National Forum, 2014a). The research question driving this Irish initiative is: 'What national professional development structures can be created to recognise, inform and sustain good teaching practice that supports student learning in a diversity of contexts'?

A national dialogue on professional development

In 2013 the Forum began a significant national and international consultation, gathering together the expertise, knowledge, and practice from professional development experts within Ireland and abroad. A diversity of sectoral stakeholders worked collaboratively towards a framework that is rigorous, dynamic and relevant across disciplines. The emerging framework has truly been an inclusive national dialogue with public sector-wide consultations, open webinars where progress is presented, a national online survey with participation from all teaching and learning centres in the country, and a series of focus groups and interviews with disciplinary experts. Professional bodies and international experts were also consulted in the process to add to the significant base of expertise in Ireland around professional development.

This consultation process was guided by questions such as: 'What does competent teaching look like across disciplines', 'How can we build in sustainability into a national framework', 'What resources are needed to implement a national framework?', and most pointedly – 'What does it mean to professionalise teaching in higher education?'.

Methodology

To develop informed responses to these questions a concurrent mixed methods approach was taken where qualitative and quantitative data was gathered and analysed. The research approach was pragmatic in that "decisions about design and methods [are] driven by the aims, objectives and research questions" (Biesta, 2012, p.147). A mixed methods approach extends beyond conducting multi-method research of qualitative and quantitative dimensions and in the analysis the challenges of interpreting data gathered from different research methods will be discussed (Johnson, R.B., Onwuegbuzie, A.J., & Turner, L.A., 2007). The research approach was also motivated by the commitment to have an inclusive process where many stakeholders could participate.

The research design consists of three strands of research: an online survey of current practice in professional development in Ireland, focus groups with disciplinary experts, and semi-structured interviews with international colleagues involved in similar national projects globally. The work is also informed by a literature review on the practices of professional bodies. The online survey is the first of its kind in Ireland and represents the collective existing accredited programmes and modules related to teaching in higher education. It reflects the trends in professional development offerings, the participation rates, and gaps where programmes/modules could be developed. Through conversations with disciplinary experts the research proposes a means to transcend divides for a coherent approach to professional development. The work with international colleagues brings together the collective knowledge and experience around national frameworks globally.

Conclusions

The development of a national framework for professional development in teaching is a complex process. It must take into account multiple factors such as the diversity of people who might make use of a framework, how the framework will

impact/engage with existing recognition schemes and how to design a framework and review process that promotes reflection and informed learning design rather than 'box-ticking'.

Based on an analysis of the data gathered, this paper presents models of national approaches to professional development in higher education teaching. It highlights how national contexts (economic constraints, government policies, funding structures, and institutional histories) interact to create a diverse international response to the question of how to approach professional development in teaching in higher education. The presentation will also discuss how each model presents possible challenges/opportunities to the Irish higher education sector. The findings of this paper contribute to the global dialogue around exploring the role of national professional development frameworks in enhancing teaching in higher education.

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