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Shining a Light on the National Professional Development Framework for all who Teach in Irish Higher Education: Why it Matters, How it Works.

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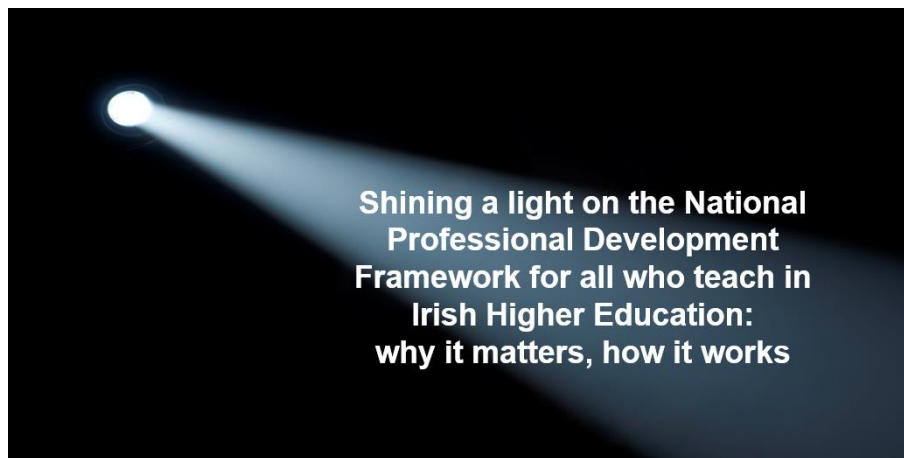
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Education Matters

Thematic Article on Professional Development Framework for Teachers in HE



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'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'
'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cheshire Cat.
'I don't much care where,' said Alice.
'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.
'So long as I get somewhere,' Alice added as an explanation.
'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough.'
Lewis Carroll (1865): 54

Summary

In higher education, we have become increasingly aware of the narrative of being part of a knowledge-based economy, and know there are strong, compelling reasons for continuous professional development (PD) to support our role as educators. For anyone who teaches and supports learning in Irish higher education, PD is fundamental for remaining current in their role, it provides the drive to progress their career, and to deal with change in the sector. Prior to 2016, there has not been a mechanism or route in place nationally to give structure, focus and support to individual academic staff to avail of relevant PD and utilise it to realise their full potential in their teaching role. Promisingly, there are more PD opportunities to choose from nowadays for those teaching in Irish HE than ever before, but negotiating the labyrinth can remain difficult.

This article discusses a key strand of the workplan of the National Forum (NF) for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning - the formation and early implementation of the National Professional Development Framework (PDF) for all who teach in higher education (HE). This important work is leading towards national recognition of an individual's

commitment to professionalism in teaching. By deepening sectoral understanding of the PDF itself and raising awareness of the recent pilot study implementation with staff who teach in universities, institutes of technology and private colleges, we are adding to the long-standing debate about the possible connections between professionalisation of teaching and improvements in student learning experiences and outcomes. We have structured the article using a series of questions, to highlight what is unique about this PD Framework, its underpinning values and distinctive domains.

Keywords: Consolidating learning; Domains; Evidence; Higher education; Leading learning; Learning support; Mentoring; New learning; Portfolio; Professional development; Professionalisation; Recognition; Reflection; Resources; Teaching; Values.

Introduction

Why is a national PDF important for T&L across the HE Sector in Ireland? At the forefront of this work by the National Forum is an aim to drive and maintain engagement in professional development initiatives for teachers to support their career-long growth. With competing forces and priorities in HE today, it can be the case that initiatives related to professional development become side-lined or relegated to an exercise in compliance. Against the backdrop of increasingly demanding job requirements, the PDF is about promoting a culture of sustainable engagement for teachers to take ownership of their personal and professional development.

The rapidly changing environment of HE in an increasing digital world needs those who teach to have a personal commitment to professional development. The National Forum responded to this need and an extensive consultation process with the HE Sector across 2014-15 (NF, 2015) highlighted a range of (often contradictory) views about a national PD Framework. What emerged was the need for a values-based framework, underpinned by scholarship that was flexible enough to be inclusive of all those who teach in HE, one that included all types of professional development, and encourages those who teach to engage in a continuous cycle of evidence-based reflection on their practice over the lifelong learning process. There was a need for flexibility for institutions to interpret the framework for their own context. There was less agreement about whether the need to develop personal and professional digital capacity should be included explicitly or to be integrated across the framework. The diversity of opinion about what the national framework would look like (the form it took and its content) means that the framework as developed may not be considered perfect, but importantly it is accepted by all those who teach in the sector as usable for their practice.

The PD Framework was published by the National Forum in mid-2016 [<http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PD-Framework-FINAL.pdf>] to provide guidance for the professional development of individuals and gives direction to other stakeholders (e.g. institutions, higher education networks, educational/academic developers, policy makers and student body representatives) for planning, developing and engaging in professional development activities. As requested by the sector, the PDF provides descriptions of the domains of PD activity, elements and professional values associated with the performance of teaching, and associated leadership roles.

Our understanding of Professional Development

What do teachers in Irish HE consider as a viable PD opportunity? Figure 1 below shows the types of professional development opportunities incorporated in the framework which include activities which are non-accredited (including collaborative, unstructured and structured) and those which are accredited.



Figure 1: Types & examples of PD identified in NF consultation

Staff who teach develop their knowledge, skills and competencies in their teaching through a range of learning activities. Each learning activity can be described by different types of learning, singly or in combination. The framework identifies and recognises four types of learning associated with any professional development learning activity ('new learning', 'consolidating learning', 'mentoring' and 'leading').

PULL-OUT QUOTE

The informal and ad-hoc nature of much professional development poses problems for us as educationalists. How do we evaluate and assess it? How can we recognise and reward it?

What are the unique features of the Professional Development Framework?

There are other PD frameworks in place in HE internationally, so what makes this Irish framework so distinctive? Its uniqueness is in reframing the PD conversation through a shift in discourse to one of advocacy, and it repositions professional development in Irish HE so that it places priority soundly on the individual's needs. The PDF (illustrated in Figure 2 below) presents a holistic approach to professional development, incorporating the five domains with the individuality of the staff member at its core.

A key feature of the framework is its flexibility in how it uses a domain-based approach to professional standards in T&L. There are five PDF domains each of which is applicable to a wide number of staff roles and to different career stages of those engaged in teaching and supporting learning. The standard domains and elements are underpinned by professional values, all of which emerged from the extensive and concentrated sectoral consultation. By setting objectives and charting progress towards their achievement, identifying strengths and development needs and enabling discussion of career aspirations, the PDF can support individuals to be responsible for determining what they need to learn, for managing and undertaking their own PD activity, and to consider how best to incorporate innovations to their professional practice.

PULL-OUT QUOTE

So much of our time is devoted to teaching students, preparing classes, assessing student work, and doing research, that there can be little time left to consider how we can develop ourselves. For the first time, the PDF is countering this and recognises how hard-pressed today's teaching and learning staff are for time.

Individuals can interpret the framework in his/her own unique way, depending on disciplinary background, and can showcase their engagement with relevant domains of the PDF. The framework enables individuals to show how they learn in diverse ways and represent knowledge, so teachers and those working in learning support can take differentiated approaches to using the framework, and engage at times that best suits their schedules in the cycle of the busy academic year.



Figure 2: The five domains of the national PDF

- At the core of the domains is the centrality of ‘the Self’ recognising that the professional and personal values that the individual brings to their teaching are pivotal in their development as a teacher.
- Professional Identity and Development captures the development and self-evaluation of professional identity and recognises that an individual’s professional identity can change at different stages of their career.
- The Professional Communication and Dialogue domain emphasises the need for those who teach to be able to communicate, and collaborate through a range of media.
- Professional Knowledge and Skills ensures the individual remains current in terms of their professional/disciplinary knowledge and can implement teaching, learning and assessment approaches which are reflective and underpinned by a strong evidence base.
- The explicit inclusion of the domain Personal and Professional Digital Capacity recognises that we live and work in a digital world, and that teachers must develop digital skills to have the self-assurance to harness the potential of technology for learning impact. This domain has made explicit the need to develop skills and confidence for those that teach in Irish higher education.

The development of an individual’s engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning is an integral component of each of the five domains.

PULL-OUT QUOTE

The PDF domains can engage teachers in continuous PD to enhance their pedagogic content knowledge, teaching and communication skills, update and upgrade their disciplinary content knowledge, and also learn about best practice approaches to harnessing the potential of technology in the T&L process.

The PDF is underpinned by five key professional values which act as a guide for individual staff, academic departments and institutions to recognise, inform, enhance and sustain PD in Irish Higher Education (Figure 3 below):

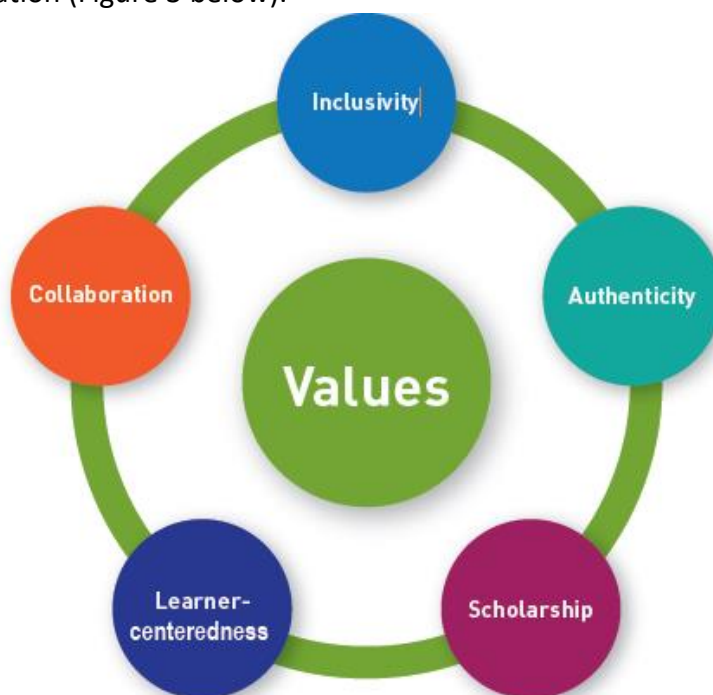


Figure 3: The underpinning professional values of the national PDF

A glance at each value below reveals why teachers in Irish HE identified these as fundamental to their PD:

Inclusivity: The framework is for all staff who teach regardless of their employment contract, the stage they are at in their career or their professional identity. It is just as relevant to learning support staff and management as lecturers at different stages in their career, and this is evidenced in the pilot study implementation discussed in this article.

Authenticity: The PDF recognised that PD must allow for genuine and personally relevant engagement by participants; opportunities for PD must be real, useful and valuable to individuals in their practice.

Collaboration: Although focused around individual staff, the approach supported by the PDF aims to emphasise the social learning that is key to learning in the workplace context. Being continuously productive in busy academic roles can be overwhelming, so having the support of colleagues through engagement with the framework can sustain our instructional vitality. The PDF can encourage staff peer dialogue and support the mentoring of other staff.

Scholarship: The framework emphasises the importance of teaching having an evidence base and supporting the scholarship of T&L. It encourages staff to link with established best practices in professional development while also fostering innovation on the basis of evidence.

Learner Centredness: If those who teach in higher education are always encouraged to be student-centred in all that they do, then it naturally follows that the PD opportunities provided for them must position the learner at the core.

PULL-OUT QUOTE

Since its publication in mid-2016, all higher institutions in Ireland have now engaged with the national PD Framework.

Implementing the PD Framework across the sector

Once the PDF was developed, the challenge for the National Forum was how to implement the framework across the sector.

Considerable thought went into planning the early implementation of the PDF, and we feel that the connections formed through each stage contributes to the uniqueness of the work. One of the first steps taken earlier this year was the formation of an independent PD Expert Group with 10 academics and education experts to develop sectoral capacity to support the PDF in the HEIs. The work of group is crucial for guiding sustainable engagement with the PDF throughout the sector. Working closely with staff in the NF dedicated to the PDF pilot studies, the PD Expert Group scheduled for the initial implementation of the PDF to be completed in the timeframe February-June 2017. The pilot studies were designed to capture how individuals (from a range of individual professional identities) navigate the PDF with a view to informing future support material and resources to guide others using the framework in the future. There were 22 pilot groups formed in the HE sector from universities, institutes of technology and the private colleges: new and experienced academic staff from a wide range of disciplines; Heads of Department; Part-time lecturers from industry; Teaching staff from the Health Professions; Academic Writing Tutors; Maths Learning Support Tutors; Learning Technologists; Nurse Educators; Educational Developers; Careers Advisors; Disability Liaison Officers; Teacher Educators; New Teachers in the HECA Colleges; Librarians; Work Placement

Co-ordinators; Art & Design Practitioner-Educators; PhD Supervisors; Teachers who research; Researchers who teach.

Each of the 22 pilot study groups gave the participants an opportunity to begin a professional development portfolio (PDP) to explore the domains of the framework, using it to think about how they can develop as teaching professionals. Those involved were encouraged to develop their PDP in any format and media that enabled them to collect their evidence in a way that suited their needs and context, and allowed them the space to undertake the continuing process of assessment, analysis, action, and review of their practice, at a time and pace that suits them. Compiling the PDP reinforces professional learning by directing the teacher's attention to strengths and gaps in their knowledge and skills and enables them to set clear goals for their own development. It is also evidence of the teacher's development and commitment to PD and to keeping up-to-date with rapidly changing knowledge, and the need to maintain and develop skills. Arguably, such a PD record is something that can support national professional mobility.

While the evaluation phase of this work is currently taking place, some early insights come directly from the 210 participants who engaged with the pilot studies. Clear benefits are emerging in terms of collaboration, authenticity and learner-centeredness which is a great endorsement of the underpinning professional values of the PDF. The participants were asked why the PDF matters to them and the following insights were shared from across the participating professions:

Encourages critical reflection on practice, training, experience, educational history, skills, knowledge over professional lifetime
Promotes collaboration with colleagues
Leverages individual's strengths and recognises areas for development
Keeping people fresh and engaged as mid-career professionals
Builds personal and professional support systems for role
Enables reviewing, planning and taking responsibility for personal and professional development & learning
Considers knowledge and skills gaps and barriers
Supports habits of recording and evidencing work and interactions
Identifies the core values that drive teaching
Serves as a jumping-off point for future professional plans
Helps navigate through the overall scope of work activities
Aids evaluating, better understanding and continuing to develop contributions to T&L
Awakens conversations and discussions on PD and a curiosity to explore the connections between T&L and the potential interchangeableness of these roles
Instils a sense of appreciation for what is being achieved in T&L practice
Provokes discussion on the diversity of the teacher/researcher role
Collaborative exercise with colleagues from other schools and disciplines - to be able to learn from others
Is a user-friendly framework to categorise, manage and disseminate PD activity in a consistent and transparent way across the sector
Recognises the educator in all higher education professionals and their activities

Complementing the work taking place on the PDF through the pilot studies, an innovative initiative that has really grabbed the collective imagination of the sector is the design, development and delivery of a series of national digital badges on PD. From February-June 2017, fifteen development teams from across the sector have collaborated to produce open access PD programmes (each requiring 25 student effort hours) on key topics which can be delivered across all institutions. Completion of these programmes will earn participants a National Forum digital badge matched to the domain it relates to on the PD Framework. These badges can improve the mobility and recognition of non-accredited professional development of staff across the sector.

Two further PDF initiatives have gained significant traction in the sector in recent months. Institutions are being financed through the T&L Enhancement Fund 2016 to map their existing professional development provision onto the PD framework, to develop specific resources for those in a leadership role as well as entry programmes for graduate assistants. Ten collaborative projects are underway involving 22 HEIs. In addition, full details of these projects are available at <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/digital-enhancement-funding/2016-tl-fund-proposals/>

Professional development has also been included as a funding stream the 2017-18 national funded seminar series and will enable colleagues to make connections throughout the sector and focus on shared interests in both the research and practice of T&L enhancement, and specifically building capacity through professional development. We strongly feel this work is important to keep up the momentum going of implementing the PDF, and to continue to give more and more teachers the chance to opt use the framework.

Ultimately, our aim is to develop a PD Recognition Framework informed by the pilot implementation and other initiatives. The PD Recognition Framework will acknowledge an individual's commitment to continuous professional development. The incorporation of a peer triad support mechanism (September 2017) will allow teachers and those in learning support from different disciplines to work together in bringing their PD further into their practice; this is key because bridging the theory-practice gap and the transfer of new ideas to the f2f, blended or fully online classroom is perhaps one of the most challenging areas that a teacher can face. The PD Recognition Framework will nurture and accelerate good ideas, showcase innovative practice, and encourage collaborative networks and partnerships among HE teaching staff. Having the opportunity for input and discussion with colleagues as a support system for this will be hugely beneficial. It will enable a sector wide learning community to form that will enrich the practice of the immediate three individuals involved, but also the profession as a whole. Through the triads, teacher success stories, as well as the challenges and how they overcome them, can be shared for the benefit of all involved.

Figure 4 (overleaf) provides a synopsis of the unique PDF characteristics to date. We are expecting and will welcome further insights which emerge from the ongoing full-scale evaluation of its early implementation in the sector.

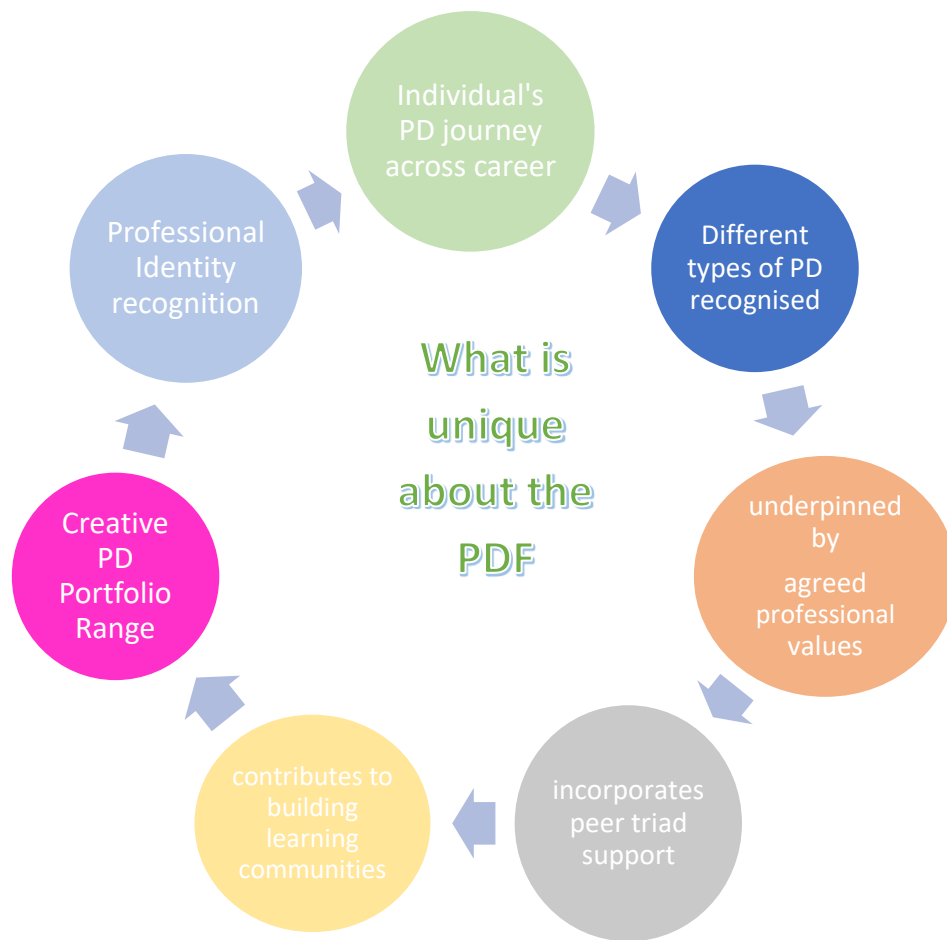


Figure 4: Summarises the areas that show the uniqueness of the national PDF

PULL-OUT QUOTE

To coincide with the PDF pilot studies, senior staff interviews were held in 2017 across the HE Sector and positively report progress in terms of increased availability and uptake of professional development opportunities in teaching, learning and assessment (NF, In Press).

Recommendations for the HE Sector

Implementing the PDF in the HE sector is undoubtedly challenging; but the unparalleled enthusiasm and commitment of the teachers who have embraced the challenges and engaged in all stages of the PDF pilot implementation has reinforced belief that this is the way forward for the sector.

- **Encourage staff to engage with the framework:** The PDF is important to the professional identity of all staff who teach or support learning. As well as engaging in formal accredited PD, committed T&L staff in Irish HE are learning on the job all the time, and the PDF allows this informal learning to be recognised, valued and recorded. The PDF can empower individuals to take ownership of their PD to create, discover and engage in meaningful personal and professional development as a career-embedded commitment.
- **Senior management should provide strong leadership:** Policymakers and institutional leaders must take some a leadership role to encourage and enable the sector wide implementation of the framework. They must support all educators within their

institutions to engage in continuous professional development and apply that learning to improve student learning. The national PDF offers a clear definition and roadmap for engaging with professional development within Irish HEIs for the future.

- **Learning Communities can support those involved:** Learning communities at discipline, programme or department/faculty level, together with communities of practice are the major engines of change.
- **Emerging theme of professionalisation of teaching in HE:** Progress on the theme of professionalisation has been positive and visible in the period 2014-2017, and there is strong support for retaining this theme in the foreground of activities at institutional, regional and national levels. A more nuanced understanding of PD needs is now evident, with an emphasis on support for specific areas and on the development of academic teams. There is openness to mapping existing and future PD provision to the Framework.
- The concept of a staff 'PD portfolio' is regarded positively, with the PDF supporting individuals to evolve their own PD portfolio as an excellent opportunity to reflect on achievements to date, receive feedback from peers, explore issues in their T&L practice, and decide on priorities and objectives for the future.

Conclusion

'An education system is only as good as its teachers' (UNESCO, 2014: 9), and inspiring and informing teachers is the most important institution-related factor influencing student achievement today. This belief is reflected in the Irish context with the National Strategy drawing attention to the importance of professional development for academic staff, and recommends that all higher education institutions '...must ensure that all teaching and learning staff are both qualified and competent in teaching and learning, and should support ongoing development and improvement of their skills' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011: 18). The take-away message about the PDF, the recent pilot study implementation, and the range of ongoing PD projects and seminars funded by the National Forum are that it can encourage those who teach in HE across all disciplines and professional roles in teaching and learning to grow, and to develop their careers. The significance of this work is the continuous improvement of teaching staff, students, institutions, and the Irish higher education community. We firmly believe that this national PDF is essential for driving future improvement in, and continuing to raise the profile of T&L across the Irish HE sector.

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