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Irish Plan offers European Roadmap to Improve Teaching

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Irish plan offers European roadmap to improve teaching

Terry Maguire & Roisin Donnelly

How do you improve teaching quality in higher education? It's a question that is never too far from the headlines as students, parents and politicians demand more from universities. Publishing more data appears to be the UK's favoured approach in recent times, with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework adding to other data sets available on student satisfaction and graduate employment rates. Tougher regulation, more student participation in curriculum design or asking industry to step into the classroom are a few other approaches tried in some quarters.

Recent [calls](#) for a Europe-wide professional body for teaching enhancement suggests, however, that the more traditional approach of supporting the professional development of educators still has some appeal. The UK's Higher Education Academy, now part of Advance HE, has been suggested by the European Universities Association as a possible model, but Ireland's more recent work in this area could also provide a blueprint.

In 2017, Ireland piloted its first [national professional development framework for those who teach](#) in higher education, having spent three years studying potential policies and consulting the sector. The initiative, run by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, has proved to be robust and impactful. The framework is arguably unique in setting out what constitutes professional development, incorporating both the informal conversations that staff have over coffee to the more formal accredited qualifications.

It is developed to promote engagement among staff, enabling individuals to interpret it in their own context and to set big or small goals to meet their current development needs. It recognises that even those leadership positions in our institutions in teaching and learning need ongoing professional development opportunities to learn new skills and competencies at different stages in their career if they are to remain leaders in what is now a rapidly-evolving and challenging teaching and learning environment.

The Irish Framework puts the teacher at the core, encouraging those who teach to reflect on their own 'self' as teacher and to think about how that influences their teaching practice. A key facet of any teaching role in higher education is the ability to communicate, not only in the classroom but in the myriad of other environments where different forms of communications are expected.

It also recognises that during their career those teaching in higher education can have a number of professional identities, all requiring a different set of skills and competences, and some which must be learnt for the first time. It enables all those engaging with it to capture if what they are now doing is new learning or a consolidation of existing learning, and it enables them to capture when they are mentoring another or taking a leadership role. Although the Irish sector was divided on whether the development of digital skills and competences should be explicitly included in the framework, institutions said explicitly that digital capacity of those who teach are not as-yet embedded in the sector. Consequently, a digital domain based on [Ireland's Digital Skills Framework](#) was included to provide a structure for higher education staff to develop their capacity to harness the potential of technology to enhance their teaching practice.

During the consultation phase the sector was clear about the kind of framework they wanted. It was to sit outside a standards-based approach which they felt would reduce flexibility, innovation and creativity in professional development.

Consequently, the Irish Framework differs from the UK's Professional Standards Framework in a number of ways. It focuses on *engagement* and *recognition* rather than *accreditation*, by stressing the importance for an individual to have career-long ongoing commitment with professional development. But an individual can have that learning validated against accredited provision if they so wish with subject experts developing a number of [open-access short courses](#) as access points to encourage engagement. Completion of these short courses gains participants a National Forum Digital Badge.

Unlike the UKPSF, the Framework has no sense of hierarchy, no linear progression to higher levels. It recognises that staff travel multiple horizontal and vertical pathways, often have a number of professional identities, as they progress through their career. No one thinks the Irish framework is perfect, but its flexibility means it is readily adaptable to institutional contexts. As such, it has been included in the Higher Education Authority Performance Framework 2018-2020 for all Irish higher education institutions. As more institutions implement it, it will be crucial that they remain true to its underpinning ethos and resist simply counting the number of staff with accredited teaching and learning qualifications.

Instead, the focus needs to be on giving them recognition for their ongoing engagement with continuous professional development. It must drive a cultural change in higher education by encouraging a thousand teachers to take one-step forward rather than a small number of individuals taking a thousand steps.

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