

Review of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning

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1 Executive summary

1. Objectives of the review

The review sought to assess all aspects of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (hereinafter referred to as the 'National Forum') including its management, governance, funding, and overall mandate. It analyses the extent to which the objectives, as set out in the 'Implementation Plan', were achieved. In addition, the review evaluates how well the National Forum has fulfilled its mission with regards to informing decision-makers, providing support for policy-priorities, and fostering a professional network that focuses on teaching and learning. It also examines the emerging impacts of National Forum, specifically of the multi-annual Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF).

The following five evaluation criteria were utilised in the review:

- Relevance – stakeholder-engagement
- Efficiency – governance and management
- Effectiveness – performance
- Impact – awareness-raising and outputs
- Sustainability and future-planning

2. Assessment methodology

The review was carried out in three phases:

- Phase 1: Inception
- Phase 2: Data-collection
- Phase 3: Analysis

The **inception** phase included a review of multiple documentary sources from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the National Forum and other official authorities (e.g. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)) in order to frame the questions, define the assessment criteria and draft the inception report.

The **data-collection** phase focused on interviews with key informants, two online surveys, interviews with award-recipients (two recipients of the Teaching Heroes Award and two recipients of the Teaching Expert Award), four project case-studies (through face-to-face and distance-interviews with project stakeholders), and a brief study of other platforms (through an online search and documentation from international organisations).

The distance-interviews were conducted with the National Forum, national authorities, the DES, the HEA, QQI, higher education associations, networks, higher education institutions (HEIs) and the academic community, student-organisations and individual students.

One online survey targeted the higher education community while the other was geared towards the 72 National Forum associates. The first survey received 1,284 responses and the second survey received 43 responses (of which 31 were complete). The first survey aimed to understand if respondents agree on the *perceived* quality of the National Forum's activities. The survey topics were defined in partnership with the HEA and cover: i) knowledge of the National Forum, ii) engagement with the National Forum, and iii) perception of the extent of the activities' impact on teaching and learning. The second survey explored the relevance of the National Forum and its perceived impacts for the associates, their institution and more broadly for Ireland.

In the **analytical** phase, the data and information collected was analysed and compiled into a draft report. The report was then finalised and presented to the HEA on 27th June 2017.

3. Findings

a. Relevance – stakeholder-engagement

Through the establishment of the National Forum, the HEA and DES consolidated targeted investment in teaching and learning in higher education in order to create an academically led platform that would serve the higher education sector by galvanising grass-roots' engagement to collaboratively identify the levers for quality-improvement.

The National Forum operates as a *neutral* platform, where the opinions of various stakeholders (e.g. public and private HEIs, state agencies, government departments, and other bodies) converge, supporting the development of a consensus on issues pertaining to the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. Through this approach the National Forum fosters greater collaboration among stakeholders. In addition, the National Forum's flexibility and openness have been vital in supporting a higher education sector which has faced dramatic changes since the economic downturn and which has been compelled to improve its efficiency.

The higher education community, seconded staff, award-applicants and participants in the National Forum's activities have expressed their appreciation of the National Forum because it 'adds value' to their endeavours to enhance teaching and learning (e.g. in terms of the conceptualisation and operationalisation of teaching and learning improvement). However, the full academic community has not demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the National Forum's objectives and activities. The National Forum's overall mandate is not clearly understood by a number of stakeholders and the high number of activities in which the National Forum has engaged can blur its core mission. Supporting an ever-increasing number of activities, the National Forum has had capacity issues demonstrating the link between these activities and their expected outcomes. This profusion of activities could ultimately distort the National Forum's mission.

The National Forum has successfully mobilised pre-existing teaching and learning networks. Playing a connector role, it has succeeded in fostering collaboration between them across a range of disciplinary areas.

However, the continued policy guidance from the DES/HEA, and the involvement of the HEI senior management, is essential to ensure that the National Forum will be fully effective for the *whole* higher education community, and the staff that teach but who are not fully engaged in pedagogical issues. The success of the National Forum will depend upon its capacity to stimulate pedagogical engagement amongst staff who teach but who are currently either unaware of the potential for, or reluctant to engage in, proactive teaching quality-improvement.

b. Efficiency – governance and management

The National Forum's Board is gender-balanced and includes representatives from the whole Irish higher education sector, inclusive of representatives from QQI, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA). This broad representation has enabled fruitful discussions at multiple levels, including those of the practitioner, the higher education institution, and the higher education system. Accordingly, the Board serves as a hub in which knowledge and a range of opinions on higher education converge. However, the Board lacks the representation of social partners and other stakeholders from the non-academic world. As the Irish higher education sector continues to play a leading role in supporting the expansion of the 'knowledge economy', as highlighted in the *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030* and in the *National Skills Strategy*, it will be vital that the work of the National Forum is informed by stakeholders from beyond the higher education community.

There is “healthy discussion” between the HEA, the DES and the National Forum—entities which, with distinct but intertwined vantage-points and missions, challenge each other. This reflects the complexity of the Irish higher education sector. The National Forum is independent insofar as the design and implementation of its activities have not been shaped by any specific constituency.

Led by the Chairperson and the Director, the activities of the National Forum are informed by an academic and a vocational view of education, ensuring the sector-wide relevance of the platform. The management of the National Forum has been commendable (in terms of the planning, consultation, design, operationalisation and follow-up of activities), despite limited staff and resources. The National Forum associates form a channel through which knowledge and practices are exchanged, connecting the National Forum to practitioners in higher education institutions. However, the link between the National Forum’s work and emerging national policy-priorities remains loose and the associates have not demonstrated the necessary awareness of the impact of the National Forum on higher education beyond institutional boundaries.

Despite the commendable management and commitment of the Board and Executive, this review indicates that it might be time for the National Forum to reflect on their myriad activities in order to streamline them and to identify the main motivations and goals of the platform.

c. Effectiveness – performance

The National Forum is fulfilling its mandate and has delivered its objectives and completed the work-programme as set out in the ‘Memorandum of Understanding between the Higher Education Authority and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning’ (MoU). The operational objectives as stipulated in the ‘Implementation Plan’ of 2012 have also been achieved, although it does not necessarily follow from this that the expected longer-term impacts on teaching and learning will materialise without the guidance of the DES, HEA and the senior management of higher education institutions. To date evidence of the effectiveness of the National Forum includes the following:

- There is a structured and updated evidence-base of documentation on teaching and learning improvements;
- The involvement of staff and students at all stages of TLEF-funded projects have demonstrated their capacity to bring about changes in teaching and learning;
- National Forum initiatives have focused attention on enhancing teaching and learning for undergraduate students;
- Many initiatives have fostered new modes of teaching-delivery, especially in distance and virtual teaching and learning;
- Many research activities, falling under the ‘enhancement themes’ and/or associated with the key developments in digital capacity-building and professional development, have been undertaken;
- The two ‘enhancement themes’ have been well understood amongst those committed to teaching and learning across the higher education sector; they guided the National Forum’s orientations from the outset;
- The Learning Impact Awards system is established and functions well;
- The National Forum’s work has, since its inception, been cognisant of international good practice;
- The National Forum has started to link teaching and learning enhancement with quality assurance.

The National Forum has created appropriate structures to fulfil its mandate through a highly transparent approach: it works around tight deadlines, accommodates the diverse needs of the higher education community (although essentially focusing on those of practitioners who are interested in teaching and learning), provides seed-funding and technical support, maintains on-going follow-up, and builds connections within Irish higher education sector. The National Forum has been an enabler of teaching and learning activities.

One major limitation of the National Forum's activities pertains to their reach beyond the community of teaching and learning enthusiasts. Potential beneficiaries have not been fully included, namely the senior management of institutions and the massive number of teachers who might be reluctant to engage or simply unaware of the potential contribution the National Forum could make to their work. There is a risk that the National Forum only mobilises those already convinced about the need for the enhancement of teaching and learning, who have already experimented and pursued projects in the field. In addition, the National Forum has not fully explored potential synergies at national level, such as, for instance, how to better connect with the *Higher Education System Performance Framework* or with the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019*.

Despite efforts to collect information on teaching and learning nation-wide, the National Forum is not yet a national resource centre for institutions. It certainly provides a wealth of information but newcomers may find it difficult to navigate through the available resources, including those on the National Forum's website.

4. Impact – raising awareness and outputs

It is premature to assess the National Forum's concrete impact on teaching and learning at national level, despite the high level of attainment of its operational objectives. Capacity-building is a long-term endeavour from which outcomes are not immediately visible. Furthermore, the qualitative outcomes of the National Forum's activities are difficult to measure since there are no metrics to assess awareness-raising or culture-change.

There is currently no robust internal quality assurance system for the National Forum that would enable a thorough assessment of its impact on teaching and learning. Furthermore, it is not possible to establish definitively a direct causal relationship between the activities of the National Forum and improvements in teaching and learning in Irish higher education since so many variables come into play.

Nevertheless, with the current level of activity, the consultants believe the conditions exist for impacts to emerge within the Irish higher education sector. For example, the Professional Development Framework (PDF) and the Digital Roadmap (DR) are two major projects which are likely to generate significant change in the Irish higher education system with regards to teaching and learning.

Also, the surveys and stakeholder-consultation undertaken as part of this review identified the following discernible enhancements to teaching and learning since the establishment of the National Forum:

- increased student interest during the courses;
- greater student involvement in their own education;
- enhanced student feedback and mobilisation for projects;
- the development of learning strategies by students;
- greater student cooperation and interactivity;
- more fulfilling student–teacher interaction;
- new types of assessment reflecting the emergence of new pedagogies;
- more effective teaching of large classes especially at undergraduate level;
- valorisation of teachers' pedagogical role;
- recognition of the 'added value' of pedagogical engagement within the institution;
- established sets of good practices that can be implemented by institutions;
- fostering of linkages with external stakeholders, like employers;
- enhanced student-evaluation processes, utilised as learning tools;
- creation of a community of practitioners;
- evidence of the value of the cross-fertilisation of teaching and research;
- tangible realisation of concepts of quality teaching.

These enhancements are the result of the confluence of facilitating factors (both internal and external to the National Forum), namely:

- the competitive process for the TLEF supports applicants to optimise the scoping of their project-proposals and the formation of their consortia for maximum success and impact;
- the provision of technical assistance to project-consortia;
- the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of projects and initiatives by the National Forum, which ensures that they remain within the confines of the National Forum's mission;
- the international expertise that the National Forum solicits;
- the feasibility of the time-frame (9–18 months) within which projects must be completed;
- the fast pace of the activities pursued with realistic objectives;
- energetic project leaders, skilful speakers, and inspirational experts;
- output-driven projects and events compelling participants, as well as the National Forum, to realise the projected outcomes;
- the allocation of seed-funding to complementary consortia;
- the size of Ireland, which facilitates the inter-connection of experts, although this also poses the risk of insularity;
- raised awareness of the need for higher education leaders to upgrade the quality and reputation of the provision of teaching and learning in Ireland.

The discernible enhancements of teaching and learning to date are impressive. Accordingly, the potential impact of the work of the National Forum, which has not yet materialised at national level, should not be under-estimated. It should be noted that:

- First, individually focused initiatives might have a systemic impact, although their potential has not yet been fully realised.
- Secondly, as already highlighted, the full engagement of senior management is needed for the realisation of the potential impact of projects and initiatives at institutional level, and thus at national level.
- Thirdly, there are a lack of appropriate evaluation methods to assess the impact of the work of the National Forum.

5. Sustainability

The dissemination and up-scaling of the activities of the National Forum are central to its remit. The National Forum chose a low-cost approach (i.e. the allocation of seed-money to projects) that is likely to ensure the replication of the activities and their associated **outputs**. The rigorous follow-up during the unfolding of the activities, led by the National Forum, contributed to the prudent use of grants and seed-money. While this approach enables expansion across the country, it does not however ensure the mainstreaming of activities, which, above all, will require 'buy-in' from the senior management of higher education institutions.

The consultants who undertook this review are confident that the entire higher education community is capable of striking a balance between research and teaching while continuing to foster teaching and learning improvement. However, the following conditions would need to exist for this to occur:

1. Continued investment in teaching and learning is required to roll out projects, lead and assess pedagogical experiences, train staff who teach, assist such staff in putting their teaching skills to the best use, and to assist students to learn more effectively, and to incorporate teaching and learning within internal quality assurance systems.

2. Higher education institutions need skilled staff who can motivate others, implement change, and sustain their efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
3. Senior management support is vital to enhancing teaching and learning in institutions as well as throughout Ireland.

The National Forum is not a project but rather an essential component of the national-level infrastructure for higher education. Therefore the mission of the National Forum is essential for the continuous development of higher education and teaching and learning in Ireland. The following recommendations are likely to make this happen.

6. Recommendations

The following 6 key recommendations are made:

1. The National Forum should be established on a sustainable basis.
2. The National Forum should be embedded in the wider policy-context within which it operates.
3. The mission of the National Forum should be clarified and its activities streamlined.
4. Through the development and implementation of knowledge management and communications strategies, the National Forum should become a resource centre on teaching and learning for the Irish higher education community.
5. A strategy should be developed for the evaluation of the impact of the work of the National Forum on the higher education sector.
6. The National Forum should aim for system-wide impact, supporting excellence in teaching and learning across Irish higher education institutions.

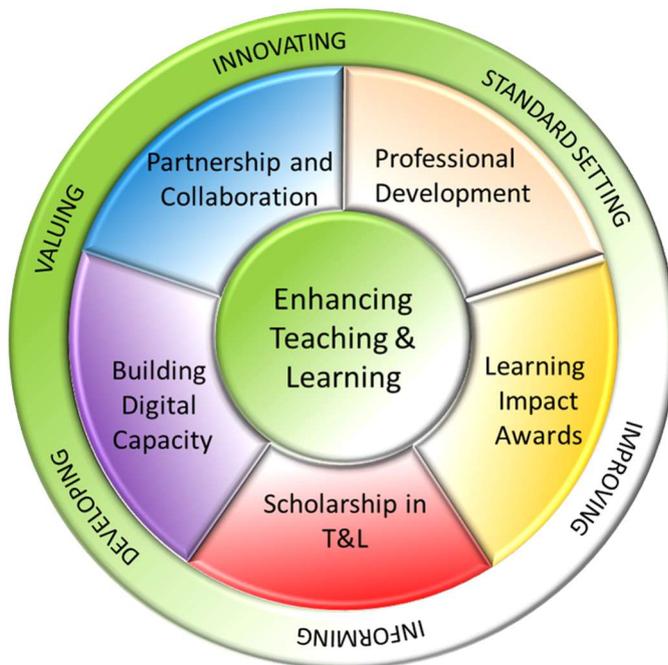
2 The National Forum: brief overview

The National Forum was established in 2012 to enhance teaching and learning for all students in Irish higher education. The National Forum mobilises expertise from across the higher education sector to formulate and disseminate best practice across higher education institutions in Ireland.

The National Forum *associates* are an integrated part of its structure. They are experts from higher education institutions who serve as an active link between the National Forum and their institution. In addition, there are currently three experts who, acting as international advisors, provide support to the National Forum.

The role played by the National Forum is integral to the delivery of the *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030*, which identifies teaching and learning as a core role of higher education institutions. The National Forum is funded by the HEA – the statutory funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology, and other designated higher education institutions; and the statutory planning and policy-development body for higher education in Ireland, which plays a central oversight role in the strategic development of the higher education sector.

3 The National Forum's activities at a glance



The National Forum coordinates many different initiatives and activities at national level, all focusing on the main goal of enhancing teaching and learning.

There are five principal areas of action: professional development, the Learning Impact Awards, scholarship in teaching and learning, building digital capacity, and partnership and collaboration.

The summary below highlights the National Forum's main projects.

3.1. Professional development: the National Professional Development Framework

The National Professional Development Framework is a National Forum project that aims to create a professional development framework for staff who teach in Irish higher education. This project has five objectives, namely to:

1. Empower staff to create, discover and engage in meaningful, personal and professional development in various ways;
2. Encourage staff to engage in peer-dialogue and to support their professional development activities;
3. Enhance and develop the pedagogy of individual disciplines to be relevant and authentic and enable learning from other disciplines;
4. Assist staff to reflect on, plan and contribute to the evidence-based enhancement and transformation of their teaching and learning approaches;
5. Contribute to the quality assurance and enhancement of the student-learning experience.

The National Forum has used a phased approach to the Framework's development and implementation, namely:

- Phase 1 (2014–2015): The National Forum carried out consultations with the Irish higher education sector. It developed a professional conceptual model for the sector.
- Phase 2 (2016): Based on these consultations, in April 2016 the National Forum developed two draft documents ('National Guidance for those who Teach' and 'Resource for Planning Personal Development'). In June 2016, Ireland's first 'National Professional Development Framework for all Staff who Teach in Higher Education' was published.

- Phase 3 (2016–2017, currently in progress): From September 2016, the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund 2016 has supported the higher education sector to align their existing provision to the new framework.
 - o A Professional Development Expert Group is in place to support the pilot-studies of the Professional Development Framework, and 10 participants are representing their institutions from within the university and institute of technology sectors as well as from private colleges. The group works on developing capacity to support and guide implementation and supports the future development of professional development to maximise the value and impact of professional development project outcomes. The aim is to develop a Professional Development Recognition Framework for the sector.
 - o Digital Badges project. A call for submissions was made to seek developers of a certified national digital badge representing identified teaching and learning competencies in Irish higher education. There are 38 participants on the badge-development teams.

3.2. The Learning Impact Awards

The national Learning Impact Awards system, co-ordinated by the National Forum, aims to support institutional efforts to promote and learn from the best teachers in all disciplines.

The objectives of the National Forum's national system are to:

- Enhance and motivate outstanding teaching in all higher education institutions;
- Showcase and strengthen excellence in higher education and value teaching at a national level;
- Reward excellent teaching practice and scholarship that aligns with the National Forum's enhancement themes;
- Offer the greatest opportunity for participation by all HEIs, both public and private.¹

The National Forum has led the development of a three-phase learning impact award system. The implementation of phase 1 was completed with the presentation of the Teaching Hero Awards in September 2014; and phase 2 with the presentation of the Teaching Expert Awards in December 2015. Phase 3 led to the development of the DELTA Awards.²

¹ <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/priority-themes/learning-impact-awards/>.

² Disciplinary Excellence in Learning Teaching and Assessment (DELTA).

| Teaching Heroes student-led | Teaching Experts academically led | Delta Awards discipline-focused |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Driven by students with support and guidance from the Forum • Extensively qualitative with important lessons learnt • Celebratory and congratulatory • Broad in reach • Illuminating student experiences and defining excellent teaching in higher education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research-informed • Evidence-based • Discipline-denominated • Design-driven | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context-specific • Enhancement-enabling • Achievement-focused • Forward-looking |

Teaching Hero Awards

The Teaching Hero Awards aim to celebrate the impact that teachers have on student-learning in higher education thanks to their teaching methods. The selection process is innovative: students nominate their Teaching Hero through an online form on which they write a short personal piece that explains why the nominee is their Teaching Hero. The term “teacher” includes lecturing staff, tutors, supervisors, technicians, librarians and anyone who is involved in teaching students within the sector. Based on students’ nominations, local student working-groups identify up to two Teaching Heroes to receive the national awards. The identification process used in each institution is implemented locally but adheres to national guidelines produced by the National Forum.

There have been 2 competitions to date: in 2014 and 2016. In 2014, 53 Teaching Heroes from 27 higher education institutions were recognised. In 2016, 37 Teaching Heroes were chosen from 800 nominees.

Teaching Experts Awards

The national Teaching Experts Awards were organised in 2015. They aim to acknowledge expert role models for excellence in teaching with regards to learning impact. The focus of these awards is on evidencing the nature of expertise and its impact on student-learning. Institutions make nominations. Subsequently an international Teaching Experts Awards panel carried out an assessment process.

In 2015 16 nominees were shortlisted and invited to attend the National Forum Teaching and Learning Summit where they were formally recognised.

The 7 winners were announced at this event.

DELTA Awards

Launched in March 2017, the DELTA Award is a discipline-focused learning impact award that aims to recognise the discipline groups within institutions that can demonstrate sustained achievements in teaching and learning enhancement. The goal here is to support staff in all

disciplines to work collaboratively to display and enhance key aspects of their students' learning experience.

During the application process, the discipline group's host institution must sign off on the DELTA Award. An international peer-review panel will then review applications. Applications will be

The DELTA Awards will be presented at a national awards ceremony in December 2017. Up to 25 awards will be given.

shortlisted based on how well they demonstrate their achievements in, and continued commitment to, teaching excellence within a framework. All shortlisted applicants will meet with the international review panel, after which the national award winners will be announced.

3.3. Scholarship in teaching and learning

National Seminar Series

Since the beginning of its activities in 2014, the National Forum has organised seminar series focused on the enhancement of teaching and learning. The seminars have been grouped into ten themes that reflected the National Forum's priorities.

The National Seminar series aims to provide an opportunity to those working in higher education to connect with colleagues throughout the sector and to focus on shared interests in both research and the practice of teaching and learning enhancement. The series also creates opportunities to hear from national and international experts in different areas of teaching and learning.

In the first series, between February and June 2014, there were 62 funded seminars across the country in 28 institutions. In the 2014–2015 series, 48 seminars were funded, and 31 were funded in the 2016–2017 series. In the 2016–2017 series, 31 seminars will be held between 1 November 2016 and 30 June 2017.

Funded research projects

The National Forum funded a number of focused research projects, which informed the 'teaching for transitions' 'enhancement theme' of 2013–15. Project teams were selected from HEIs across the sector following a competitive process facilitated by an international panel. Successful proposals were then further developed in partnership with the National Forum. Examples of projects include "Learning Resources and Open Access in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland", "A Current Overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) In Irish Higher Education", and "Student Non-Completion on ICT Programmes".

3.4. Building digital capacity

Digital Roadmap

Via wide consultation, the National Forum created a Digital Roadmap to help guide institutions and organisations to develop local and national digital strategies and to ensure alignment, coherence and a sense of common endeavour at sectoral level. The Digital Roadmap is a document designed to inform and guide senior managers, heads of department, schools and faculties and leaders within the higher education sector. It also highlights the role of higher education organisations, as well as representative organisations within the sector to enhance teaching and learning by building digital capacity.

The Digital Roadmap identifies important principles upon which to base recommendations, and is divided into four sections: strategy with implementation, collaboration, changing practice and evidence-based research.

The Digital Roadmap has now been in place for two years.

3.5. Partnership and Collaboration

One of the activities included in the National Forum's partnership and collaboration work-plan is to encourage the rationalisation and cross-disciplinary collaboration of national networks and disciplinary groups. This comprises aligning their activity towards current national teaching and learning enhancement priorities. Partnership dialogues are a series of meetings, focus groups, and interviews between the National Forum and national networks.

3.6. Teaching & Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF)

The Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF) supports collaborative projects with national impact. The first two calls for proposals issued under this fund (in 2014 and 2015) were focused on digital capacity-building while the third (issued in 2016) focused on professional development. The fund aims "to optimise the synergies and scope that can be enabled by strong sectoral collaboration, or through partnerships with other education providers or external stakeholders and through institutional enhancement, for maximum national impact".

In 2014 14 projects were selected, in 2015 6 projects were selected (to be completed by June 2017) and in 2016 15 were selected. In each phase, the National Forum formulated a template to guide propositions. Projects are chosen after several reviews made by an international panel.

3.7. The 'enhancement themes'

As stipulated in the 'Implementation Plan', the Board of the National Forum has been guided by current priorities throughout the higher education sector, by the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* and most importantly by the knowledge and expertise of teaching and learning champions both nationally and internationally.

The 'enhancement themes' are meant to focus expertise and attention on issues of real interest and importance while improving, developing, innovating and transforming the teaching and learning culture and capacity throughout higher education institutions in Ireland.

2013–2015 theme: teaching for transitions

- The theme refers to "the many important transitions that learners have to navigate: the transition from second level to third level, the transition from undergraduate education to employment or to postgraduate research and learning. Other transitions relevant to many learners include the transition from one national culture to another, the transition (in the case of mature learners) from a work-based environment back to an educational one, or the transition from one mode of learning (e.g. full-time, conventional) to another (e.g. distance, blended or e-learning modes)."

2016–2018 theme: "assessment of/for/as learning"

- Assessment OF Learning: completing assessment to demonstrate learning;
- Assessment FOR Learning: using assessment to give feedback on teaching and student learning;
- Assessment AS Learning: student empowerment and engagement to become a better learner.

In 2013–2015 the 'enhancement theme' was 'teaching for transitions' and in 2016–2018 the theme is 'assessment of/for/as learning'.

4 Methodology of the review

The terms of reference (ToR) of the review necessitated the evaluation of the National Forum from the point of view of several dimensions, and within the specific Irish context for the enhancement of teaching and learning. These dimensions were:

- All aspects of the National Forum;
- The National Forum's management, governance, funding,³ and mandate;
- Achievements of the National Forum's objectives (as set out in the 'Implementation Plan');
- Fulfilment of the National Forum's functions (information to decision-makers; alignment and support to emerging policy-priorities);
- Emerging impacts of the multi-annual Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund.

The review included a retrospective and a prospective dimension, using the following approaches to evaluate the National Forum:

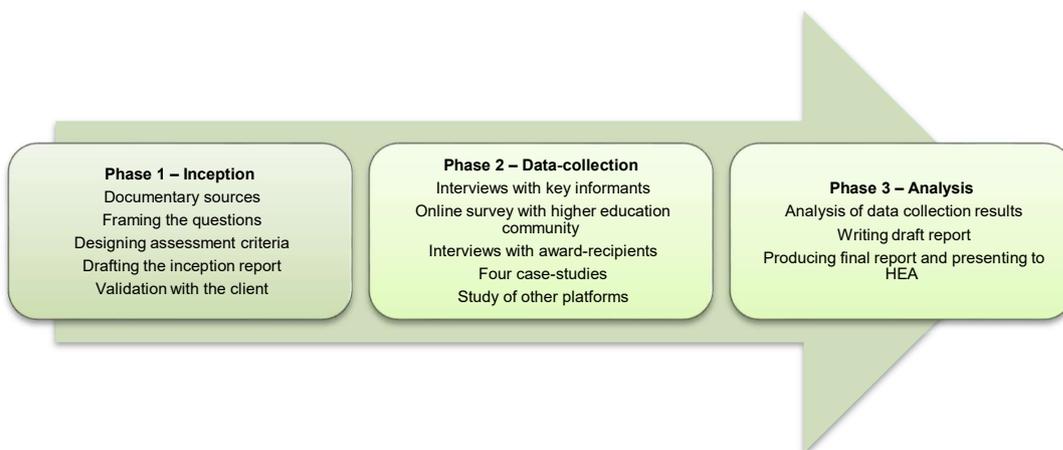
- Outputs analysis and stock-taking exercise;
- Analysis of the National Forum mode of operation and relations with stakeholders;
- Analysis of results and identification of emerging impacts;
- Analysis of the ownership by the academic community, students, relevant stakeholders; future mainstreaming of outcomes.

The review questions were structured around five evaluation criteria under which the evaluation questions were framed:

- Relevance – stakeholder-engagement;
- Efficiency – governance and management;
- Effectiveness – performance;
- Impact – awareness-raising and outputs;
- Sustainability and future planning.

Each criterion was developed in the inception report and in the evaluation matrix (see annex).

To produce the required results, the assignment was organised in three phases.



³ Following the inception phase, it was agreed with HEA that the funding issue will not be evaluated as such, but that it should inform the decision-makers for the sustainability and future of the National Forum.

These three complementary phases interacted with one another, from the data collection to the online survey, qualitative interviews, case-studies, and the in-depth analysis of the information gathered. Early findings were discussed with the HEA at the end of March 2017, based on which a further analysis was carried out to draft the final recommendations and conclusions. All these were compiled in a draft report submitted to the HEA for comments (20th May 2017). These comments were incorporated into the final report.

Data were collected from multiple sources, i.e. desk-research, a review of available documentation, an online survey, case-studies and qualitative interviews of selected target groups (carried out face-to-face and virtually).

During the **desk-research** the mission, specific aims and activities of the National Forum were reviewed. Documentary sources included the 'Implementation Plan', the MoU, the 'Service Level Agreement between the Higher Education Authority and the University of Limerick in respect of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning', the Professional Development Framework, the National Forum's Director's reports, the minutes of conferences and evaluation results, and the annual reviews of the multi-annual TLEF.

The National Forum website was analysed, looking at individual pages of funded projects, Teaching Heroes and Teaching Experts, publications, and at the governance and management arrangements for the platform.

The consultants carried out **three missions to Dublin** (Nadine Burquel, December 2016; Fabrice Hénard, January and March 2017). The purpose of these missions was to work with the HEA, DES and the National Forum on the approach, perceptions and early findings (including a brief presentation in March 2017 to the DES and HEA). During these missions, the consultants also met with representatives from the National Forum (including the international panel); from the DES; from project teams; from bodies like QQI, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA); and from teaching and learning networks.

An **online survey with the higher education community** was launched to give all stakeholders an opportunity to voice their views on the National Forum. This survey was answered by **1,284 respondents**. The purpose was to understand the level of consensus on the *perceived* quality of the National Forum's activities. The survey topics were defined in cooperation with HEA and covered three dimensions, namely knowledge of the National Forum, engagement with the National Forum, and the perception of the level of impact on teaching and learning of the National Forum.

A second online survey was carried out **with the associates** (72 people) to assess their perception on the quality of National Forum activities. This survey was answered by **43 associates with 31 complete responses**. The survey topics were defined in cooperation with HEA.

Profiles of 2 recipients of Teaching Heroes awards and of 2 recipients of Teaching Experts awards were produced on the basis of distance qualitative interviews. These profiles served to highlight the variables of success that often depend on attitudes, human relationships or individual trajectories. They were not meant to be representative but allowed for an in-depth analysis of the impact of the awards on the recipients, their institutions and research/teaching activities.

Distance-interviews were carried out with representatives from the National Forum, national authorities such as the Irish Research Council, HEA, IUA, the Irish Higher Education Quality Network, institutional centres for teaching and learning (e.g. at UCD and CELT at NUIG), QQI, the DES, HEIs and the academic community, student organisations and other stakeholders. Distance-interviews were also carried out with members of the international panel who assist the National Forum with its development. Overall more than 64 informants were interviewed (the list of these interviewees is annexed to this report).

Four case-studies of projects were produced based on distance-interviews with project-stakeholders (decision-makers, teachers, support-staff, international panel reviewers) and those who have benefited from these projects either directly or indirectly. Two case-studies were selected from a typology of projects for 2014 and two from 2015.

The case-studies and data collected through the interviews as well as the documentary analysis enabled the consultants to form a consolidated picture of the outputs and emerging impacts of the work of the National Forum. The wealth of data gathered from multiple sources provided rich empirical evidence for the review. The (mainly) qualitative analysis and examination of information led to concrete recommendations and conclusions, bringing out the salient points identified in the data-gathering exercise as well as highlighting the lessons learnt. Sources were systematically triangulated to prevent a biased judgment. Institutional and system-level issues were analysed (e.g. via the analysis of national strategic documents) to capture the precise nature of the National Forum's impact on teaching and Learning in Ireland and the levels at which this impact can be mostly perceived.

A short study on the positioning of a selection of platforms dealing with teaching and learning support in higher education was conducted, based on the documentation of international organisations (e.g. the OECD, university networks) and a Google search.

5 Results of the two online surveys

Two online surveys were created to better understand the perception and the emerging impact of the National Forum. The first addressed the higher education community in general and was posted on the National Forum’s website. The second survey addressed the 72 National Forum associates.

5.1 The survey of the Irish higher education community

General overview and involvement in the National Forum

1,284 respondents answered this survey, of which 1,113 provided complete answers. Given that the total staffing (academic and support staff) in HEA-funded HEIs (as per 2013/14 data) was 23,123, the response-rate is relatively low, suggesting yet a certain lack of visibility. However, the survey was only open for 19 days, from 8th March to 27th March 2017.

Also, approximately two-thirds of the responses came from 7 HEIs (3 universities, 3 institutes of technology (IoTs), and 1 private provider). 12.15% of the respondents were from University College Cork (156 responses); 11.14% from Dublin Institute of Technology (143 responses); 10.9% from Trinity College Dublin (140 responses); 9.97% from the National University of Ireland, Galway (123 responses); 8.72% from Cork Institute of Technology (112 responses); and 7.48% from Dundalk Institute of Technology (96 responses). There were also a high number of responses from Hibernia College (81), Maynooth University (77), Waterford Institute of Technology (68), Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology (56) and the University of Limerick (43).

| Institution | Out of 100 | Institution | Out of 100 |
|---|------------|--|------------|
| University College Cork | 12.10% | IICP Education and Training | 0.30% |
| Dublin Institute of Technology | 11.10% | Dublin City University | 0.20% |
| Trinity College Dublin | 10.90% | Institute of Technology, Carlow | 0.20% |
| National University of Ireland, Galway | 10.00% | Limerick Institute of Technology | 0.20% |
| Cork Institute of Technology | 8.70% | Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire | 0.20% |
| Dundalk Institute of Technology | 7.50% | Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland | 0.20% |
| Hibernia College | 6.30% | SQT Training Ltd | 0.20% |
| Maynooth University | 6.00% | Open Training College | 0.20% |
| Waterford Institute of Technology | 5.30% | University College Dublin | 0.10% |
| Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology | 4.40% | Letterkenny Institute of Technology | 0.10% |
| University of Limerick | 3.30% | Institute of Technology, Tralee | 0.10% |
| Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown | 2.80% | Carlow College | 0.10% |
| Mary Immaculate College | 2.50% | Griffith College | 0.10% |
| Dublin Business School | 2.30% | National College of Ireland | 0.10% |
| Institute of Technology, Sligo | 2.20% | Dorset College Dublin | 0.10% |
| Athlone Institute of Technology | 1.20% | | |
| College of Computing Technology | 0.50% | | |
| St. Angela's College, Sligo | 0.40% | | |

A large majority (67.95%) of those surveyed responded that they were “aware” of the National Forum. Only three indicated in the comments that they did not know that the National Forum

existed prior to the survey. It could be assumed that most of those surveyed were unaware of the National Forum and preferred not to answer.

Concerning involvement, 40% of the responses, or 344 people, responded that they interacted with the National Forum although 426 people skipped the question.

For the persons involved, a large majority (69.30%) had participated in a workshop, conference, or other event. Many of the respondents (43.90%, 147 answers) had participated in a National Forum-funded project.

| Answer option | Responses | |
|--|-----------|-----|
| Participation in a seminar, workshop, conference or other event | 69.30% | 232 |
| Participation in a National Forum-funded project | 43.90% | 147 |
| Organisation of a seminar in the National Seminar Series | 14.30% | 48 |
| Recipient of a National Learning Impact Award (a Teaching Hero award or a Teaching Expert award) | 9.90% | 33 |
| Membership of the National Forum Network of Networks | 4.80% | 16 |
| Membership of the National Forum Associate Assembly | 3.90% | 13 |
| Secondment to the National Forum | 1.20% | 4 |
| Other | 11.90% | 40 |

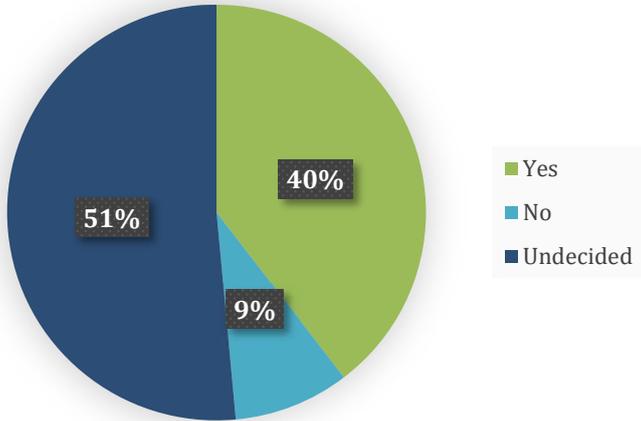
The perception of the National Forum’s impact

To the question regarding the “positive impact on teaching and learning in your higher education institution”, most respondents answered “undecided” (51.47%) while only 8.95% answered “no” and 39.58% answered “yes”. The question was skipped by 468 respondents, highlighting respondents’ difficulty in evaluating the impact.

Question 6 asked respondents to describe this “positive impact”. There were 288 comments most of which highlighted the notion of “awareness”. More than fifty comments indicated that, in their institution, the National Forum has brought the importance of teaching and learning issues more to the fore. One of the respondents suggested that the National Forum was responsible for “raising levels of interest and support for learning and teaching, and for motivating individuals and groups”.

The second recurring point in the comments involved networking and the strengthening of a teaching community. One respondent commented that through its activities, the National Forum provided “a space for colleagues to share and develop their practice”, while another respondent explained that the National Forum “provided a platform for discussions around various aspects of T&L with colleagues within and outside of [the institution]”. Many respondents stressed that the National Forum may encourage exchanges outside of an institution and even promote a sense of belonging to a wider educational community, while others highlighted the dissemination

Has the work of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning had a positive impact on teaching and learning in your higher education institution?



of 'best practices' and the sharing of resources. Various respondents noted that the TLEF helped to stimulate project-based collaboration, particularly within institutions.

The impact of the National Forum's work on students, students' involvement and their access to resources were among the other themes highlighted in the comments. Furthermore, some respondents indicated that the National Forum has had a direct impact on their teaching, citing the adoption of new practices.

Overall it appears that the National Forum is considered as a useful mechanism for the development of initial benchmarking reports in teaching and learning, as well as for the creation of an Irish teaching and learning community. The main 'value added' for the Irish higher education community is that the National Forum has provided opportunities for teachers in institutions to access, and contribute to, wider collaborative projects. The perception of the Forum's impact varied depending on the degree of the respondent's involvement.

5.2 The national associates' survey

General overview

The associates are experts and supporters who are integrated into the National Forum's structure. They support the National Forum's activities by:

1. keeping staff and students in their institutions up to date about key events, initiatives and encouraging involvement across all disciplines;
2. supporting the National Forum's enhancement activities by providing institutional and/or disciplinary feedback on its initiatives through relevant consultations and the National Forum Associate Assembly;
3. contributing to sharing and disseminating 'best practices' in enhancing teaching and learning within and across disciplines within institutions locally, as well as regionally and nationally;
4. informing the current and future work of the National Forum.⁴

This survey was answered by 43 associates with 31 complete responses. There were 25 respondents from the institutes of technology, 9 from the university sector and 9 from private colleges. The majority (65.12% or 28 answers) have been associates for 3 years, 16.28% for 2 years (7 answers) and 18.6% (8 answers) for one year or less. Thus, this survey was conducted mostly with people with extensive experience of the National Forum, which supports the accuracy and the relevance of the collected answers. Considering the number of associates (72), the response-rate is ambiguous: it represents almost 60% but considering the nature of their role, one might have expected a higher response-rate. However, there are typically two associates per institutions, working in partnership to represent their HEI, and so this is arguably a mitigating factor.

⁴ "The National Forum Associates", in the National Forum's website <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/about/key-contacts/>

The National Forum and its relations with its partners

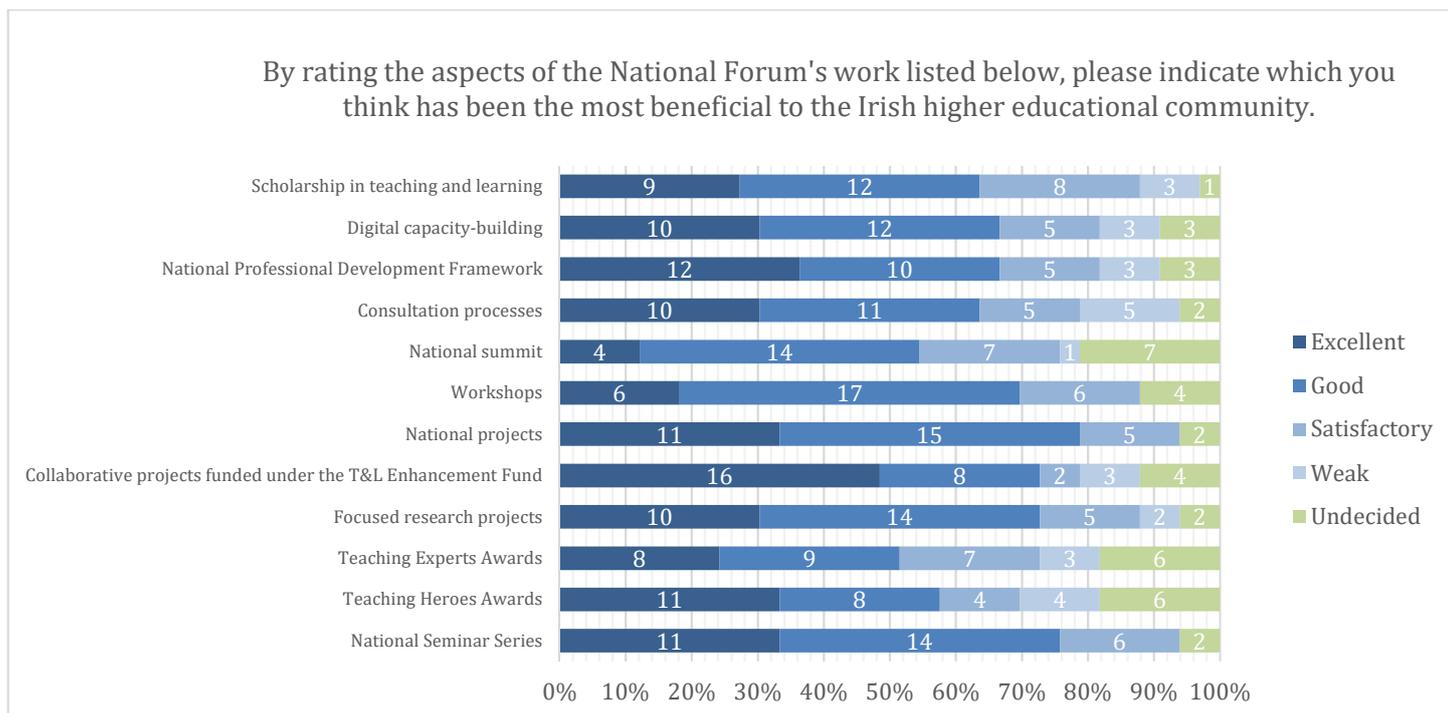
Most respondents indicated that their participation in the National Forum Associate Assembly enables them to raise issues related to teaching and learning within their institution (77.14%), while 22.86% replied to the contrary. Approximately 67.86% maintain that it also enables them to contribute to decision-making, as well as to the development of the National Forum's activities (37.14% responded "no"). 85.71% believe that being a member of the Associate Assembly has benefited their institution (14.29% responded "no").

The responses and comments emphasised that associates play a key role in relaying and transmitting information between the National Forum and higher education institutions. The respondents felt that they were in a better position in terms of knowing what is happening at the national and the sectoral levels. This may enable associates to disseminate the *National Strategy* and to influence their own institution's initiative. The National Forum is thus considered a true partner for institutions, to the extent the associates play their dissemination role within their institutions, which might be questioned. 55.56% of the respondents believed that the National Forum has been responsive to the particular needs of their institution, although 15.15% believed otherwise and 27.27% responded "not applicable". The National Forum's leadership capacity received high ratings in effecting improvements in teaching and learning in the Irish higher education sector (60%: "excellent" and "good"; 30%: "satisfactory"; and only 3%: "weak"). Thus, associates arguably consider the National Forum as a force for change, thanks to its leadership and capacity to create a network.

The associates hold more nuanced and contrasting views about their direct capacity to influence the National Forum's activities. They expressed the belief that there is a strong interest in the National Forum's proposals and feedback. However, some felt that their contributions were not always taken into account, considering that the National Forum decides on the initiative-structures in advance. Others believed that the associates are well respected and involved in the decision-making; they may be able to inform the final scope of an activity and/or its implementation. Finally, some thought that progress has been made and that the level of feedback depends on the subject considered.

The associates' opinions differ with regards to the National Forum's visibility. Most of them believed that the National Forum is well-known among staff and students who have a particular interest in teaching and learning but more broadly it lacks visibility (60%). Only 6% believed that the National Forum is little known across Irish higher education. A few respondents suggested that the lack of visibility of the National Forum within their institution can be attributed to a general lack of focus on teaching and learning within an environment in which research activities are clearly favoured and prioritised from the top down.

The National Forum's activities and structure



The associates seemed positive concerning the benefits of the activities. More than 50% of the ratings of all of the activities were “excellent” or “good”.

The associates were asked if they think that the National Forum’s organisational structure (and the role of the Associate Assembly within the National Forum) optimises involvement in the academic community. Responses were divided: 40% answered “yes”, 20% answered “no” and 40% were “undecided”. Even the associates, who were integrated in the National Forum’s structure were not fully aware of how it functions and many did not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to weigh in on this issue. Similarly, asked if they think that the National Forum provides the optimal structure for supporting the enhancement of teaching and learning in the Irish higher education sector, the associates were mostly undecided (51.5%). 36.36% answered “yes” and 12.12% responded “no”.

The perception of the National Forum’s impact

The assessment is clearer for the “positive impact on teaching and learning in [their] institution”. 66.7% of the respondents answered “yes” and only 15.2% answered “no”. 18.1% were “undecided”.

At the same time, 63.6% believed that the National Forum has had national impact in terms of enhancing teaching and learning across the Irish higher education sector (3% stated the contrary). 33% were “undecided”, highlighting another example of the difficulty for some of the associates to evaluate the impact, especially globally, outside of their institution.

Most of the comments emphasised that stronger communication, especially with the senior management within the institution, is needed to give the work of the National Forum more recognition. Others sought stronger lines of communication with the National Forum, requesting more information on the National Forum’s activities and on the likely evolution of the platform.

6 Findings

6.1 Relevance

To what extent has the National Forum been successful in mobilising and leveraging external expertise and resources?

To what extent has the National Forum been successful in engaging with the Irish higher education community, policy-makers and other stakeholders?

The National Forum is a government-funded initiative to raise teaching and learning quality in Irish higher education, regardless of how higher education institutions are funded. The mandate of the National Forum thus encompasses the whole higher education sector.

For this reason, the National Forum has engaged with a wide range of higher education representatives and stakeholders with a view to designing a work-plan that could best serve the whole sector. The name “National Forum” was specifically selected to reflect the intention to engage in a dialogue with the community at large, involved or simply expressing interest in higher education. Since the establishment of the National Forum and routinely thereafter, the Board and the Executive have been keen to consult and cooperate with publicly funded universities and institutes of technology as well as with private providers and specialist networks operating in the field of higher education (at discipline⁵ or thematic levels⁶).

The National Forum has drawn lessons from international experience

The National Forum has drawn lessons from outside of Ireland. First, the National Forum was designed after a review of other national platforms, arrangements and policies in teaching and learning (notably in Australia and the U.K). Secondly, **the activities were informed by international initiatives but with a view to identifying what would be appropriate for the Irish context.** There is no example of foreign initiatives being directly imported from other countries. For instance, the MOOC project was inspired by other initiatives implemented in foreign institutions but was designed for the Irish community, entailing the development of relevant material that Irish students can easily use because it is customised to their learning needs (e.g. the Irish accent utilised within the multimedia MOOC was appreciated). Informants furthermore pointed out the extent to which the National Forum considers the national context by comparison with other EU-funded projects, which are judged more generic and in which the national specificities are often indistinct. In addition, lessons to be extracted from EU-funded projects often require huge adaptation before being transplanted to the Irish context; by contrast *the TLEF-funded projects fit perfectly to the national constraints, values and institutional specialities*, as a member of the Digi-Languages project observed.

The active engagement of the international experts serving on the Board and on TLEF assessment panels helps the National Forum to connect its work to the global trends of higher

⁵ The Irish Maths Learning Support Network aims to promote and develop mathematics learning support throughout the island of Ireland.

⁶ For instance, All Ireland Society for Higher Education (AISHE) is an independent, membership-based professional society dedicated to promoting good practices in learning and teaching throughout the island of Ireland; EDIN is the Educational Developers in Ireland Network; and FACiLiTATE is the Irish Enquiry / Problem-based Learning Network.

education. *They bring fresh air to our national but small-sized reflection*, remarked a senior institutional representative.

The high capacity of the National Forum to mobilise existing networks

The National Forum has paid great attention to cooperating with existing networks (either disciplinary or thematic) and has drawn upon their achievements to enrich the dialogue on teaching and learning. While the National Forum has not created a “network of the networks”, as some National Forum’s Board members claim, it has certainly become a hub within which all teaching and learning-related issues converge. The core value of the National Forum lies in its capacity to bring the work of networks up to national level and to foster the dissemination of their work across the country and allow for more sustainability.

The existing networks have acknowledged that the National Forum:

- Provided networks with more resources to undertake more activities. Some have bid for projects launched by the National Forum and were awarded funds they would not have received without the National Forum.
- Provided increased visibility to networks, which occasionally struggle to demonstrate their value to the higher education community or the decision-makers (HEA, DES)⁷.
- Reinforced the sustainability of the outcomes of the networks’ projects.

In 2015 17 disciplinary groups and 13 teaching and learning networks applied for National Forum funding. These activities (to 31st December 2015) were reported on at end of January 2016, including a requirement for highlighting their impact.

As an illustration, the Irish Maths Learning Support Network (IMLSN) is an informal network of mathematics’ teachers and practitioners, which aims to develop and foster good practice in the teaching of mathematics in higher education. The IMLSN submitted an application to the TLEF and was awarded funds to produce a report featuring a wide array of teaching and learning practices from students’ viewpoints. Today testimonials show that students and teachers use the National Forum’s outputs as inspiration for pedagogical innovation and for the development of learning strategies.

Playing a connector role, the National Forum has succeeded in nurturing the interplay of networks, which might not have subjects in common. Most are discipline-specific, having emerged from shared faculty interests in pedagogy and/or research. The activities, like the events, conferences or research projects, have helped networks forge relationships that they otherwise would not have.

☞ Recommendation:

- ***The National Forum should further engage with specialised networks to foster the dissemination of good practice to departments and staff who teach across all Irish higher education institutions. Networks are key enablers and agents of change in the area of teaching and learning.***

⁷ Providing evidence of the impacts of the work of the networks on higher education is challenging. The National Forum encounters similar problems (see chapter on impact).

The dual role of the National Forum in relation to policy priorities

The National Forum informs, and responds to, national strategic priorities at the same time, while also pursuing the activities outlined in the 'Implementation Plan' and the MoU. The Board have ensured that the activities have taken place within the remit of the National Forum to avoid duplications with the work of other stakeholders, such as decision-makers (HEA, DES), QQI (as the regulatory and quality assurance body), and teaching and learning / disciplinary networks.

The 'Implementation Plan' and the MoU provided the National Forum with considerable leeway in developing its activities within the scope of its mandate, and the National Forum strived to demonstrate its value to all partners, and specifically to the funders. This has led the National Forum to multiply their activities at a fast pace.⁸ The National Forum's leaders were conscious of the risk of developing activities that might be relevant to the National Forum (Board, Executive, associates, international experts) but not necessarily to the higher education sector on the ground. (A few of the associates surveyed responded that they were unable to identify the impact of the work of the National Forum for the higher education sector). The associates' survey indicates that a large majority of associates (67.95%) were "aware" of the National Forum but that few could testify to its potential impact: the question was skipped by 468 respondents, highlighting the difficulty for respondents in this regard. Therefore, **the driving force of the National Forum's development has always been the engagement of the higher education community and policy-makers as well as a wide range of external stakeholders.** Such engagement aimed to ensure that the proposed activities would be responsive to the objectives of the beneficiaries (i.e. the higher education sector at large) and advance the national policy priorities set by the HEA/DES. Interviews with informants from all of the above-mentioned categories highlighted the in-depth, systematic engagement of the National Forum with the higher education sector (as directed by of the Chairperson and Director, the Forum team and the associates). Employers were engaged in the design of the National Forum's work-programme although to a lesser extent. Further engagement of a wider range of stakeholders by the National Forum, representing the socioeconomic sector at large, is recommended so that Irish higher education remains connected to the needs of the current and future job-market.

☞ Recommendation:

- ***Representatives from the socioeconomic sector at large should also play an advisory role in supporting the work of the National Forum.***

The leeway left by the mandate⁹ enabled the National Forum to initiate innovative activities with potential impact at national level (although that potentiality has not yet materialised). Few institutions have the ability or remit to launch innovation on a national scale; the National Forum has a remit to do so. For instance, there have been quite a lot of discussions with staff in higher education on the professional development framework and numerous small-scaled initiatives have been launched within institutions to support its implementation. However, few institutions would be able to design and implement such a framework nationally as well as stipulate the conditions needed prior to proposing teaching improvement activities. The professional

⁸ For instance, between February and June 2014, the National Forum held 62 funded seminars across the country in 28 institutions. For the 2014–2015 session, 48 seminar series were funded, and 31 were funded during the 2016–2017 session.

⁹ The report of the review uses the word "mandate" to encompass the MoU and the 'Implementation Plan'. The question of the mandate will be addressed later and in a recommendation. There is no mission statement that specifies the mandate of the National Forum.

development framework is the type of project of which the National Forum is capable – and expected by the HEA/DES – of spearheading.

Stakeholders actively engaged in teaching and learning enhancement have shown great interest in the National Forum

The interest in the National Forum of those actively engaged in teaching and learning enhancement within Irish higher education is demonstrated by the number of applicants to the TLEF and to the Teaching Heroes and Teaching Experts Awards schemes; by the number of attendees at events; and by the involvement of academic-staff in research-projects and in pre-identified national projects such as the Professional Development Framework and Digital Roadmap. **The higher education community's engagement with the National Forum reflects the relevance of the National Forum to its needs.**¹⁰ *There is a time before and after the National Forum was established*, commented a network-chair. The National Forum is the product of smart and timely reflection that occurred at the HEA and DES in the years 2010–2012, when, in the aftermath of the economic crisis, the imperative for the consolidation of targeted state investment in teaching and learning in higher education came to the fore. The ethos of the National Forum lies in the appropriate identification of a response to the needs of the higher education sector to improve the effectiveness of studies, with a view to increasing the socio-economic preparedness of the students and the employability of the work-force, supporting requalification, and triggering innovation for economic growth. For such reasons, it is crucial for the National Forum to pursue and reinforce cooperation with employers, as noted above.

Among the various paths that could be activated, **the HEA and DES concentrated their efforts on the creation of an academically led platform that would serve the higher education sector, stimulating grass-roots' engagement to collaboratively identify ways in which to improve teaching-quality.** The imperative for the re-balancing of the roles of higher education institutions to re-focus on teaching and learning without adversely affecting research-performance is recognised by the whole higher education sector, including the universities, institutes of technology and private providers. *If we don't improve our teaching methods, students will never master the learning outcomes ensuring their professional preparedness and addressing the skills shortages which will otherwise badly endanger the Irish economy and hamper its recovery*, said an HEA staff-member. Many in the higher education community share this sentiment. The National Forum has been an important force in advancing this re-balancing, allocating funding to 'bottom-up' initiatives with a view to supporting system-wide quality-enhancement.

The relevance of the National Forum is further demonstrated by its capacity to stimulate the interest of **staff on secondment**, coming from higher education institutions to be assigned to specific projects. The National Forum has hugely benefitted from the commitment of the staff on secondment who have given of their expertise and served as a bridge to the higher education sector while also advancing national policy priorities. All staff on secondment value their experience at the National Forum, and highlighted how they reap the benefits of joining a national platform. Working at the National Forum enabled them to gain some distance from the daily routine at their institution, learn about international 'best practice', and connect with a variety of stakeholders. The secondment period is a genuine professional development experience for these staff. They return to their institution with a changed mind-set and, for some, *modus operandi*, specifically on: how to engage multiple stakeholders, how to balance debates with

¹⁰ Many comments from the general survey stressed that the National Forum may encourage exchanges outside of an institution and even promote a sense of belonging to a wider educational community.

divergent opinions, how to conduct short-term projects within a strict time-span, how to reach out to faculty teaching in remote areas of Ireland, and how to cooperate with students on national projects. The National Forum has received strong interest in these secondment positions, which have significantly enhanced their human resources. The seconded staff has been given a lot of responsibility in their assignments. The National Forum management team has stimulated their creativity, prompted their connection to top-notch national and international expertise and exposed them to multiple practices in teaching and learning spanning the whole country and beyond (through conferences for instance). As a result, the seconded staff will become an emerging pool of skilled teachers (some 42 since the start of the National Forum) at the forefront of teaching and learning, who are likely to serve the Irish higher education sector – although the evidence of this (in terms of impact on other staff) has yet to materialise. Instead of dispersed capacities spread over the higher education system with uneven levels of knowledge and practice – the situation faced by Ireland for years – the staff on secondment constitute a creative body from whom the country can benefit. It is essential to keep that pool upgraded and expanded.

The National Forum – a neutral platform supporting cooperation

The National Forum operates as a neutral platform, where opinions converge to result in – sometimes but not always – a consensus on issues related to higher education. The team is very keen to prevent any bias in the analysis of issues and challenges arising within higher education (e.g. the non-completion of students in higher education). The National Forum has been facilitating work on two major projects: The Professional Development Framework and the Digital Roadmap. However, it is facing numerous challenges such as differing standpoints on the value of such work as well as on the various approaches to their possible implementation. In addition, the National Forum has managed to strike a balance between conflicting demands, such as stakeholders' prioritisation of policy-development and implementation, and others' appreciation of a more hands-on approach through which guidelines and tutorials are generated as key outputs. (This diversity is illustrated by the wide range of expectations of those who responded to the survey of the Irish higher education community and to the associates' survey illustrate). The National Forum succeeded in keeping the discussions as open as possible amongst stakeholders without adopting any discernible position. The National Forum is indeed not the unique designer of projects and instigator of actions. Since its establishment the National Forum has driven initiatives, made them happen on the ground and gave them a national scope. The National Forum has rather fostered intense debates so that all ideas, conceptions and expectations could be expressed. There is consensus from the informants on the capacity of the National Forum to organise debates with a constructive approach (largely confirmed by the 2 surveys) which is suited to Ireland as a small country.

The cooperation prompted by the National Forum has taken different forms: consultation during the design of national projects like the Professional Development Framework (e.g. digital experts), the engagement of students for the selection of the awardees, the inputs provided by the stakeholders during the conferences like the seminar series (interventions), the submission process of the TLEF projects, and the research projects.¹¹ The survey of the Irish higher education community included lots of comments on the capacity of the National Forum to support networking and to strengthen the teaching community. The survey conducted in 2016 by the

¹¹ For instance, in partnership with the Irish Research Council the National Forum has committed to funding a project under their Research for Society and Policy Programme. The National Forum has sponsored 4 National Forum IRC scholars.

National Forum on the perception of the National Forum by the networks corroborated that conclusion.¹²

Furthermore, the Board is not only a decision-making body but also a platform for discussions involving members from various higher education backgrounds. The Board members who were interviewed underlined the richness of the debates and the inclusiveness of the decision-making process, for instance on the development of the annual work-plan, the selection of the 3-year 'enhancement themes' and on strategic reflection on the future of the National Forum. *The cooperation is the cornerstone of the modus operandi of the National Forum; it has ensured its relevance for higher education as a whole. The National Forum can neither be reduced to an academic entity nor to a policy enforcer of the HEA or DES, as summed up by a national body representative.*

Flexibility and openness of the National Forum as key factors of relevance for the higher education sector

The National Forum is intrinsically a forum, meaning a place where opinions are shared and activities are collaboratively undertaken. The National Forum is a flexible arrangement, like an "open book" on how to approach teaching and learning improvement. The National Forum has decided to explore every opportunity beneficial to any institution wishing to foster teaching and learning. Not surprisingly the level of engagement and professionalism of institutions vary greatly when it comes to teaching and learning policy and strategy. Such variety depends on the leadership capacity of the management teams, the strategy of the institution and the pressure from the users and tax-payers to deliver a quality higher education rather focusing primarily on research-performance. **The proliferation of the since the inception of the National Forum has provided an opportunity for institutions to engage with teaching and learning improvement.** Some institutions have been ready to participate in projects or are more advanced (for instance hosting a centre for teaching and learning); others could only attend events and opted for minimal engagement. Whatever the capacity and willingness of the institutions, the National Forum offered a range of activities from which each could select and benefit. No institution has been left aside. On the contrary, the National Forum team ensured that all institutions, including the most remote ones or those lagging in developments in teaching and learning, could engage in the activities. Along the same lines, the proliferation of activities has consolidated the legitimacy of the National Forum. In 2013 the National Forum was a new arrangement, with a mandate from the HEA/DES but expected to cooperate with, and serve, the higher education sector. The National Forum is not a legal entity and enjoys limited institutional autonomy (despite full operational autonomy). The review will subsequently recommend that this standing be retained. **The drawbacks of the proliferation of the activities have led to not enough academics within the higher education community being engaged.** The survey shows that the stakeholders directly involved in projects and the staff on secondment have a good knowledge of the National Forum. By contrast, those who have not been directly involved in its activities only have a narrow understanding on the National Forum's work-programme and aims.

A general mandate gives leeway to the National Forum but also blurs its core mission

¹² Networks reported that there has been an increase in collaboration as a result of involvement in the National Forum's Network of Networks including, for example, collaboration between some of the following networks: AISHE, FACILITATE, CEEN, EDIN, INEW and LIN.

Despite the clear-cut mandate of the National Forum, which stipulates “key objectives” and “key functions”, the precise purpose of the National Forum is not so clear for many. The general objective of enhancing quality in teaching and learning is certainly shared yet the ways and means to achieve this objective remain subject to multiple interpretations according to the level of engagement of the community. The project awardees know about the general objectives of the National Forum and pursue specific goals correlated to their projects (e.g. improving the use of ICT in classroom).

Few can express clearly how their projects are amenable to being leveraged to enhance the quality of teaching and learning at the level of their institutions. Anyone can predict that the projects, despite their successful implementation, will be conducive to change at national level. Most projects have the potential for national reach and impact. However, there is little evidence that the activities taking place in the projects will result in wider impact at national level.¹³ There is a need to reconceptualise the projects that would help the National Forum identify the levers that could raise the standard teaching and learning nationally. This reflection goes also for other activities like events (conferences), Teaching Heroes and Teaching Experts Awards schemes, as well as for research studies.

The Professional Development Framework and the Digital Roadmap have a different status as they set the national agenda, in which institutional activity plans are likely to be further developed. Both aim to stimulate change at national level, to the extent that the higher education institutions take the initiative to make them work within a local context. Evidence has been gathered that this is the case for some institutions. However, a major impulse from the National Forum, backed by HEA and the DES, will be needed to prompt institutions to implement their own digital initiatives and plans for professional development, otherwise the Framework and the Roadmap might become empty shells. National change might not happen without national incentives. The foreseen integration of the National Forum into the HEA would help in this regard, as well as in enabling greater utilisation of the National Forum to support the implementation of the *Higher Education System Performance Framework* in the area of teaching and learning. The National Forum should be able to instigate change at national level.

☞ **Recommendation**

- ***The National Forum should explore new tools to support policy-making and implementation at institutional and national levels.***

The National Forum’s bridging role

The review has highlighted the connector role that the National Forum plays with networks. The National Forum has taken into account the concerns of stakeholders who are outside of the higher education community, engaging with players who could indirectly contribute to the quality of higher education and provide significant insights:

- The National Forum took into account the needs of the further education and training sector (FET), whose parent department is also the DES. This sector is interested in the quality and adequacy of higher education for life-long learners, catering for people resuming studies via recognition of prior learning (RPL), and it is responsible for the vast part of vocational and education training (VET), which is taught outside of the universities and institutes of technology. The FET sector has recently undergone significant reforms and is keen to forge links with the higher education sector. There is a mutual sharing of

¹³ One third of the respondents to the associates’ survey reported that they are unaware of the impact of the National Forum outside of their institution.

practices (e.g. FET is known for its proficiency in aligning training to job-market needs while universities are more advanced in using ICT for studies). The National Forum has instigated greater cooperation, which is considered a valuable asset that could be further developed. *Without the National Forum, the connection with the higher education sector would have been sporadic and dispersed. It is more systematic thanks to the National Forum's inclusiveness*, said a network member engaged in FET.

- The National Forum cooperated on nation-wide projects that did not initially fall within its remit, such as the disciplinary workshops on the data generated through the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE). The ISSE and the National Forum sought more interaction where there are potential synergies between the National Forum's work, such as a project on student involvement, and that of the ISSE. The ISSE has the capacity to provide the National Forum with data beneficial to teaching and learning. In the future, the National Forum could be a key partner for the ISSE assisting with the dissemination of data within institutions, as long as this data can help improve quality.
- There has been greater interaction with the business sector. Some TLEF-funded projects involved corporations, which may not have the same interest in education. For instance, the engineering project¹⁴ enabled industries to participate in simulation processes and provide their inputs in a project initially designed only for higher education. The corporations also facilitated the dissemination through workshops.

The Learning Analytics and Educational Data Mining (meant to explore and develop the use of data for student achievement) project could not be carried out within the higher education sector, otherwise the project would have solicited only the IT experts with their jargon and would have omitted policy aspects, as well as teaching and learning impacts of the projects. On the other hand, policy-makers and students could not lead the project alone. The National Forum ensured that the technical aspects of learning analytics and the policy aspects of higher education were balanced. The cross-fertilisation of standpoints during the unfolding of the projects paved the way for its success. A member of the Learning Analytics project.

Interplay between the National Forum and the stakeholders

Stakeholders' involvement in the National Forum is linked to the National Forum's commitment to decision-making bodies and to stakeholder-activities. The National Forum's Director, for instance, serves on the board of several higher education networks. At the same time, the Forum's Board members also belong to other network decision-making bodies. The HEA and DES have nominees serving on the National Forum's Board (although neither the HEA nor DES is itself directly represented on the Board).¹⁵

Most associates of the National Forum indicated in the survey that their participation in the Associate Assembly enables them to raise issues related to teaching and learning within their institution (77.14%). Associates play a key role in relaying and transmitting information between the National Forum and the institutions. The respondents felt that they were in a better position in terms of knowing what is happening at the national and the sectoral levels.

Hence there are many further opportunities for the cross-fertilisation of stakeholders dealing with higher education (notably with employers) which can benefit the National Forum, and who are abreast of the developments in the sector. In addition, the National Forum has many occasions to reflect on its activities and to inform the stakeholders about the work in progress and future

¹⁴ Irish Engineering Graduates Advancing Global Manufacturing Competitiveness: Design Simulation for the Process Industries.

¹⁵ The replacement of two of the HEA/DES nominees have been pending for a number of months, with the third position to become vacant in the summer.

prospects. The National Forum's autonomy and sectoral independence has ensured the relevance of its activities and the compliance with its mandate.

The National Forum has extensive topical knowledge of the on-going issues within the Irish higher education sector and abroad. This requires much effort in terms of presence, promotion and communication, endorsed by the National Forum's Board, associates and team. The National Forum now has a comprehensive and consolidated picture of higher education in Ireland today and has developed a holistic approach to higher education that is unique in Ireland.¹⁶

Despite the huge effort to consult with stakeholders, **the National Forum has not managed to fully engage all key constituents in the higher education community, including the presidents and senior management of institutions.** (deans, programme heads, registrars, directors of services). That category "*knows about the National Forum but is not very familiar with its activities*", said a registrar. Several reasons might explain their lack of commitment from the senior management:

- The National Forum's activities are mainly skewed towards staff who teach who will improve teaching and learning on the ground (e.g. the Teaching Heroes Awards);
- The nation-wide activities such as the Professional Development Framework and Digital Roadmap, include experts and various stakeholders with an interest in these domains (e.g. Human Resources Heads) but not all;
- Networks, which have benefited from the National Forum, rarely address the management levels;
- Most of the activities and events are time-consuming for some staff who have a busy schedule;
- The observable impacts of teaching and learning initiatives come to fruition slowly and are difficult to measure quantitatively. Senior management often expect results in the short term so that they can have tangible proof of return on investment;
- Not every institutional strategy addresses a tangible teaching and learning priority. Teaching and learning often remain a global objective with no specific implementation;
- Some senior managers focus solely on research performance and metrics. They feel that the National Forum is only dealing with teaching staff. *They might be supportive but in a passive sense*, said a registrar.

For managers interviewed, the profusion of activities has distorted the National Forum's purpose, and few realised that they could participate or asked how to be more involved. Attending a seminar series might not be of direct interest for busy managers who have various responsibilities. They leave the teaching and learning issues to the staff who teach. There seems to be a limited connection between teaching and learning and other institutional policies in areas such as human resources, internationalisation, access and research. For instance, experts and the HEA Executive implement the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* and are very familiar with the complex issues which arise in this area, such as socio-economic disadvantage. Some stakeholders are, however, not fully acquainted with the teaching and learning dimensions which are integral to advancing the access agenda, there being a lacuna between the knowledge-base of staff who teach and policy-makers.

¹⁶ The chapter on impacts will however show that the holistic approach promoted and used by the National Forum has not resulted in sustained buy-in of the HEIs' senior management.

Other informants have confirmed that senior managers express the need for policy advice and guidance rather than teaching and learning-specific tools. Today they believe that there is little assistance on how to adjust a strategy or policy dealing with teaching and learning to maximise higher education's effectiveness in student inclusion and socioeconomic growth. Survey results also showed that **leaders are convinced that teaching and learning can help improve the higher education sector. At the same time, they have trouble identifying the potential paths and adequate provisions to make change happen concretely.**

The implication of senior management and leaders

Many senior management and leaders feel unsupported and alone when making many decisions that have serious impacts on human resources, financing and legal issues. Teaching and learning tends to be an add-on with limited responsibility, and many minimise their importance, regrets an academic.

There are proficient academics committed to improving their courses and teaching methods. But at the end of the day, whether their enthusiasm turns into reality will depend on the decision of the dean or heads of department. Many initiatives and ambitions are compromised. A teacher from an Institute of technology.

Similarly, survey results and interviews with project-leaders and event-participants confirmed that **the most involved stakeholders are teachers who are already convinced of the National Forum's value.** *The National Forum talks to the converted and values the champions of teaching and learning,* complained an associate. There is consensus at the National Forum and across informants that the subject of teaching and learning is often understood by the *pedagogues*, i.e. individuals or groups of individual teachers motivated to challenge their teaching practice and convinced of the National Forum's value. Survey comments underlined a correlation between the value assigned to the National Forum and the passion expressed by the informants: *passionate teachers respect the National Forum because they are "quality fans" and value their work through the pedagogy lens; this is not shared by all teachers in higher education* said a university staff-member. By contrast, many teachers lack time and overlook the teaching and learning aspects of their career. They prefer research, and above all, feel (and are) better rewarded if they publish or carry out scientific projects.

The National Forum team continues relentlessly to promote the message that teaching and learning is important for all staff who teach. However, cascading down successful projects across an institution and across the entire higher education sector remains a challenge. Targeting the influencers who could make a change at department, faculty and institutional levels is not easy for the National Forum.

☞ **Recommendation: Ensure that the senior management of all higher education institutions are fully engaged with the National Forum.**

The National Forum endeavours to include students who are considered key players by the National Forum Board, Executive and associates. This was corroborated during the interviews. Depending on the dynamics of the student associations at institutional, departmental and discipline level, student-involvement varies. This statement is shared with the staff in charge of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement. While the USI representative on the National Forum Board plays a major role, and strives to mobilise his fellow students in every Irish institution, student-participation nevertheless depends on the engagement of the local student unions.

The National Forum is greatly aware that it may be focusing only on those already convinced by the need to make progress in teaching and learning. It has remained steadfast that the activities should be of national relevance and reach, and not only serve a small group of those promoting quality teaching and learning. Thus, it has stayed true to its mandate to serve the national sector,

and not part thereof. Subsequently the National Forum undertook actions during its 5 years of existence. For instance:

- **Touring across the country** to meet as many institutions as possible, and not only the top performers in teaching and learning. The National Forum advocated for the opportunity for any academic, whatever their status and location, to join its activities, depending on their desire and their capacity to engage. The National Forum is furthermore developing activities that are rarely recurrent; most of them are innovative and require constant promotion to get institutions involved. The National Forum is not a regulatory body which requires institutions' engagement. Rather the National Forum encourages institutions to make change happen with regard to teaching and learning;
- **Addressing new categories of academics** by expanding the Teaching Heroes/Experts Awards, which recognise high-performing teachers, to discipline-specific teachers (with the new DELTA arrangement), mobilising an experts' panel to legitimise the awarding process;
- **Trying to recruit secondment staff from various educational backgrounds** although more effort could be made to capitalise on the expertise of those who might not be already convinced of the National Forum's value;
- **Fostering multidisciplinary-focused activities** (e.g. the Digi-Languages project includes several disciplines; discipline-specific projects are inclined to expand their scope to other domains, such as the GeoLab, likely to be transferred to other domains than geosciences);
- **Opening events to wide categories**, like for the seminar series, which are not restricted in terms of attendance;
- **Expecting TLEF-granted project members and associates to diffuse the findings within and outside their institutions.** Most did so through a presentation at national and international conferences.

Immense communication efforts have been made to reach out to all categories potentially interested in the National Forum's work. The website is an information-packed platform that is constantly updated. The documents posted are articulate, well presented and professionally edited. **The National Forum is remarkably transparent, as all documents generated by events and projects are shared and posted. However, the website is not user-friendly enough for potential users who may not be familiar with the topic of teaching and learning.** The website content is so dense that it could hamper users from exploring items posted and from exploiting them for their own use. Due to the increase of activities in a short time-span, it is unclear as to how to best use the resources posted on the website.

☞ **Recommendations:**

- ***The National Forum should enhance the user-friendliness of its website.***
- ***The National Forum should develop (and monitor the implementation of) a knowledge-management (KM) strategy and allocate resources to this endeavour.***

Many informants complained that the National Forum is not yet a resource centre that could support the design of a teaching and learning strategy or hands-on tools. The National Forum is hesitant to prescribe a toolbox for the development of such a strategy, recognising the varied contexts within which institutions operate (inclusive of time-constraints and resource-constraints). *If institutions consider that teaching and learning is a tick-box exercise, then the National Forum will have failed*, said a National Forum staff-member. The National Forum utilises

resources such as documentation, which are open to anyone, to disseminate it work. However, this does not meet the needs of the higher education sector for more hands-on support and guidance in designing and implementing teaching and learning enhancement schemes and provisions. The documentation generated by the National Forum is highly relevant to the work of higher education institutions but not yet fully implementable by the higher education sector.

☞ **Recommendation:**

- ***Through the development and implementation of a communications strategy, the National Forum should enhance the communication of the outcomes and impact of its work, and strengthen its communications with institutional leaders and the wider higher education community as well as stimulating the community of practitioners to better disseminate the outcomes and impacts.***

Thus, it is clear from the review that the National Forum makes recommendations, supports innovation with seed-funding, contributes to the recognition of exceptional teachers and disseminates information. Despite these achievements, there is today no guarantee that the National Forum will be recognised as essential for the *whole* community, including the leaders and the teachers peripheral to teaching and learning-specific issues. **The success of the National Forum will lie in its capacity to promote teaching and learning to staff who teach but who currently are not fully engaged in quality-improvement.** This is an immense challenge for the National Forum, as a key system-level infrastructure with a national remit. So far, the National Forum has not been very successful in reaching out to the vast majority of 'teachers on the job'. Many have benefitted from some activities, but not at a level that would foster a profound change in their teaching practice: attending a national seminar or being designated a 'Teaching Hero' does not equip staff who teach to disseminate their good practice or to serve as an ambassador for pedagogical innovation in their institution. By contrast, participants in the TLEF-funded projects are better equipped to instigate change at departmental level, although are still dependent on the 'buy-in' of institutional leaders for their good practice to be mainstreamed at institutional level.

A second tentative conclusion is that **there is a need to clarify the National Forum's mission.** Few stakeholders have an in-depth knowledge of the National Forum activities and objectives. Many have instead a vague idea of the different types of activities and get confused when it comes to describing the core mission of the National Forum. In addition, most are unable to connect the National Forum's activities with its objectives. The articulation of the relationship between the activities and objectives of the National Forum is lacking. There is an 'Implementation Plan' as well as an MoU, but these are not documents which are designed to support the external communication of the National Forum's objectives to all stakeholders. There is a clear need for a mission statement which would set out concisely the National Forum's overarching and specific objectives vis-à-vis all stakeholders, and setting out the activities which are to be performed to advance these objectives. This would help to address the present situation in which higher education institutions struggle to connect their own strategy and priorities with those of the National Forum, and are therefore unclear about the relevance of the National Forum's activities to meeting their strategic needs. The priorities of the higher education institutions and the National Forum when it comes to supporting teaching and learning differ for many reasons (e.g. the pace of implementation of the institution differs from that of the 'Implementation Plan' of the National Forum).

☞ **Recommendations:**

- ***The National Forum should develop a mission-statement, which outlines its objectives and the principles and values underpinning its work (e.g. inclusiveness).***
- ***The National Forum should develop a model for relationship-management with higher education institutions that will ensure that institutions' strategic priorities are addressed through the services provided.***

6.2 Efficiency

Does the governance and organisational structure of the National Forum optimise its performance?

Is the size of the Executive optimal to support the work of the National Forum within the Irish context?

Are appropriate structures in place to facilitate responsiveness to emerging policy-priorities?

The National Forum has an efficient Board

Composition and representativeness

The Board is gender-balanced and includes representatives from the universities, institutes of technology, private providers, QQI, international experts, and the student body. **The broad range of representation on the National Forum's Board reflects the entire higher education system of Ireland.** It ensures that the National Forum operates within its mandate and manages its available funds.

Despite some recurrent concerns raised by members on the possible influence of some groups, the evaluation confirms that the current range of representatives enables the National Forum to address every issue facing the higher education sector as a whole. While the representation of the universities, institutes of technology, and private providers is not correlated to the numbers of institutions or students in each sector, they are nevertheless all seeking ambition to build a collective vision of the higher education sector to which all can subscribe. Triangulation of the discussions with Board members from the various sectors led the consultants to the conclusion that there is a common vision regarding the National Forum's mission, its values and its *modus operandi*.

However, the review notes that the Board lacks more diverse representation, and recommends that it should represent the range of interests in, and expectations of, higher education. Social partners and other stakeholders from the non-academic world are not represented. The composition favours academics and contrasts with the openness of the National Forum (e.g. cooperating with the further education and training sector) and its attempts to connect with corporations (e.g. TLEF-funded consortia which include corporations, such as the engineering project).

☞ ***Recommendations:***

- ***Board members of the Higher Education Authority should have a role in advising the National Forum.***
- ***Representatives from the socioeconomic sector at large should also play an advisory role in supporting the work of the National Forum.***

- **The National Forum should continue to work in close partnership with student-representatives.**

Functioning and guiding

The Board is an active body, enjoying a constructive working atmosphere. As the members serve on several boards, they are able to benchmark their experience with that of the National Forum Board. There is a consensus among the informants that the National Forum organises purposeful meetings with a clear agenda and produces systematic minutes with decision-points as well as following up on previous decisions made.

There are no taboos among Board members when it comes to addressing higher education-related issues – even those that are sensitive such as the positioning of the National Forum, the sustainability of its funding, the renewal of staff-contracts and the relationship with the University of Limerick, as the National Forum’s administrative custodian.

All meetings are well-prepared by the National Forum Executive; documents are sent out in advance so that members are fully prepared for the meetings. *The Board is inherently constructive*, said a member.

The meetings balance the technical and policy aspects of the National Forum. Members’ profiles vary greatly; some are more informed about teaching and learning at ground level while others are more familiar with the policies in Ireland. This composition leads to fruitful discussions at multiple levels, from teachers in the classroom to the institution and system-wide levels. The Board also includes a representative from QQI as a national statutory body. The discussions are highly valued because they provide a window into the actual teaching and learning situation on the ground. Some members acknowledged that they are much more familiar with how teaching and learning is addressed and handled by institutions, *in a country where research has dominated the debate on higher education for decades*, said a member. **The Board is a kind of hub where knowledge and opinions on higher education converge.** The Board is in and of itself a valuable platform for higher education that exists nowhere else in Ireland. There is still room to foster its advisory role, along with the classic managerial role of a board.

Project: "Transforming Personal and Professional Digital Capacities in Teaching and Learning"

"When submitting the proposal to the TLEF, the project partners met with an international panel that had some ideas and encouraged us to emphasise cultural change, to opt for a more collaborative approach and further design our digital developments. We had initially worked from a disciplinary perspective, and we were more focused on research, as scientists.

Working with the National Forum helped us prioritise teaching and learning, which was relatively overlooked in our submission. Instead of turning down our proposal, the National Forum allowed us to refocus on teaching and learning, which was the core objective of the project, but we were unable to identify how we would focus on teaching and learning. The National Forum is a unique body in Ireland. Otherwise we would have submitted a research-oriented project. - A project partner.

The review also confirms the view of the National Forum that *"the associates are key and vital links between their institution and the National Forum."*¹⁷ **The associates form a channel for knowledge-exchange between practitioners, connecting the National Forum to institutions and institutions to national policy and strategy.** The associates facilitate the National Forum’s bridging role between decision-makers in institutions and national policy-makers. In addition, the country’s size facilitates the interplay among stakeholders, and the associates can help improve communication, serving as advocates for the enhancement of teaching and learning on behalf of the National Forum.

¹⁷ National Forum Associates form an integrated part of the structure of the National Forum.

However, the review highlights the fact that the **National Forum operates within national borders with limited openness to international trends in higher education**. All informants appreciate the ‘added value’ of the international experts serving on the Board, on assessment panels, and in working groups as they bring fresh insights into the challenges facing higher education worldwide. Nevertheless, some members fear that the National Forum, located in a small country with a limited higher education community¹⁸ and where interests are intertwined, might be disconnected from global trends or even become an inward-looking platform. TLEF-funded project-leaders complained that there were few opportunities to connect with European and international experiences. Testimonials from project team-members mentioned the over-solicitation of U.K., U.S. and Australian experts, which confines the international contextualisation of the work of the National Forum to within the English-speaking world. The project team-members all attested to the ‘added value’ of gaining insights from international experts.

☞ **Recommendation:**

- ***The National Forum should continue to solicit advice from independent (national and) international experts in teaching and learning.***

Operational independence

The evaluation confirms that the National Forum operates independently. As the National Forum is supported by public funding, institutional independence is limited, as with all public organisations. The National Forum is accountable to the state (DES/HEA) and accountable for the public funding received. However, the design and implementation of the National Forum’s activities are not unduly influenced by any specific constituency. **The National Forum is neither exclusively a vehicle for the enactment of the policies of the HEA/DES, nor a tool for the higher education sector to preserve its interest.** Two major principles motivate the Board’s work, even though they are implicit:

- Results must be delivered. Any activity that is not able to deliver will not be continued;
- Activities must generate systemic impacts.

These principles have prevented the National Forum from working for only one category of stakeholders and have kept it in line with its mission statement to serve the entire higher education system.

However, there is a tension between the National Forum’s degree of autonomy and its role in responding to emerging national policy-priorities. This gives rise to questions such as whether the National Forum has the authority and legitimacy to publish a report without seeking formal approval from the government. As some Board members are experts on teaching and learning, and because National Forum projects rely on an evidence-based approach (e.g. deriving from studies, research or surveys), the National Forum may have a strong case to adopt policy-positions, helping to shape government policy with robust evidence which may contradict existing policy-positions.

¹⁸ Higher education in Ireland is provided mainly by 7 universities, 14 institutes of technology, including Dublin Institute of Technology, and a number of other specialist higher education institutions. In addition private providers offer a wide range of higher education courses. Source HEA website, April 2017.

There are pending inquiries from the higher education community on the driving forces of the National Forum as well as on the responsibilities regarding accountability: *Who is behind the National Forum? Who has the responsibility for the National Forum at the end of the day? Who is the National Forum accountable to?* asked a university leader. As underlined earlier, the National Forum initiates discussions and carries out activities that encourage institutions to improve. It does not represent the higher education sector nor advocate for its interests. Ideally, all stakeholders should own the National Forum. Concretely, its ownership is unclear.

An efficient team, the Executive

The Executive, led by the Director, is unanimously recognised as hardworking, fully committed, inclusive and single-minded. The Chairperson and the Director's backgrounds span academic and vocational education, which ensures that the whole higher education sector is represented. The Chairperson and the Director have prevented any division between VET and academia. Instead they have enabled universities and institutes of technology to cooperate. The National Forum is not a consultancy responding to institution-specific requests, neither is it an advocate for government policy. Striking a balance between the two is not easy, and requires the ability to listen, as well as a sense of wholeness and synthesis that is determined by the National Forum's motto:¹⁹ "encouraging teaching and learning in the Irish higher education sector". The review found that the Chairperson and the Director, as two strong and open personalities, have imparted their faith, enthusiasm and professionalism in their duties. The duo, whose abilities has been complemented by a dedicated team of permanent staff (5 in total) and staff on secondment, has been instrumental for the National Forum's success since its establishment.

The Chair and the Director are well known as they conduct fieldwork and embody the National Forum to some extent. However, the review found that the National Forum is led and represented by a wider group of advocates made up of the Board members, the associates and the team. This advantage helps the National Forum maintain a constant and unified message.

The drawback is the fragility of such an effective team. Even if staff-turnover is a normal phenomenon in any organisation, the National Forum is very new and has not yet gained full recognition by decision-makers and the community. It does not have a substantial workforce. With the number of activities delivered with very limited resources, the evaluation concludes that the National Forum is efficient, however, at the expense of the staff's wellbeing and without security of employment for the staff. The Board reinforces this precarious feeling, as they are all committed and work on a voluntary basis in addition to their occupation: *Is the level of energy we are compelled to invest into the National Forum sustainable?* asked a member. The review casts doubt on whether such governance arrangements can be sustained over the longer-term.

The responsiveness of the National Forum

The National Forum has not been confined by the roles and activities set out in the MoU with the HEA. As the National Forum needed to prove its ability to deliver the expected services, a broader approach to the MoU has been taken. The National Forum was established while resources were scarce. Seeking constant efficiency spurs its development, which may ensure the sustainability of the outputs, although the sustainability of the National Forum is not yet ensured. (See the chapter on sustainability.)

¹⁹ Although the National Forum has no clear-cut mission statement.

Upon its creation, the National Forum's key objectives and functions, such as the Professional Development Framework, the TLEF, the Digital Roadmap, the Learning Impact Awards and the seminar series, were set out in the 'Implementation Plan'. Many activities were added to respond to the challenges encountered by the higher education sector thereafter. Discussions sparked new activities that were unplanned. Many informants argue that the 'Implementation Plan' dates back to 2012, and should be updated 5 years later. The annual work plans set a list of activities, but they were not necessarily underpinned by major orientations. The team, while interacting closely with the entire higher education system, has gathered many ideas that it has helped come to fruition. At a certain point, Board members were concerned by the number of activities and feared that the National Forum's mission could be distorted. Few informants (including some Board members) have a clear and comprehensive understanding of the range of activities and sometimes misunderstand the pursued goal. The range of activities are aligned with the mandate despite the increase in activities. Accordingly, there is greater work for the team, in terms of guiding and monitoring, which may not be sustainable. The National Forum, contrasting with the ISSE that was set up the same year, has a broader mandate and plays a key role in realising the vision for teaching and learning set out in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Neither the MoU nor the 'Implementation Plan' has constrained the National Forum's development. The National Forum's responsiveness to the various situations and expectations of the higher education sector has increased dramatically entailing an amalgamation of activities that could be inconsistent: for the National Forum team, it is clear that the activities should be aligned with the mandate and serve the higher education system. Many activities are complementary; few are stand-alone activities. The clarity and alignment is not that obvious to the stakeholders, the HEA and DES. As an illustration, the comprehensive Director's reports aim to present the activities coherently. The review recognises the huge endeavour by the team to consolidate a coherent picture. However, as a Board member remarked: *The Director's report is so dense that I am unable to sum up the activities of the National Forum and I wish I could describe the National Forum at a glance*. In order to cope with this complex situation, many informants have asked that no further activities be planned. **The review indicates that it might be time for the National Forum to take a step back from the activities so as to streamline and identify its main motivations and goals.**

☞ **Recommendation:**

- ***In addition to the need for a clear mission-statement, the annual work-plan of the National Forum should demonstrate the coherence of the range of activities to be undertaken; the strategic relevance of the activities to current and emerging policy priorities; and responsiveness to the current and emerging needs of key stakeholders, foremost among whom are higher education institutions.***
- ***The National Forum's activities must be streamlined with the deployment of resources reflecting a clear focus on selected strategic priorities.***

The enhancement themes (transitions: 2013–2015; assessment: 2016–2019) framed the activities. Many were directly connected to the themes (e.g. the National Seminar Series has been aligned to each assessment theme. Forty-eight assessment-related seminars were held throughout Ireland from 2015 to 2016). However, with the plethora of activities, it is unclear to what extent the National Forum responds to the emerging national priorities. Few are able to relate the Director's report to national priorities, the mandate and the 'Implementation Plan', except for the National Forum team, which is versatile enough to understand fully the scope of action.

At the same time, the evaluation questions **the relationship among the HEA/DES/National Forum. There is healthy discussion between the HEA/DES and the National Forum, which challenge each other as their missions and standpoints are different albeit intertwined.** The National Forum is not expected to design policies. However, the work achieved on teaching and learning has helped to highlight concerns, identify obstacles (e.g. the difficulty to design an institutional professional development policy) and formulate recommendations (e.g. informing the assessment methods of teaching and learning by QQI). The HEA and DES are not expected to assist the institutions but need feedback from the ground and to inform evidence, and are entitled to instruct the National Forum. There is a kind of checks-and-balances system whereby each entity needs the other to move ahead with teaching and learning. Contact between them is frequent and the National Forum reports to the HEA and DES, which have nominated representatives serving on the Board. Nevertheless, the HEA and DES have several sections working in partnership with the National Forum. The Board and the National Forum team wonder how best to convey the National Forum's messages, report on the activities and share the findings of the research and projects across these divisions.

6.3 Effectiveness

To what extent have the key objectives and functions of the National Forum, as detailed in the 'Implementation Plan' of 2012, been advanced; and to what extent has the National Forum fulfilled its mandate, as set out in the 'Implementation Plan' and MoU?

To what extent has the National Forum supported the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education institutions?

How does the performance of the National Forum compare to other similar international initiatives?

The National Forum fulfilled its mandate as set out in the MoU

The review acknowledges that **the National Forum has met its objectives as set out in the 'Implementation Plan' regarding the realisation of activities and fulfilment of their specific outputs.** There is no evidence that the expected longer-term impacts have been achieved. However, there is much evidence that outputs have emerged.

As indicated above, the MoU and the 'Implementation Plan' did not set any quantitative thresholds. It would be irrelevant to make any conclusion regarding the National Forum's "success rate". The National Forum encourages the teaching and learning initiatives; it is a driver for change.

The National Forum Director's latest report lists in detail all its achievements as of June 2017, of which there are tangible outputs. The review opted to highlight the main achievements proving that the National Forum has met its objectives as set out in the MoU:

- **There is evidence-based documentation on teaching and learning enhancement:** research and studies have been published and have been presented to national, and even international, conferences (e.g. Strategy on RPL).
- **TLEF-funded projects have demonstrated that teachers, staff and students have been involved in the design, rolling out and monitoring of the projects.** They have

also been beneficiaries of the outputs,²⁰ which, for most of them are visible (e.g. a virtual library, software, a database). However, the visible outputs should not mask the shift in the mind-set of project participants (e.g. new ways of assessing student performance). Most projects are complemented with pedagogical tools, instructions and tutorials for further use by teachers who were not directly involved in the projects.

- **The initiatives focused on teaching and learning for undergraduate students**, many of who have more difficulty (drop-out, failure, low motivation, and difficulties related to the massification of higher education²¹).
- **Many initiatives aimed at experiencing and sustaining new modes of teaching delivery, especially in distance and virtual teaching and learning.** The National Forum structured numerous experimental attempts and built upon previous achievements, which were also transferable when broadened to national level. The National Forum offered the opportunity to institutions, which had not explored such domains, to catch up and operate like those that are more advanced. All initiatives and projects and their associated findings have been shared, and are free for use (e.g. an institution that benefitted from the National Forum's grants does not charge fees to access online resources to external users).
- **Many research activities, falling under the priority themes and/or associated with the key developments in digital capacities and professional development, were undertaken.** Evidence-based and impact analyses were conducted. The National Forum was able to shift from assumptions and perceptions to substantiated analysis with robust evidence. Trust was gained with regard to teaching and learning provisions and arrangements, which are repeatedly criticised or disputed by the higher education community, as well as by decision-makers. The higher education sector, particularly the universities, is accustomed to creating scientific knowledge and to the rigorous assessment of research results (e.g. through peer reviews). *Shifting the researchers' mind-set to teaching and learning is not possible and unfair to those who devote their time and effort to teaching improvement*, said a university researcher. External stakeholders, such as employers and even students, tend to compare the quality of teaching with employability and may overlook the teaching and learning process that should result in learning outcomes.²² Instead of advocating for the value of teaching and learning improvement, the National Forum sought evidence to demonstrate that quality improvement is beneficial and that the entire community is capable of demonstrating this if the right tools, support and rewards are available and user-friendly. The close work with the associates and the networks allowed the National Forum to anchor its work in evidence found on the ground.
- **The 'enhancement themes' were well understood across the higher education sector** (at least among the academics advocating teaching and learning improvement). The themes guided the National Forum's orientations from the outset. There is consensus that the enhancement themes are relevant. However, there are issues regarding the sequencing of the enhancement themes and their coordination over time (*Does the selection of a new theme mean that the National Forum will no longer address*

²⁰ The 4 case-studies, annexed hereto, are presented as exemplar but many informants referred to their positive experience in other projects, most of them related to digital capacity, and to innovative learning environments and pedagogies.

²¹ Ireland has the most higher education graduates per head of population of all 27 countries of the European Union (EU statistical agency Eurostat), thus the quality of teaching and learning for students should be promoted.

²² This judgement is the result of the triangulation of authoritative documentation on Irish higher education and of the interviews conducted with approximately 20 teachers, researchers, quality assurance staff, HEA/DES staff as well as representatives from 5 different networks.

the previous theme while it is still a priority for many institutions? asked several informants). In addition, there is a misunderstanding regarding the National Forum's orientations with regard to the "key objectives" of the mandate and MoU, the National Forum's "key functions", the priority themes, and the pre-identified national projects (Professional Development Framework and Digital Roadmap). The higher education community continues to seek to identify the National Forum's core missions and ultimate objectives even 5 years after its inception.

- **The awarding system for excellence is established and functions well**, as expected, with involvement from students (Teaching Heroes) and institutions (Teaching Experts). There will soon also be the discipline-specific teaching awards (DELTA). The submission process is transparent and robust. The national teaching fellowship scheme, as set out in the mandate, is not yet set up. However, the National Forum is streamlining the existing awards (for teachers, experts and discipline-specific teachers) and has set up the new IONTAS Alliance (it is a new association for Ireland's National Awardees of Teaching Excellence in Higher Education).
- **The National Forum took into account international practices** in its own reflection so as to avoid pitfalls that foreign higher education institutions might have encountered. The National Forum developed relationships with other communities (e.g. with the US, Israel, Slovenia) with a view to cross-fertilising its own experience with that of foreign communities of teachers.
- **The National Forum has been able to start linking quality assurance with teaching and learning issues** as a result of the close cooperation with QQI and interaction with internal institutional quality units. Cooperation with ISSE paved the way for further work, which helps improve data-driven analysis. In addition, strengthened cooperation could be envisaged. QQI is a new entity resulting from the merger of different quality assurance organisations. It is not fully operational in domains that directly address teaching and learning (e.g. institutional audits). ISSE was established in 2012 and developed slowly and methodically in order to acclimate institutions to the value of data instead of imposing prescriptive data collection and use. Therefore, more progress could be made with regard to the inclusion of teaching and learning issues.²³

The National Forum set the conditions to successfully implement its mandate and MoU

The National Forum has been an enabler of teaching and learning activities as a result of:

- **Tight schedule:** over 5 years, the National Forum's activities unfolded as expected with few delays. Activities unfolded at a fast pace (from designing, planning, to implementation) prompting institutional partners to focus on the essentials. For instance, steering groups organised efficient meetings, thus wasting little time.
- **Flexibility:** The National Forum tried to accommodate the various needs of the higher education sector, the HEA/DES and other stakeholders. Despite the fast pace of implementation and the ever-increasing number of activities, the National Forum took into account the level of stakeholder-preparedness. For instance, the National Forum thought the Professional Development Framework could be used as a control mechanism by institutions. The recognition framework project aimed to recognise the achievements of teacher professional development was put on hold. The National Forum considered the sector not yet ready to use such a framework and preferred to let the Professional Development Framework cascade down steadily across the institutions.

²³ The ISSE already includes 24 questions related to teaching and learning, provided by the National Forum

- **Seed-money:** The National Forum provided sufficient resources to launch and carry out the projects until deliverables were achieved. Partners were not expected to raise extra funds. The institutions made resources available to the projects (e.g. via staff on secondment, mobilisation of internal expertise, sharing of premises, using software free of rights, etc.).
- **Neutrality:** there is consensus that the National Forum is a neutral platform which operates without partisanship.
- **Technical support:** The National Forum has helped institutions to engage in the activities, by inviting them to expert groups, training the project-leaders when submitting to the TLEF or helping them facilitate meetings. Students received support through the student unions. The rationale was to equip people with the tools and attitudes to do their best, listen carefully to diverging opinions, foster consensus-building, structure a consistent project, seek evidence for better analysis and provide conditions for success (e.g. how to profile a project assistant). Such support required commitment and daily availability from the Executive and the associates.
The National Forum was attentive to the coordinating functions that were necessary for successful initiatives. Informants confirmed that often in project management, few funds were allocated to coordinating, guiding and monitoring the activities. The National Forum provided assistance to partners for these functions (for instance, the recruitment of a research assistant has been recognised as good practice, alleviating the task from the partner institutions that could not afford sufficient human resources). *With the National Forum, the coordinator of a project on teaching and learning is never left alone*, said a project leader.
- **Continuous and close follow-up on the activities' implementation according to the initial planning:** reporting to the National Forum has been rigorous (the National Forum provided templates), and regular stock-taking exercises were organised for events, TLEF-funded projects,²⁴ and awards. However, there are no quality assurance mechanisms that would ensure that the outputs deriving from the National Forum's events and projects are likely to foster change in teaching and learning. In the future, the review recommends that the National Forum should be integrated into the accountability mechanisms under which the HEA operates (e.g. the HEA's annual work-plan, annual report, and service-level agreement with the DES).
- **Connecting the Irish higher education sector:** The National Forum positioned itself at the centre of the HEA, DES and the whole higher education sector of Ireland and beyond, including the associates and *ad hoc* groups.²⁵ However, this does not ensure that the National Forum effectively serves the objectives assigned to the higher education sector by the national authorities.
- **A transparent selection process:** The National Forum is clear on the selection process. Rules are shared and most are posted on its website. It tried to avoid biased and external influence when, for example, selecting experts to serve on working groups, assess applications or review papers. *When we present a paper related to our project, an international panel provides feedback and we engage in fruitful dialogue with the National Forum, that connects us to peers and experts we don't usually know*, said a TLEF-funded project-leader. From the outset, National Forum processes were not established in advance and adjustments had to be made. For instance, experts in charge of the assessment of the Teaching Heroes Awards did not receive an evaluation framework

²⁴ E.g. Surveys have been administered to stakeholders, like networks, on their perception of the National Forum's effectiveness.

²⁵ Such as the National Professional Development Expert Group for the Professional Development Framework.

nor evaluation criteria from the National Forum. However, the experts collaboratively decided to adopt principles so as to enhance the assessment process.

Specific issues deserve closer attention:

- **The national online resources are not ready yet.** The Digital Roadmap and all activities related to digital resources have progressed greatly (research, projects, seminars). The newly explored pre-specified project Research Impact on Teaching and Learning looks at building-capacity around researcher knowledge of open access. The National Forum has also started to establish an Open Access Expert Group to run in tandem with this project to explore how the National Forum can support institutions in developing their own open access strategies, building understanding among staff and organising a national initiative around the Global Open Access Week in late October 2017.
- **The National Forum does not yet seem to be recognised in Europe or internationally as a key driver for teaching and learning improvement in Ireland.** This judgement is based on perception and a limited number of interviews with foreign teachers and students involved in quality assurance and higher education-focused activities.²⁶ The review considers that there are not yet enough impacts on teaching and learning that could be perceived by students. Students are the ultimate, albeit vital, beneficiaries of the National Forum and it will take time for them realise that quality has significantly improved and that this improvement is the result of the National Forum's support (see the chapter on impacts).
- **The resources delivered and posted are not easy to use for a policy-purpose by senior managers and also for categories of teachers, newcomers in teaching and learning.** The Director's report and the website are not the most appropriate vehicles despite being so extensive. For instance, the website is not sufficiently intuitive to lead the visitor to the right information. *A lot of valuable information is buried in the website*, said an associate.

6.4 Impact

What are the outputs of the National Forum and what are their impacts on teaching and learning in Irish higher education?

Has the National Forum been successful in raising awareness of the value of teaching and learning in Irish higher education?

To what extent has the National Forum supported policy-implementation, e.g. through the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund?

The evaluation states that it is **premature to identify the impacts** of the National Forum's work on the Irish higher education system for several reasons:

- **All activities aim to raise awareness of teachers and institutions on the importance of addressing teaching and learning.** It is difficult to assess a change in the mind-set and attitudes when it comes to raising awareness, as there are no metrics. In addition,

²⁶ E.g. side interviews with EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ENQA members, Erasmus Alumni association, conducted in spring 2017, as well as with Irish proficient academics involved in international research. They witnessed how Ireland is perceived from abroad.

the HEA and DES have not defined specific metrics to assess the performance of the National Forum, it is therefore challenging for the National Forum to report back on achievements compared with thresholds. No one knows if the National Forum passed or failed. The review concludes that the situation is more intricate, and that only an array of quantitative and qualitative assessment tools are likely to understand the National Forum's performance over the longer-term than the average project's duration.

- **Most activities aim to build and reinforce teacher and institutional capacity** to implement teaching and learning policies and provisions with a view to ultimately improve student learning. **Capacity-building takes time to produce tangible impacts.** There is a logical sequence of impacts: people first become aware of the importance of addressing teaching and learning; then there may be some exploratory initiatives. Attitudes, behaviours, methods and approaches are then deduced to improve teaching and learning.²⁷ Not all stakeholders were prepared to immediately undertake a teaching and learning improvement policy.
- **There are conflicting currents within the National Forum:** serving the sector, pushing for change and being accountable to the HEA/DES. *The National Forum has been pulled and pushed at the same time, this has hampered the possibility of the Forum to conceive an overall evaluation system; it could only track the projects, and succeed in that,* said network representatives. The review highlights the National Forum's efforts to keep track of the potential or existing impacts of its activities.²⁸ At the same time, the review concludes that a more robust internal quality assurance system for the National Forum still needs to be established.
- **The synchronicity of the activities could not match exactly with the institutions' priorities.** Many informants stated that their constraints and their own agenda were obstacles to engaging with the National Forum. The TLEF-funded projects, as illustrated in the case studies in the annex, can be deemed successful because they came at the right time for the institutions, which were looking to improve teaching and learning. *One cannot conclude on the resistance or ignorance of the institutions that don't participate in the National Forum. Some might just not gather the pre-conditions to start off or are absorbed by other priorities they must handle (e.g. designing a strategy, implementing a major revamping),* said a National Forum team member.
- **Timing of the National Forum's activities differs from the timing of impacts.** All the projects are coming to an end shortly. The end of the project for the National Forum is the start of the change process in teaching and learning. Following the design of the project, its implementation and the setting up of the organisation (management, monitoring and evaluation), the activities can roll out and start impacting teaching and learning. It would be unrealistic to detect tangible impacts at the wrap up of a project, of which the duration was, on average, 18 months. There is consensus among the informants, backed by international experience,²⁹ on the limited methodology for impact-

²⁷ There are different steps in the building of capacities, but this short description derives from authoritative articles on quality teaching improvement and behavioural change in Europe and the world.

²⁸ In April 2016, the National Forum explored the outputs and impacts of the projects. An additional category was added for 'Impact on National/Institutional Policy' and the description has been elaborated.

²⁹ See the publication of A. De Grouse (2012), There is no development without capacity, UNESCO 2012 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001870/187066E.pdf> or Capacity building in the field of higher education, European commission, 2017, rationale of Key Action 2 http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/home/erasmus-plus/funding/capacity-building-in-field-higher-education-2017_en

analysis and assessment when it comes to capacity-building and quality teaching and learning, in particular (see note³⁰).

The review emphasises that the Irish higher education system is challenged, as are many systems in the world. International research shows that “*teaching and learning relates to new thinking patterns and ways of knowing that have emerged in the last century and dramatically changed with the massification. All the major academic disciplines have been evolving new forms and processes in their teaching*”. Systems have strived to adapt by putting the student at the centre and reconsidering the mission of higher education.³¹ The Bologna Process was a great driver of this at European level, although it has not significantly changed the Irish higher education landscape. Nevertheless, the imperative for the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education – and more broadly the need for reform of the system – is set out in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*.

Two major projects gather the conditions for emerging impacts on the Irish higher education sector

The Professional Development Framework (PDF) and the Digital Roadmap (DR) are two major projects that are likely to generate change in the Irish higher education system with regards to teaching and learning. The PDF has provided shared objectives and the paths institutions should take for a smooth and effective design and implementation of a professional development policy. Institutional and teacher associations and networks confirmed the need for the sector to have a national framework within which the institutions could operate freely but with indications. The continuous upgrading of skills and knowledge within the teaching profession has become essential at a time of increasing unemployment. (It is important to remember that the National Forum was established during the economic crisis, which required the development of a new skills strategy and enhanced provision of higher education options that are responsive to employers’ skills needs.) The advent of the learning outcomes approach calling for new pedagogies, the need to assess students differently, the inclusion of students with various backgrounds and the requalification of life-long learners are examples of the recent challenges that the higher education sector has had to address. In addition, the government is pushing to foster innovation and entrepreneurship, as stipulated in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*.

³⁰ “There is relatively little evidence demonstrating the impact of professional development courses or students evaluations on improving teaching and learning outcomes. This information vacuum can undermine the legitimacy of institution- wide quality teaching policies, as no tangible facts are available to demonstrate their accuracy and effectiveness. Evaluation of the quality of teachers and their teaching will remain challenging as long as stakeholders such as students and employers, and the teachers themselves, question their reliability and usefulness”, extracted from OECD Handbook for quality teaching, 2012.

³¹ J. Gidley (2017), ‘Evolution of education: From weak signals to rich imaginaries of educational futures’, Global Cities Research Institute, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

The Digital Roadmap is another project that was meant to assist institutions in the development of ICT and their link to the educational community. Many informants complained about their limited capacity to launch effective pedagogies using the full potential of ICT. Online education and new classroom tools now available were opportunities that teachers could not seize upon. Students were digitally skilled but few had the experience of using ICT for pedagogical purposes. The Digital Roadmap is a national response to address the needs and assist institutions in designing and implementing an IT-friendly learning environment.

There is a 'before and an after' the National Forum when it comes to specific themes like professional development, digital capacities, summarised by a group of 3 networks interviewed together.

For these two mainstream projects, the National Forum collected components of existing experiences dispersed within the higher education sector and streamlined the possible orientations and suggested priorities.

Both have provided an invaluable push for higher education as a whole. *Without the National Forum, we would not have reached this level of conceptualisation regarding professional development, as we strictly operate within our remits and have limited resources,* said a senior manager of university. It is too early to confirm that the National Forum has been instrumental in terms of generating nation-wide impacts regarding professional development and the use of digital tools. There are no quantitative thresholds by which it can be concluded that the National Forum has had a tangible impact at systemic level. However, the review has gathered strong views leading to the following conclusions:

- More institutions than ever before have engaged in a consistent professional development policy aligned with the national Professional Development Framework;
- The innovations linked to digital capacities are more interconnected at national level due to the emergence of a community of practitioners, the sharing of practices, and the dissemination by partners and the National Forum (e.g. via the *Forum Insights*, conferences and seminars).
- The studies and analysis of the National Forum sometimes do not lead to ready-made improvement-schemes or advice to overcome an obstacle but help understand situations. The National Forum helped clarify the underpinning challenges that were not so explicit for many or consensual enough to envisage taking action. For instance, the report on digital capacity underscored the lack of a strategy and planning at many Irish institutions, despite a strong desire for ICT and communications and the use of ICT in pedagogies. The report highlighted that decisions in ICT are mostly made *ad hoc*, with limited preparation; institutions have all their champion teachers but operating in silos when using ICT-based pedagogies. *The National Forum comes with an unbiased, non-partisan, pluralistic diagnosis on the use of ICT faced in higher education that many ignore or think they know about,* said a university leader.

The Engineering project and the Digital Roadmap

The project is about designing simulations (software), which can be very useful for many sectors (pharmacy, oil/gas); I have been involved in this simulation work. First semester – in a period of 2 weeks companies came to UCD and presented their graduate programmes giving students the opportunity to apply. This is a great opportunity for 1st and 2nd year students to see what the companies are doing and gain information about the labour market/understand the sectors and the types of jobs. Furthermore, these meetings are useful to teachers to understand the precise needs for expertise and to see whether the teaching responds to that or needs to be adapted.

I work now on a T&L project to develop digital resources for this project (tutorials, videos). I see that it will help the students understand the knowledge better and gain better skills.

A master's student involved in the Engineering project.

The National Forum endeavours to play a systemic role at national level:

The National Forum made efforts to instruct project leaders, institutions and individuals to operate with a view to transferring and up-scaling the experience they gained from the Forum's supported activities. These efforts took different forms:

- **The proficiency in connecting the TLEF projects to other initiatives** like conferences and research activities (see example of the engineering project). This enabled the projects not only to be disseminated across partner institutions but also to reach national level.
- **Making sure the projects and activities were not standalone and endorsed a nation-wide objective.** Partners sought sustainability, transfer and expansion to other departments, faculty and institutions across Ireland.
- **The selection process reminded the partners of the need to think, at the inception of the project, about the sustainability for the higher education sector** (and not only to sustain the project itself) and the dissemination, not when it has wrapped up.
- **Freedom to innovate and flexibility to implement** (the National Forum might allow delays, the reconfiguration of projects, etc.) enabling partners to find the most adequate route to success. At the same time, the freedom and flexibility **are counterbalanced by the National Forum's requirements regarding national expectations.** The TLEF-funded projects not only explored the possibilities to innovate in teaching and learning, but also constituted a first step to be continued. The assistance of the National Forum's team and the close monitoring of the unfolding of the projects ensured that the projects would have a wider impact at system level than on their immediate targets.

These efforts resulted in the emergence of a range of observable impacts on a small-scale (e.g. at the level of the departments of the partner-institutions in charge of implementing the TLEF-funded project), yet not at system-level.

Various observable impacts and weak signals³² on teaching practice and learning experience, but not a system-level

Despite the challenge to assess the longer-term impacts of capacity-building and teaching and learning-related initiatives, the review underscored a wide range of weak signals³³ that demonstrate that change is occurring, but on a limited scale:

- Increased student interest during the courses;
- Greater student involvement in their own education; eliciting student feedback and students' mobilisation to support content, lead projects, and connect with stakeholders such as companies;
- Student-developed learning strategies, greater student-cooperation and interactivity in addition to the classic "learning at home attitude";
- More fulfilling student-teacher interaction – they became more like colleagues with less hierarchical relationships;
- New types of assessment reflecting the new pedagogies (e.g. project-based learning);
- Effective teaching of large classes especially at undergraduate level (flip-class, breakdown of homework and work in the classroom);
- Value of teachers' pedagogical role, often neglected or minimised by themselves or their hierarchy;

³² Collected from the interviews, case studies and documentation posted by the National Forum such as Insights.

³³ McKinsey (2016), The strength of 'weak signals' <http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/high-tech/our-insights/the-strength-of-weak-signals?cid=eml-web>

- Recognition of the 'added value' of teachers' pedagogical engagement within the institution;
- Sets of good practices (for some) that are implementable by institutions (e.g. professional development policy linked to HR policy);
- Fostering linkages with external stakeholders like employers who become partners;
- Enhancing the student-evaluation process, with, for example, self-evaluations that should encourage autonomy and use formative assessment as a learning-tool;
- Building a community of practitioners. The National Forum has set up an association of Teaching Heroes awardees. Every TLEF-funded project includes the development or reinforcement of existing networks and communities, with a view to diffusing the project outputs within the system. The projects usually included presentation meetings, distance discussions, repository of documentation, e-platforms with stakeholders and all other material helping the emergence and sustainability of a community. The expected result is to assign a community the responsibility of upholding and developing the project outcomes. *The National Forum is actually an enabler and is not a substitute for teachers who should own their projects and their further expansion*, said a National Forum staff-member;
- Making a case that excellent teaching and high-performance in research enrich each other and that teaching excellence is an attractive asset for the institution, enhancing its reputation;
- Turning concepts into tangible reality (e.g. using a virtual microscope radically boosted the undergraduate students' interest in geosciences). Quality teaching and learning is not only jargon for specialists.

The value of excellence via the Teaching Heroes Awards, a testimonial from Trinity College awardee

The award ceremony took place at Dublin castle last October. There were a total of approximately 50 awardees. At the Award ceremony, an announcement was made about a new alliance/network of all recipients of the Teaching Heroes Awards. It is still too early to tell but I think this network will have great potential. Two winners were selected to attend a workshop on behalf of the NF.

Perception of the application process:

I was asked at my institution (an email was circulated) to get assistance. Several people were nominated and the Trinity student union played an influential role in the selection. The nomination was completely student-driven. Out of the 100 nominations 2 were selected. I received an email from the National Forum that I had been nominated. I had nothing else to do.

Recipients' distinctive features:

I am still doing my PhD; I was a teaching assistant when I received the award. I get on well with the students and I am perhaps more approachable than the other teachers. I like to ground issues in the real world. I like to have fun with the students. This might explain the popularity of my teaching.

Impacts:

As I am coming to the end of my PhD, I realise the value of good T&L to help students gain confidence. After the award, I received several offers for lecturer positions in other institutions and a lot more responsibility regarding the content of the courses. I am promoting the award as I apply for jobs.

I am not sure about the impact on my department or institution and their awareness of the award. .

The facilitating factors

Evidence was collected on the impact at national level for stakeholders who found inspiration and instruments to improve the outcomes of National Forum-supported projects. QQI is for instance now designing guidelines for institutional assessments that take into account the findings of National Forum-supported research and projects. Since the National Forum interacts closely with the institutions, which QQI as a regulatory and quality assurance entity cannot do with the same openness, the guidelines match the teaching and learning reality on the ground. QQI has gained more legitimacy to address teaching and learning, which is a sensitive issue

when addressed by buffer bodies³⁴ like quality assurance or funding agencies. Serving on the National Forum's Board enabled QQI to become fully acquainted with the multi-faceted aspects of teaching and learning and to explore, collaboratively with the National Forum and associates, how to improve the assessment methods.

There are various facilitating factors that enable changes to emerge. They are summed up below. Some pertain to the National Forum, while others are more external.

National Forum-specific facilitating factors:

- The competitive process for the TLEH encouraged the institutional partners to succeed and explore the best way of being awarded;
- National Forum team offer support at any stage of teaching and learning development: the National Forum is open to any idea and proposal, even when it does not feature in their work-plan;
- The National Forum team and associates visit the institutions requiring a presentation or customised assistance. Within projects, the National Forum continuously provides technical assistance on the organisation of the applications, the design of the project and its implementation and monitoring;
- The monitoring and evaluation (M&E) by the National Forum, which is often seen as a burden for institutions but allows the initiatives to remain within the confines of the National Forum's mission;
- The international expertise that the National Forum solicits to bring an external, neutral and non-Irish view. This input could be further developed, as it is much appreciated by the partners;
- Most projects are small in size and budget (the National Forum grants seed-money), hence the projects remain manageable and thus feasible during the brief time span;
- The high pace of the activities with realistic objectives permitted the work of the National Forum to progress steadily and to track the outputs;
- The capacity of the National Forum to detect energetic project leaders, skilful speakers and inspirational experts. There is consensus on the quality of the content and form of the expertise made available by the National Forum;
- Output-driven projects and events compel participants, as well as the National Forum to anticipate the outcomes to be reached. However, the outputs may not be as consistent as the National Forum thinks. The interplay between the activities is often unclear to many teachers on the ground and at national level;
- The National Forum elicits the existing expertise when necessary and identifies where the resources can be mobilised within Ireland. The National Forum has therefore

**The Learning Analytics project:
an outputs-driven project**

A 9-month project is very short, it must work within these months. The challenge was for all the committed partners who felt strong pressure to succeed. They tried to balance between identifying realistic objectives and at the time submitting an ambitious objective that could serve not only the partners but the whole sector. We had no clue whether the sector would be interested. Our project covered the broad domains of higher education, but the National Forum advised us to set achievable objectives. We came to the conclusion and the project would had potential for national expansion but our immediate output at the end of the project was: the online library of 25 key resources. - An institution staff-member and project-partner.

³⁴ The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)'s studies have repeatedly shown how institutions were reluctant for quality assurance agencies to assess teaching and learning as they are considered far removed from teaching practice and use unrealistic metrics.

refrained from concentrating the expertise but rather detecting where the resources are to complement that of the team and of the partner institutions.

External facilitating factors:

- The size of Ireland simplifies the inter-connection among experts. However, this presents some limitations and the risk of inward-looking behaviour (as highlighted above);
- A propitious policy environment for enhancing teaching and learning since 2010 (including the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, the merging of QA bodies into QQI, the ISSE and the National Forum);
- Great awareness of the need for higher education leaders to upgrade the quality and reputation of educational studies in Ireland. *We could no longer rely upon our fantastic economic transformation of the 1990s that was badly hit by the financial crisis and so Ireland had to plunge into the knowledge society to open up new avenues for development and inclusion. New skills were becoming key*, observed a DES representative.

The review could not detect any contextual or National Forum-specific hindering factors that could hamper or slow down the emergence of impacts on institutions and the whole system. However, the chapter on sustainability indicates risks that might endanger the materialisation of the expectations on a systemic change of in teaching and learning at national level.

The list of impacts is impressive and one should not underestimate the potential for impacts that have not yet materialised at national level:

First of all, individually focused initiatives might have a systemic impact, although their potential is unclear. For instance, the Teaching Heroes and Teaching Experts Awards value the engagement of high-performing teachers and specialists, after a tough selection process. Testimonials from awardees confirmed the award's value, first for maintaining enthusiasm and heightening their engagement. The awards could be a career-booster. However, the review considers the return on investment of such arrangements remains limited to national considerations. The awards rather recognise the individual engagement as a sign of excellence. Unlike the TLEF-funded projects, the submission process does not require the applicant to demonstrate his/her capacity (except a video and a portfolio based on prior achievements). All recipients and students involved with the awards highlight their inability to identify a potential impact on the higher education system.

☞ **Recommendation:**

- ***The National Forum should ensure that individually-focused schemes, such as the Learning Impact Awards, have wider impact, supporting awardees to disseminate to their community their insights and innovative pedagogical practices.***

Secondly, as already highlighted, the full engagement of senior management precludes the achievement of the impact at institutional level, and thus at national level.

☞ **Recommendation:**

- ***The National Forum should ensure that the senior management of all higher education institutions are fully engaged with the National Forum in respect of the enhancement of teaching and learning at institutional level. Exploring an institutional self-positioning tool might be relevant in this context.***

Thirdly, there is a lack of appropriate evaluation methods on the assessment of impacts. Only 5% of associates commented that the National Forum has brought the teaching and learning issues to the forefront of the institution. Beyond the remits of the projects they are involved in or outside of their scope of interest, no evidence has been collected on their national impact. Few informants are able to identify with certainty that the National Forum has successfully initiated national change in the area of teaching and learning. There will be a need to develop appropriate evaluation methods to ascertain this.

☞ **Recommendation:**

- **A strategy should be developed to evaluate the impact of the National Forum's work on the higher education sector**

6.5 Sustainability

How should the mandate and functions of the National Forum be developed to optimise the HEA's support to enhance teaching and learning in Irish higher education?

What role should the National Forum play in responding to, and advising on, policy-priorities?

The dissemination and up-scaling of activities are at the core of the National Forum's mission

The National Forum was established at a time of economic crisis and dwindling public funds for higher education. Hence activities were conceived that were to be implemented over the short-term and that required limited resources. The review highlights the compliance between the allocated funds and the objectives of the projects and activities. All projects have or are about to be terminated and have reached their specific objectives: their outputs have been delivered. The informants maintained that more money would not have resulted in increased outputs. The funds were allotted to mobilise partners, and to develop expertise and tools, and were earmarked for dissemination and upscaling, once the projects could generate findings worth diffusing across the higher education system.

Enhancing Digital Literacies for Language Teaching and Learning "Digilanguages"

The project aims to develop a national digital literacy framework for language-learning and teaching within an Irish higher education context. The cross-institutional project team comprises language lecturers from across a range of geographically diverse locations, representing six institutions. The project focuses on the following languages: French, Italian, German, Spanish, Irish and English for speakers of other languages.

When designing the project, we made sure that the material developed will be used. As from 2017, the partner institutions have been integrating the materials into the module content. Contact points have been involved in the dissemination. Experts mobilised by the National Forum and those serving on the international advisory panel are well connected and often provided inputs to the technology and the material developed. We have asked students and teachers across the international higher education sector to create user-friendly material. We followed a solid quality assurance process in order to refrain from being too conceptual.

Today, changes are occurring on the ground, our materials are very hands-on and accessible via the portal. They are not theoretical and put away on a shelf. In November 2016, we presented the outcomes at an international conference in South Africa. Participant reaction was overwhelmingly positive. We think that the increase in seed money and the strict guiding of the project, as well as the value of the international experts, helped us save 2 years. The platform has become a one-stop-shop for teachers, who appreciate finding a unique repository. The project leader.

All projects have been designed to be built upon. The National Forum has made sure that the deliverables are accessible and implementable including by those who have not been associated

with the projects (see the case study on the GeoLab virtual microscope project, which includes software that requires only one-hour of practice in order to be familiar with the device). Another example are digital badges that many considered a novelty in Ireland as in many other countries.³⁵ The National Forum was careful to associate users and experts with a view to expanding the concrete implementation of digital badges.

The National Forum chose a **low-cost approach** that is likely to ensure the replication of the the activities and their associated outputs. A cost-analysis was carried out on the material developed (such as software) and training modules so to calculate investment and running costs.

The rigorous follow-up during the unfolding of the activities, led by the National Forum, contributed to the prudent use of grants and seed-money.

Most of the activity-outcomes are long-lasting with regard to digital capacity-building and staff-development. Events and research-activity participants, seconded staff, associates and expert group members agreed that joining the National Forum's activities either as passive or active participants has been instrumental in improving their knowledge with regard to teaching and learning. Those who are more involved in the National Forum, such as the TLEF-funded project leaders, confirmed that their knowledge and experience have increased (as evidenced by the results of the National Forum's systematic evaluation) and that their skills have been improved.

Such an approach enables expansion across the country, however it does not ensure the mainstreaming of activities, which will require other conditions, above all the buy-in from the senior management, which is currently lacking.

☞ **Recommendation:**

- ***The National Forum should ensure that senior management of all higher education institutions are fully engaged with the National Forum with respect to the enhancement of teaching and learning at institutional level.***

The National Forum needs financial security

The National Forum was funded for first 3 years of its existence and has been funded annually from 2014 until 2016. This 3-year funding ensured the expansion of the National Forum and permitted the engagement of the activities as stipulated in the 'Implementation Plan'. In 2017, the National Forum benefitted from an annual allocation paid quarterly to support its actual and projected expenditure.

The University of Limerick is the administrative custodian of the National Forum. This arrangement is sub-optimal, as well known by the National Forum, the HEA and DES. As the

³⁵ There are many regional and international conferences focusing on digital badges, as well as multiple initiatives to recognise learning. Thus this demonstrates the emerging interest with regard to digital badges within the worldwide higher education community and a lack of common position on their value and robustness. Traditionally, academic credentials and professional certifications were awarded as students emerged from education and vocational/technical programmes (Ledesma, 2012). By 2015, global higher education institutions were considering validation of knowledge from online learning coursework in one single common, broad-based credentialing platform (EAIA, 2012, 2015). See Micro-Credentials, Nano Degrees, and Digital Badges: New Credentials for Global Higher Education by Pamela A. Lemoine (Columbus State University, Columbus, GA, USA) and Michael D. Richardson (Department of Educational Leadership, Columbus State University, Columbus, USA), in [International Journal of Technology and Educational Marketing \(IJTEM\)](#).

National Forum is not destined to become an autonomous legal entity, it will not administer its own budget. An alternative to the present arrangements must be explored in the short term.

All stakeholders agree on the endurance of the challenge to enhance teaching and learning and insist that it will not be removed from the political agenda. They, however, expect the national authorities to demonstrate political acceptance and provide financial resources to teaching and learning in the near future. In addition, there is an consensus, shared by the reviewers, that the outcomes will take time to emerge and will require long-term support, including financial provisions earmarked for teaching and learning.

☞ **Recommendation:**

- ***The HEA and DES should ensure the continued functioning of the National Forum for the next 5 years to allow the emerging impacts to come to fruition and to sustain the national-level support provided to the higher education sector with regard to the enhancement of teaching and learning.***
- ***A strategy should be developed to ensure the sustainability of the National Forum's achievements as an integral part of planning and implementation.***
- ***A comprehensive suite of impact-indicators should be developed for the assessment of teaching and learning in Irish higher education.***

Higher education institutions continue to face economic challenges and seek to generate revenue independently of their budget-allocation from the state. **Teaching and learning could be jeopardised if public funding is reduced. Research-performance remains the key target for most academics.** All the institutions in Ireland, no matter their category, are aware of the high competitiveness of international research and could hold back funds for scientific activities, which are likely to yield external resources (e.g. from the European Union), international reputation and increased innovation capacities. There is a great deal of pressure to continue to favour research at the expense of teaching and learning. This situation is not specific to Ireland. Fortunately, the national policy documents (like the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*) and the positions of associations such as HECA, THEA and the IUA have called for closer interaction between research and teaching and learning, with a view to enriching both. The National Forum has taken the same approach: while supporting teaching and learning, the National Forum has sought to highlight that it is complementary to research, although this is less true for institutes of technology **Nevertheless all face financial concerns and there is a risk that teaching will not attract the investment required for Irish HEIs to compete at European and international level.**

Therefore **the review is confident that the entire higher education community is capable of striking a balance between research and teaching while continuing to foster teaching and learning improvement. However, the following conditions would need to be met:**

1. Continued investment in teaching and learning is required to roll out projects, lead and assess pedagogical experiences, train teachers and staff, assist teachers in putting their teaching skills to the best use, and assist students to learn more effectively (e.g. by setting up learning communities), including teaching and learning within the internal quality assurance system.

2. Above all, the institutions need staff who could motivate, implement and sustain their efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning. International examples confirm that providing guidance to teaching and learning is essential and requires highly competent staff. Successful projects have relied on the skilful leadership of project leaders, and close cooperation with the skilled National Forum staff. A multi-year plan for its activities has provided the National Forum, as well as the higher education community with a sense of direction. It should continue but with greater visibility. It is worth recalling that the National Forum gave a lot of hope to institutions as they were undergoing severe budget cutbacks. The National Forum supported institutions' efforts to review their programmes, adopt strategic plans and foster teaching and learning innovations, with limited teacher-incentives. This is aligned with the recommendations of the European Higher Education Modernisation Agenda 2020 (see box above).
3. Senior management support is vital to enhancing teaching and learning in institutions as well as throughout Ireland. The National Forum supports national-level cooperation between staff who teach yet it is unclear whether there is senior-level support (university presidents). Therefore the sustainability of the projects is not guaranteed. For the projects to truly contribute to systemic changes in teaching and learning at national level, it is critical that there is buy-in from the HEIs' leaders. Some current impacts (or "weak signals" at this stage) might vanish without continuous senior management support.

Recommendation #2 of the higher education modernisation agenda 2020

Every institution should develop and implement a strategy for the support and on-going improvement of the quality of teaching and learning, devoting the necessary level of human and financial resources to the task, and integrating this priority in its overall mission, giving teaching due parity with research.

7 Positioning the National Forum – examples from abroad

The initiators of the National Forum, the HEA, DES and the higher education community involved in the design of the National Forum, were inspired by international experiences.

A quick overview³⁶ of the national platforms and provisions on teaching and learning in higher education leads to the conclusion that few countries have committed to supporting and incentivising individual teachers, groups and institutions, as well as recognising teaching and learning engagement and/or excellence.

There are national professional development schemes and nation-wide initiatives (e.g. in Germany with the Nexus project by HRK (the German Rectors conference)) often focusing on excellence in teaching, certificates for recognition of pedagogical skills (like in the Nordic countries). There are those that provide support to institutions and teachers and an extensive array of dispersed provisions for training, supported by the State or associations or specific networks (e.g. French Agency for Mutualisation in Universities, AMUE). Australia developed an impressive arsenal of tools and support arrangements through the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) although the government ceased funding this in 2011.

The National Forum was inspired by the U.K.'s Higher Education Academy which is today at a more advanced level of development. It promotes professional standards that are used in

Lessons to be learned from the review of the U.K.'s Higher Education Academy by HECFE

In May 2013, the funding bodies of higher education in the U.K. commissioned independent consultants to evaluate whether the Higher Education Academy is effectively achieving the general priorities set out by the funding bodies and its wider aims and objectives. The review was also asked to consider whether the Higher Education Academy is providing funders and the sector with value for money.

The research found that the Higher Education Academy had made significant progress since the previous evaluation commissioned in 2007 and that it:

- provides services, knowledge and expertise that are important to the sector;
- has, at both the level of the Board and the Executive Team, a clear vision and a grounded appreciation of the priorities it must pursue if it is to continue to improve the value it offers the sector, funders and other stakeholders;
- is an increasingly efficient and effective organisation that has secured, especially in the last three years, improved levels of confidence from the wide range of different stakeholders and communities it serves;
- has devised and, for the most part, successfully implemented a new and more resilient business model.

The research also found a number of areas requiring further development. For example, the Higher Education Academy:

- has not established a clear approach to demonstrating value for money and the impact of its work to the sector;
- needs to better communicate, to institutional leaders, the impact and value of its work with their institutions;
- needs to fine-tune its organisational model to ensure greater agility to respond to institutional requirements and an evolving environment;
- needs to narrow its focus on fewer key strategic priorities and be more effective in providing evidence of the outcomes it delivers for individual institutions.

³⁶ There are no recent authoritative studies and research on the national support to teaching and learning. Literature includes a profusion of research on teaching excellence and European documentation features examples of good practices, but there is not a comprehensive analysis of how governments support teaching and learning at national level, as of the date of the external evaluation.

HEIs and by individual academics eager to obtain the certification. The U.K.'s Higher Education Academy has a wider disciplinary focus than the National Forum. However, its future is in danger as the government is cutting all its funding from 2018.

Interviews undertaken as part of this review with foreign experts and Irish informants underlined the fragility of the national-level engagement with the National Forum by the higher education community, and experience and research demonstrate that little impact emerges from short-term engagement. **Major changes in teaching and learning in higher education usually take between 5 to 10 years to occur.** The path to tangible change is actually lengthy and never linear. Institutions make progress in teaching and learning and then may change priorities (due to the election of a new management team), have new conditions (e.g. budget cutbacks, pressure of competition), or call for other kinds of support.³⁷

³⁷ OECD (2010), *Learning our Lesson*, Hénard.

8 Conclusions

Relevant and effective work

The National Forum has fulfilled its mandate's main objectives and has endorsed the key functions as set out in the MoU.

The National Forum's strength is in the setting up of a *check and balances* system whereby the National Forum was able to understand the complexity of higher education's requirements and address the multi-faceted, and sometimes opposing, needs:

- The National Forum enjoys operational independence although it operates within a nationally-designed MoU and 'Implementation Plan';
- The National Forum has much leeway to identify and carry out activities although it should contribute to the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, the *National Skills Strategy* and the European Modernisation Agenda 2020;
- The National Forum enjoys a flexible approach to best serve institutions and adapt to higher education realities, however it imposes short deadlines and output-driven initiatives;
- Pre-identified projects establish national orientations although the National Forum is expected to support implementation on the ground through various means such as seminars, consultations, studies, pilot-programmes, etc.;
- The National Forum fosters bottom-up initiatives, however they should comply with national higher education objectives and be aligned with, or inspired by, the priority themes;
- Seed-money is available to launch projects but the National Forum places a great deal of emphasis on the sustainability of the outcomes through their dissemination and is attentive to their transferability within the system;
- The National Forum promotes empirical and exploratory initiatives and supports evidence through research, international insights and peer reviewing.

The National Forum is not a project; it is an essential component of the national-level infrastructure for higher education. Therefore, the work of the National Forum is essential for the continuous development of higher education and teaching and learning in Ireland.

There is strong consensus that its mission should remain and be strengthened. It is agreed that returning to having no national-level infrastructure for teaching and learning in Irish higher education would sabotage the efforts already undertaken. It is therefore important that this national-level support for teaching and learning should continue to be provided, although there is no need to create a new legal entity for this purpose. It has become a unique platform where opinions of various higher education stakeholders converge, from the bottom-up, as well as from the top-down. The higher education hub is taking shape and all agree that its value is relevant to the development of the Irish higher education sector and for the output of skilled graduates for the country.

The higher education community is starting to bear the fruit of the National Forum's activities. There is today a collection of frameworks (Digital Roadmap, Professional Development Framework), tools, research studies and much evidence-based documentation on *what works and how with regard to teaching and learning in Ireland*.

The National Forum structured and consolidated pre-existing quality-improvement initiatives on teaching and learning which had been dispersed among institutions, departments and individual teachers. The attempts to streamline teaching and learning activities led by earlier governmental provisions and networks were taken into account and structured to ensure greater visibility and accessibility to the higher education sector.

The inclusiveness of the National Forum has been instrumental in raising awareness regarding the importance of support for teaching and learning for the entire sector. Hence, the National Forum operated nationally and fully complied with its mandate.

The number of activities that it has developed over the years allowed the National Forum to prove its capacity to improve teaching and learning within the sector. The National Forum abides by the rationale of its creation, “*making more for higher education with less resources*”, as summed up by National Forum staff.

The National Forum is expected to provide decision-makers with evidence-based arguments that benefit higher education. The National Forum needs to be aligned with national policy initiatives and developments as well as with institutional priorities. The reviewers believe that positioning the National Forum under the aegis of the HEA will help associate the National Forum with policy-developments at both the national level and at the senior management level within institutions.

The governance and management

The National Forum’s governance model reflects the variety of the higher education sector, the commitment of both the Board members and its Executive, which has contributed to its success since it was established. The associates and the experts, including those from abroad, helped the National Forum to gain a better understanding of the teaching and learning environment at the institutional level, and this has been complemented by various stakeholders, who contributed through their experiences. **The National Forum’s Executive deserves much praise in this regard.**

The academically led Board legitimised the National Forum *vis-à-vis* the higher education community. It is therefore essential that the Executive of the National Forum continue to be advised by independent experts in the field. The categories of institutions are well represented, although the number of representatives from each category may not be equal, but all opinions are respected. The healthy tension between the National Forum and the HEA/DES has helped motivate each entity, which has contributed to improving the mutual understanding of their roles and the specific constraints and aspirations of each partner. With the Board’s guidance, the National Forum was able to form a shared vision despite the huge diversity in the higher education sector. As higher education contributes to expanding the knowledge economy, as stated in the *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030* and the *National Skills Strategy*, representation on the Board may be too narrow. There are no representatives from the enterprise sector, the voluntary I sector, nor life-long learning.

Although the organisational structure runs smoothly, its functioning is not well known nor understood by the wider teaching community. The design of a clear mission statement will help clarify the missions and roles of the higher education community, the HEA and DES as well as other stakeholders involved in teaching and learning.

The National Forum platform is fragile and its future is uncertain. It requires long term sustainability to improve institutional teaching and learning practices.

The consistency of activities

Activities were interconnected under the National Forum's priority themes, which provided a general level of consistency in its operations. While the MoU and the 'Implementation Plan' stipulated clear-cut assignments, all of which came to fruition, as the National Forum engaged in so many initiatives. However, **with the ever-increasing number of activities, the National Forum had little capacity to verify the link between these activities and their institutional/sector expected outcomes. This profusion of activities could ultimately distort the National Forum's mission.** Some think that "*activities live for themselves*, Today, apart from the Executive, few from the higher education community are aware of the full range of its activities and their connection with the National Forum's themes.

On the one hand, the MoU enabled the National Forum to expand quickly and demonstrate its capacity, however, on the other hand there is little evidence that all activities served the entire higher education sector.

The outputs-driven activities were instrumental in delivering tangible results for the higher education community and HEA/DES. In addition, the National Forum engaged in leveraging the capacity of the sector, specifically the teachers and the students, in raising the quality of teaching and learning. The range of activities and initiatives confirm that the National Forum has been a vehicle to leverage the capacity to deliver change in the sector.

The review showed that there is **an inconsistent understanding on the mission of the National Forum.** Most who know about the National Forum, can describe its main activities and the priority themes. However, there is no consistent definition of the mission statement.

Much remains to be done so that effective improvement on teaching and learning takes place:

- The capacity to conduct an analysis on institutional teaching and learning strengths and weaknesses, to identify comparative advantages *vis-à-vis* other institutions;
- The capacity to define a strategy in teaching and learning, set fit-for-purpose objectives, and implement the policy;
- The effective mobilisation of the community of teachers on the value of improving collaboration on teaching and learning;
- The incentivisation so that teachers will buy in and invest in teaching and learning;
- The evidence-based demonstration to teachers that investing in improvements in teaching and learning is essential for their development.

Responsiveness and outreach

The National Forum was able to respond to the higher education sector's demand for improvements in teaching and learning. It had difficulty turning down some project proposals that were relevant to improvements in teaching and learning. However, from the higher education community's external standpoint, *the National Forum could become a giant with too many entry points and channels.* **How to access the National Forum, what is its added value to institutions and individual teachers, how is it aligned with institutional priorities, are recurrent questions for the National Forum's Board and staff. In addition, it is still difficult**

for the National Forum to fully engage with the whole sector and its potential beneficiaries. Although the Executive is enthusiastic and responsive, having limited staff could hinder the strategic thinking that it needs to carry out on the quality of the achievements, the range of beneficiaries and non-users of the National Forum's deliverables, as well as the National Forum's development.

These issues are critical with regard to the impact of the National Forum's which should involve *all* the higher education community in teaching and learning. Categories that have not been engaged, namely the senior management of institutions and the massive number of teachers who might be reluctant or simply unaware of the potential contributions the National Forum could make. **The National Forum mobilises those already convinced by the teaching and learning issues and who have already undertaken actions and projects in that field.** Reaching out to the less involved segments of the teaching community is a recurrent concern for the National Forum. Likewise, the knowledge society includes a wider range of stakeholders who are not represented on the Board nor associated with the National Forum's development. The enterprise sector is a key player that should be involved.

There are unexplored synergies at national level, for instance how to better connect the Higher Education System Performance Framework which for example sets out key indicators on excellence of teaching (system objective 3). There will be a need to align the National Forum's impacts (i.e. resulting from its mission, and not only the impacts of each activity of the National Forum) with the expectations from the national authorities.

Impacts and sustainability of T&L enhancements achieved

There are growing signals showing that impacts from the National Forum's activities are likely to emerge. The outputs of all of its initiatives are likely to turn into outcomes and longer-term impacts for the sector. Despite the scarcity of evidence, the conditions are met to make change happen, i.e. teaching and learning improvement will help students learn better and institutions be more efficient.

Today it is however uncertain that the range of initiatives, whatever their intrinsic quality, will result in a systemic change for the sector. Sustained support from HEA/DES will be required. The National Forum needs time to implement its initiatives that have been developed. Few of these initiatives have been fully implemented.

The National Forum's timespan should be distinct from the advent of the changes. There is no synchronicity between the materialisation of the outputs and the tangible changes that make teaching and learning more effective. The National Forum has closely monitored the projects and has constantly sought for feedback from the awardees (see the evaluation from events attendees).

9 Recommendations

There are 6 key recommendations, which follow from the findings and conclusions of this report, namely:

1. The National Forum should be established on a sustainable basis.
2. The National Forum should be embedded in the wider policy-context within which it operates.
3. The mission of the National Forum should be clarified and its activities streamlined.
4. Through the development and implementation of knowledge-management and communications strategies, the National Forum should become a resource centre on teaching and learning for the Irish higher education community.
5. A strategy should be developed to evaluate the impact of the National Forum's work on the higher education sector.
6. The National Forum should aim for system-wide impact, supporting excellence in teaching and learning across Irish higher education institutions.

In the following pages, the rationale for each of these recommendations is summarised prior to the identification of actions, and of lead actors, to support their implementation. The actions are categorised as short-term, medium-term, or long-term, as defined below.

- Short-term (ST) actions are those that are likely to be implemented in 2017–2018;
- Medium-term (MT) actions are those that are likely to be implemented within 2–3 years;
- Long-term (LT) actions are those that are likely to be implemented within the next 5 years.

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| 1 | The National Forum should be established on a sustainable basis | |
| Why? | <p>The National Forum is an effective platform for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education, for which there is a clear need in the Irish context. However, in the future, the myriad of activities and the ‘grass-roots’ engagement, which the National Forum has supported to date, will need to be complemented by the engagement of the entire higher education community and by the attainment of stronger buy-in from the senior management of higher education institutions. Only by securing such sector-wide engagement and high-level buy-in will the strategic impact of the National Forum’s activities be fully realised at national level, ensuring value-for-money for this targeted state investment in teaching and learning in higher education. The National Forum’s responsiveness to emerging policy-priorities at national level will also need to be enhanced.</p> | |
| How? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HEA and DES should ensure the continued functioning of the National Forum for the next 5 years to allow the emerging impacts to come to fruition and to sustain the national-level support provided to the higher education sector in respect of the enhancement of teaching and learning. | HEA+DES (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should be relocated under the aegis of the HEA, lending parity of esteem to teaching and research in higher education at national level and increasing the National Forum’s exposure to the national policy-context within which it operates. | HEA+DES (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should be integrated into the accountability mechanisms under which the HEA operates (e.g. the HEA’s annual work-plan, annual report, and service-level agreement with the DES). | HEA+DES (ST) |

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| 2 | The National Forum should be embedded in the wider policy-context within which it operates | |
| Why? | <p>Higher education is a driver for the knowledge-society and the socioeconomic growth of Ireland. It is therefore imperative that the work of the National Forum is informed not just by developments in higher education but also by developments in the broader policy-context within which higher education institutions function. Accordingly, it is essential that the Executive of the National Forum continues to be advised not only by independent experts in the field of teaching and learning, but also by the range of stakeholders who play a role in the knowledge-society. In the years ahead the National Forum will need to be outward-looking to ensure that the enhancement of teaching and learning is responsive to the emerging needs of the economy and society.</p> | |
| How? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board members of the Higher Education Authority should have a role in advising the National Forum. | HEA (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the National Forum is established under the aegis of the HEA, it should continue to solicit advice from independent national and international experts in teaching and learning. | HEA+DES (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives from the socioeconomic sector at large should also play an advisory role in supporting the work of the National Forum. | HEA+DES (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should continue to work in close partnership with student-representatives. | NF (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should continue to form independent international assessment panels to assess proposals received under competitive funding-streams. | NF (ST) |

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| 3 | The mission of the National Forum should be clarified and its activities streamlined | |
| Why? | <p>While, after 5 years of existence, the National Forum has proved its capacity to undertake a wide range of activities, many members of the Irish higher education community remain unclear about what the National Forum offers and about how to engage with it. The ‘enhancement themes’ have helped to provide some focus to the work of the National Forum but often the link between these themes and the activities pursued is not apparent. Furthermore, the outcomes and impact of the activities are not always readily apparent.</p> <p>These shortcomings need to be addressed. The National Forum needs to tighten its focus on the strategic priorities that it seeks to address and to ensure that this is reflected in its resource-allocation. There needs to be clarity about the services which are provided to individuals and higher education institutions by the National Forum to support the enhancement of teaching and learning, and these services must be responsive to institutions’ strategic priorities.</p> | |
| How? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should develop a mission statement that outlines its objectives and the principles and values underpinning its work (e.g. inclusiveness). | NF (MT) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The annual work-plan of the National Forum should demonstrate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the coherence of the range of activities to be undertaken; ○ the strategic relevance of the activities to current and emerging policy-priorities; ○ responsiveness to the current and emerging needs of key stakeholders, foremost among who are higher education institutions. | NF (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum’s activities must be streamlined with the deployment of resources reflecting a clear focus on selected strategic priorities. | NF (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should develop a model for relationship-management with higher education institutions, which will ensure that institutions’ strategic priorities are addressed through the services provided. | NF (ST) |

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| <p>4</p> | <p>Through the development and implementation of knowledge-management and communication strategies, the National Forum should become a resource centre on teaching and learning for the Irish higher education community</p> | |
| <p>Why?</p> | <p>The National Forum has accumulated and disseminated a tremendous amount of information deriving from research, empirical analysis, events and projects. However, in terms of accessibility, the website of the National Forum is sub-optimal, presenting comprehensive information on all of the activities pursued rather than facilitating bespoke engagement by institutions and individuals.</p> | |
| <p>How?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should develop a knowledge-management (KM) strategy and allocate resources to this endeavour. | <p>NF (MT)</p> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should facilitate regular meetings for the purpose of knowledge sharing between different stakeholders, the senior management of higher education institutions, practitioners, independent experts, and policy-makers. | <p>NF (MT)</p> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the development and implementation of a communications strategy, the National Forum should enhance the communication of the outcomes and impact of its work, and strengthen its communications with institutional leaders and the wider higher education community as well as stimulating the community of practitioners to better disseminate the outcomes and impact. | <p>NF (MT)</p> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should revamp its website and enhance its user-friendliness. | <p>NF (MT)</p> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should monitor the implementation of its KM strategy in annual progress reports. | <p>NF (LT)</p> |

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| <p>5</p> | <p>A strategy should be developed for the evaluation of the impact of the work of the National Forum on the higher education sector</p> | |
| <p>Why?</p> | <p>The impacts of the National Forum’s activities on the enhancement of teaching and learning across the Irish higher education system will emerge in the longer-term, i.e. in 5–6 years’ time. Sustaining and mainstreaming the outcomes of the activities will be essential to this endeavour if the work of the start-up phase of the National Forum is to be capitalised upon. This will necessitate strong engagement on the part of the National Forum with the senior management of higher education institutions.</p> <p>To date the National Forum has been rigorous in the monitoring and evaluation of the progress of its funded projects but has yet to establish and implement mechanisms for assessing their institutional impact and value for money. This will be imperative in the future, both to ensure full accountability for state investment and to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives in terms of enhancing teaching and learning.</p> | |
| <p>How?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strategy should be developed to ensure the sustainability of the National Forum’s activities as an integral part of planning and implementation. | <p>HEA+DES (MT)</p> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A methodology should be developed for the systemic evaluation of the National Forum’s work and its impact on the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education institutions, and implement periodic reviews. (See “Food for thought” in annex). | <p>NF+HEA+DES (MT)</p> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A comprehensive suite of impact-indicators should be developed for the assessment of the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. | <p>HEA+DES+NF+QQI (LT)</p> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should ensure that individually-focused schemes, such as the Learning Impact Awards, have wider impact, supporting awardees to disseminate to their community their insights and innovative pedagogical practices. | <p>NF (LT)</p> |

| | | |
|------|---|---|
| 6 | <p>The National Forum should aim for system-wide impact, supporting excellence in teaching and learning across Irish higher education institutions</p> | |
| Why? | <p>To date the National Forum’s primary constituency has been those staff who teach in the Irish higher education sector who are already interested and engaged in pedagogical innovation, either as individuals or as members of pre-existing networks dedicated to the enhancement of teaching and learning. The National Forum’s lack of success in engaging with the senior management of higher education institutions is however a serious deficit, inhibiting the mainstreaming of the good practice emergent from the projects funded by the National Forum. Moreover, this lack of engagement has diminished the National Forum’s capability to implement system-wide change and to respond to institutions’ own emerging strategic priorities.</p> <p>The needs of the senior management in institutions in terms of the support required in respect of teaching and learning are different from the needs of the teachers. They face the challenge of designing and implementing institution-wide policies in the area of teaching and learning, and of demonstrating on-going quality-enhancement. This expectation is embedded in national strategies and is vital within today’s open, global, ‘knowledge society’, in which access to higher education, drop-out prevention, socio-economic inclusion, regional development, innovation and internationalisation are key indicators of a successful higher education institution. It is incumbent on the National Forum to support institutional leaders in realising these ambitions. Likewise, the senior management of higher education institutions need to articulate their expectations <i>vis-à-vis</i> the National Forum.</p> <p>There is no evidence today that all staff that teach in Irish higher education institutions are familiar with the National Forum and know how to utilise its services.</p> | |
| How? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should ensure that the senior management of all higher education institutions are fully engaged with the National Forum in respect of the enhancement of teaching and learning at institutional level. Exploring an institutional self-positioning tool might be relevant in this context. (See example in annexes.) | NF+HEA+DES+ sectoral representative bodies (ST) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should further engage with specialised networks to foster dissemination of good practice to departments and teachers across all Irish institutions. Networks are key enablers and agents of change in the area of teaching and learning. | NF (MT) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum should explore new tools to support policy-making and implementation at institutional and national levels. (See the example of the OECD GPS in the annexes.) | NF (LT) |

10 Annexes

10.1 Case-study: All Aboard project

The project at a glance

All Aboard is a project which aims to identify the wide range of skills and knowledge that students, and all those who work in higher education, will need to feel confident and creative when learning, working and exploring the digital world. The project is then focused on the enhancement of digital capacities. The All Aboard project has developed tools to develop digital skills (in a form of a Metro Map), and has produced and shared lessons and learning materials online. They worked in partnership with many organisations and groups, including supporting student engagement projects.

In 2017 a week-long (3rd–7th April 2017) series of national and regional public events designed to build confidence in Ireland's digital skills for learning took place.

The informants interviewed and documents used

Informants:

- Blaneeth McSharry, Learning Technologist/Multimedia Developer, National University of Ireland, Galway
- Dr. Sharon Flynn, Assistant Director, CELT, National University of Ireland, Galway
- Aoife Geraghty, Head of Information Services, University of Limerick
- Liz Dore, Librarian, University of Limerick
- Leone Gately, Educational Technology Coordinator, UCD
- Dr. Deirdre Ryan, Teaching and Learning Officer, Mary Immaculate College

Documents:

- Director's Update – National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, June 2016
- NMC Horizon Report 2017 Library Edition
- Digital Skills Framework: <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/DigitalSkillsFrameworkHE.pdf>
- All Aboard project website: <http://www.allaboardhe.ie/>
- Digital Roadmap: <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Digital-Roadmap-web.pdf>

Analysis

- **Rationale of the projects, why and how it has emerged. Why these partners?**

The All Aboard project is funded by the 2014 Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund. The consortium comprised NUI Galway, University of Limerick, University College Dublin and Mary Immaculate College. Involving diverse and varied partners in the project helped provide different institutional perspectives.

The project's main rationale was to build confidence and the overall digital capacity of HE staff and students as well as strengthen their digital skills. The National Forum's "A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015–2017", known as the Digital Roadmap, identified the first priority as "the strategic development of digital capacity in institutional and national policy and quality frameworks in a way that supports innovation for impact".³⁸ The policymakers identified the need for HE staff and students to "feel confident and creative when learning and working in the digital world".³⁹ The project emerged as a response to three documents: 1) Ireland's National Digital Strategy, 2) Digital Agenda for Europe, and 3) the Digital Roadmap.

- **The level of engagement of National Forum and the partners**

The project is an excellent example of enthusiastic and motivated leadership, which has been praised by all partner institutions. The entire partnership experience received a positive evaluation, including the National Forum's level of engagement. In order to increase inclusiveness, it is recommended that partner institutions are involved at all stages of the project. The only library involved was that of the University of Limerick. It would be advantageous to involve other HEIs' libraries when reconsidering future projects on digital skills and capacities.

- **What are the main characteristics of the project in terms of teaching and learning?**

The project used innovative and multiple approaches to address issues of confidence in and development of digital skills. The digital framework, which is largely based on previous existing frameworks, provided a solid context from which further teaching and learning resources could be developed, such as the Metro Map as a visual aid. Addressing a number of themes grouped in seven clusters (Tools & Technologies, Find & Use, Identity & Wellbeing, Teach & Learn, Communicate & Collaborate, and Create & Innovate),⁴⁰ offered an innovative guideline to develop digital skills. The Map's structure could be incorporated into existing and new modules. One of the informants confirmed that there was already an example of a new module being created for student teachers at Mary Immaculate College.

Learning resources were developed late in the project thus their impact will need to be evaluated in the future. The overall project outcomes helped teaching staff identify the main points within curricula to be strengthened and/or introduced and inspired new open educational resources to be developed and shared.

- **Has the project been supported by the institution? What incentives made the project a success?**

The project had strong institutional and national support. Besides being very timely in identifying needs at the national level, it also built on previous experiences and did *not reinvent the wheel*. Cooperation between partners was positive, especially in terms of communication among the participants.

³⁸ *A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015–2017*, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, p.viii, <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Digital-Roadmap-web.pdf>

³⁹ NMC Horizon Report 2017 Library Edition, p.26

⁴⁰ <http://www.allboardhe.ie/map/>

- **To what extent did the project provide added value to: the partners, the department or faculty, to the institution as a whole?**

The project provided added value for all stakeholders involved. Digital Champions and Digital Ambassador student-initiatives, which target students specifically, enhanced student participation in the project and *students became a tremendous resource for the higher education institutions, as well as for themselves*. These initiatives have helped students develop their digital skills beyond their curricula.

Digital badges⁴¹ have been identified as one of the greatest added value for academic staff, providing recognition and acknowledgment of their achievements and effort in introducing digital skills in their teaching and learning processes. The project also represented an excellent opportunity for staff to *identify possibilities and gaps in their skills* through the Digital Framework and the Metro Map.

Inviting smaller higher education institutions to participate in a project that gained such large national and international traction further contributed to improving the institutions' experience.

For libraries, the project was an important opportunity to improve their confidence in digital skills, both through sharing already existing knowledge and expertise, as well as through learning from other institutional initiatives and experiences.

- **Is there any impact or condition already met that shows change with their hierarchy, with the departments or institutions across Ireland?**

The project's impact at institutional level has yet to be fully seen, although it has gained great recognition at national and international levels. The Digital Skills Framework has been translated into several different languages and the project leadership received invitations to present the project at a number of international events.

The All Aboard week that took place in April 2017 further accentuated the project's national impact. The website has been widely recognised as a useful resource for institutions throughout Ireland.

- **Are there any further opportunities to promote the project's value?**

The partners seem confident that the project will continue. The national All Aboard week provided wider dissemination of the project's outcomes. As most of the educational resources were developed towards the end of the project, their impacts have yet to be seen and evaluated.

- **What are the obstacles that you have identified that could increase the project's relevance and/or effectiveness?**

The project could have greatly benefited by the early development of learning materials and resources so as to be able to further evaluate their implementation and usefulness for the institutions, academic staff and students.

⁴¹ <http://www.allaboardhe.ie/digital-badges/>

The partnerships developed with students should lead to further in-depth assessment of student needs in terms of digital skills.

It seemed that some of the project's planning stages should have been more carefully planned and aligned with the institutional and academic year. The national All Aboard week took place too late in the academic year, which was not suitable for many higher education institutions. More careful planning would also allow for better alignment with different institutional activities.

As national and project level evaluations are strongly encouraged, the National Forum should share resources and link different projects that are being funded simultaneously. Additionally, some of the institutional administrative obstacles (i.e. procedures for hiring project staff) should be adapted to the project's needs and especially the timeframes within which the projects are being planned. Some of the informants also mentioned the need to have fewer project reporting demands as the demands could take a lot of time away from the project's activities.

Although the project has gained much international traction, broadening the target groups and the arena within which the project is operating needs to ensure that higher education is fully engaged with the project's focus.

Conclusions and perspectives for the National Forum

- **To what extent does this project seem relevant for National Forum and for T&L in Ireland, in general?**

The project seems to be highly relevant and timely for teaching and learning in Ireland and for the National Forum future efforts in the digital skills area – it aligned with the vision of the Digital Roadmap 2015–2017 and responded to its set objectives. As such it was a project that fully integrated the overall policy vision of the Irish higher education sector, created effective partnerships, as well as being internationally recognised.

- **What makes the project different from other projects?**

The project seems to have encouraged excellent partner relationships, both among the institutions that participated in the project and between the National Forum and the project partners. Through good partner relationships, the institutions have established a solid base for future projects and partnerships. Project leadership was very helpful in maintaining the momentum and the motivation of all partners involved. Within the institutions, the informants have high regard for the relationship developed with students.

Funding has been evaluated as sufficient and as such, contributed greatly to the project's success. The project's management was less constricting, which provided the time for people involved to focus on the project's outcomes and results. Continuous feedback and guidance from project reviewers was also helpful.

The project built on previous knowledge, expertise and experiences in digital skills area and integrated digital skills into the learning and teaching process through *fun and creative ways*.

- **What are the key issues for the sustainability of the project?**

It will be important to focus on the project's evaluation and identify the best strategies to continue the project. It is essential that there be further monitoring of the implementation of the Digital Skills Framework, as well as of the developed educational resources, notably at the institutional level.

- **Are there any lessons learned or good practices that would ensure the up-scaling of the project at national level?**

Employing specific people to work on the project eased the pressure of regular institutional activities.

A partnership approach, across institutions as well as divisions within the institutions, was a useful mix bringing together different components of the higher education institutions while keeping a clear division of responsibilities and strategic coordination. Some of the institutional units benefited from the project for their own growth. The project should be promoted to libraries in all institutions in Ireland. The project was mentioned as a good practice project in the NMC Horizon Report 2017 Library Edition.

The accessibility of the project's outcomes through open access download from the project's website was another lesson learned – it provided accessibility to all interested parties, ensuring up-scaling and sustainability of the outcomes. Easy access to project documents, resources and outcomes is one of the important answers to the difficulty of reaching out to all interested academics, often overburdened with daily tasks of research and teaching, but also the HE management.

SWOT

| Strengths | Weakness |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An enthusiastic and motivated leadership, which has been praised by all partner institutions - Excellent partner relationships, both among the institutions that participated in the project and between the National Forum and the project partners - Strong institutional and national support. - Innovative and multiple approaches to address issues of confidence in and development of digital skills. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some of the project's planning stages should have been more carefully planned and aligned with the institutional and academic year timeframes. - The involvement of students could be more important to lead to further in-depth assessment of student needs in terms of digital skills. - There is a need of further monitoring concerning the implementation of the Digital Skills Framework, especially at the institutional level - Only one HEI library is involve, it would be advantageous to involve other HEI libraries when reconsidering future projects |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The website has been widely recognised as a useful resource for institutions throughout Ireland. - The accessibility of the project's outcomes through open access download permit a broad use. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Although the project has gained much international traction, broadening the target groups and the arena within which the project is operating needs to ensure that higher education is fully committed to the project's focus. |

10.2 Case-study: Irish Engineering Graduates Advancing Global Manufacturing Competitiveness: Design Simulation for the Process Industries

The project at a glance

Started in 2015, the project is focused on the development “led by academic subject experts, in conjunction with e-Learning professionals with strong student input “of novel, shared, vertically-structured sets of tools, integrating theory, experiment and simulation, across different core modules of the undergraduate Chemical Engineering curriculum.

All of the stakeholders in Chemical Engineering in Ireland are involved, along with related Bio-Sciences disciplines/programmes, major simulation tool developers, providers and end-users. Support from the Institution of Chemical Engineers (IChemE), the international, discipline-specific accrediting body, provides for international dissemination.

The informants interviewed and documents used

Informants:

- Patricia Kieran (project coordinator), UCD School of Chemical and Bioprocess Engineering
- Damian Mooney, UCD School of Chemical and Bioprocess Engineering
- Carmel Hensey, UCD School of Biomolecular and Biomedical Science
- Gearóid Ó Súilleabháin, CIT Department of Technology Enhanced Learning
- Brian Glennon, APC
- Federico Orefice, UCD Chemical and Bioprocess Engineering student

Documents

- Forum Insight July 2016 <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/644-Irish-Graduates.pdf>
- <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/irish-engineering-graduates-advancing-global-manufacturing-competitiveness-design-simulation-process-industries/>
- Project Presentation February 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvlhNlxyBmU&t=102s>

Analysis

- **Rationale of the projects, why and how it has emerged. Why these partners?**

The project received funding under the 2015 Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund. It emphasises building students’ digital capacity to develop strong connections between Chemical Engineering theory, experimental work and the intelligent use of simulation tools.

All stakeholders in chemical/process engineering education in Ireland are involved and all related bioscience disciplines/programmes are represented. The project consortium is comprised of University College Dublin (UCD) as Project Lead, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), University College Cork (UCC), and

University of Limerick (UL). The external (non-funded) partners are: APC, IChemE (Institution of Chemical Engineers), Jacobs Engineering, NIBRT (National Institution for Bioprocessing Research & Training) and Scale-Up Systems. Practicing engineers and graduate employers provided input on current and anticipated graduate simulation skill needs.

The partnership seems to work well with strong partner institutions, all which were familiar with each other from previous joint initiatives. The project is implemented as a multi-institutional partnership representing total core discipline coverage within the framework of professional (IChemE) accreditation guidelines for simulation skills and practices. The project is unique as it brings together all Irish institutions working on the subject to work on a national initiative.

In Ireland NIBRT plays a significant role in attracting investment and supporting local and international companies to advance biopharmaceutical innovation, research and training. NIBRT works with universities and institutes of technology to ensure that there is a strong supply of graduates with relevant skills for the sector.

Traditionally, academic institutions working in the engineering field have a good cooperative relationship with private companies. Irish chemical engineering graduates are highly valued for the development of the biopharma and chemical sectors that account for more than 50% of total annual exports. Hence there is a need to keep pace with new developments and deliver the best pedagogical practice aligned with sectoral needs. Process and other simulation tools are now considered as some of the best approaches to enable the most rigorous interrogation of proposed engineering designs and the development of optimisation strategies, which has led to the intent to integrate such tools into the curriculum.

- **The level of engagement of National Forum and of the partners**

The project is an excellent example of a dynamic partnership working at the national level to support national developments in the biopharma and chemical sectors, with new approaches to teaching and learning, so that the curriculum is relevant to industrial needs. The project leader at UCD is highly praised for her dynamic engagement and energetic approach in initiating new developments.

The overall work programme was divided into several work packages that were assigned to different partners. Various institutions lead most work packages, each involving several partners so as to ensure integration.

Regular project partner meetings are organised so that the partners can report on progress made with their assigned work packages and provide outcomes. Partner institutions take turns hosting the project meetings.

The National Forum seems to provide clear support at project application level and during project implementation. In addition, it has the capacity to mobilise expertise at national level. Yet, seen from the industry side, the level of National Forum funding seems fairly limited compared to large national science projects. The funding requires a high level of administrative reporting; however, the interaction with academia is highly interesting and produces significant value. In the words of some informants, the National Forum funding arrangements sometimes seem overly complex. While the monitoring meetings are very useful, at the same time they are expensive as project recipients need to meet twice a year.

- **What are the main characteristics of the project in terms of teaching and learning?**

Activities focus on the production of three types of outcomes: (a) in-depth and critical evaluation of current practices in the use of simulation tools; (b) shared academic toolkits tailored to specific learning outcomes; and (c) validation of toolkits and training packages for all stakeholders.

The project is developing a wide range of digital learning objects and resources (videos, animations, simulations, assessment activities) in four thematic engineering areas that are directly relevant to the sector.

The objects and resources are all placed on an open online learning platform that is accessible to partners. The platform and learning suites are developed for full time academic programmes, while at the same time they provide a framework that can be adapted to the specific needs of the pharma/biopharma sector in terms of technology transfer and training.

The platform and learning suites are developed in close cooperation with external partners and with strong student engagement. Students are involved in all stages of the project; they carry out in-company internships and gain direct information on sector needs and exposure to professional practice. These aspects can be brought into academia to further develop the curriculum and help academic institutions to enhance curriculum relevance and student employability.

The project is an example of thorough knowledge and skill acquisition across different kinds of institutions with multiple types of learning experiences for the students.

- **Has the project been supported by the institution?**

The project has drawn on earlier cooperation between the institutional academic partners as well as with external partners.

The interviews provided limited information indicating that there was support for the initiative across institutions. However, taking into account the level at which the project operates and the potential for future curriculum development, it seems that there should be solid support at various levels within the institutions.

- **To what extent has the project provided added value to: the partners, the department or faculty, and to the institution as a whole?**

The project is delivering much added value to all partner institutions (academia and the private sector), as well as to individual teachers and students.

There is greater awareness in the academic partner institutions of the precise needs of the pharma sector that can be fed back into the curriculum, ensuring its relevance to the needs of the sector. As the project consortium represents full sector in chemical/process engineering undergraduate education in Ireland, deliverables could be adopted in Ireland within the partner academic institutions and beyond. Another national impact of the project is its potential contribution to the growth of the pharma/biopharma sector.

The project brings significant value to private companies from the interaction with academic partners and innovative solutions that can emerge from cooperation across different types of organisations. These include simulation tools, new methodologies and student upskilling.

As a whole, the project's implementation will help provide chemical/process engineering

graduates with the right skills that are currently needed.

- **Is there any impact or condition already met that indicates change?**

The new knowledge generated and the practical tools developed are already leading to a strategy and supporting resources to integrate the effective use of discipline-specific simulation tools in chemical engineering degree programmes in all Irish HEIs. They are also supporting the development of professionally relevant graduate skills and are having a significant impact at the various levels within institutions (student practical work, teacher-student relations, new methodologies and teaching practices, curriculum and course updates).

It is premature to assess the concrete impact on individual learners, yet the qualitative feedback collected so far already points to the more specialised knowledge and skills gained by students and their up-skilling that will help them be prepared and be more employable. Up to now, 20 students have carried out an in-company internship and 60 undergraduate students have been involved in testing or using the resources. The learning outcomes have been incorporated into the application for accreditation as one of the approaches to sustain the project beyond its timeframe.

The project has already led to a number of positive changes in the curriculum. This is the only impact that the review can ascertain.

- **Are there any further opportunities to promote the project's value?**

Some dissemination actions are planned at the Chemical Engineering Association Conference to be held in autumn 2017. This Association accredits all chemistry programmes and the project outputs will be useful in future accreditation processes. There are plans to set up a dissemination platform focusing on the project outcomes.

The deliverables are designed primarily for chemical/process engineering students, however they could be adopted by other disciplines

Conclusions and perspectives for the National Forum

- **To what extent does this project seem relevant for National Forum and T&L in Ireland, in general?**

The project is relevant to the National Forum as it is in line with the 2015 Digital Roadmap and the priorities to promote digital institutional capacity, including professional development and digital literacy. The project responds to the National Forum's priorities to develop good practices and new expertise in teaching and learning.

The project is also in line with teaching and learning policy in Ireland in so far as it responds directly to the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*.⁴² The project helps to improve the interface between higher education and the private sector with new forms of pedagogy that focus on strong student engagement and encourages innovative practical skill development. It

⁴² http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/national_strategy_for_higher_education_2030.pdf

contributes to graduates' up-skilling and development of innovative skills. As such, it supports economic growth in Ireland in a leading economic sector.

- **What makes this project different from other projects?**

The project is different from other projects as it brings together partners at sector level in Ireland to work on a common initiative.

The National Forum's approach is highly innovative whereby proposals are presented in an open selection meeting attended by all project proposals. The selection meeting is also streamed live, making the entire process open and transparent.

The biannual project monitoring meetings are held using the same format and contribute to the significant cross-fertilisation of ideas between projects and with the international panel.

The National Forum's website provides detailed information on the application stages and the required information. It seems that the National Forum provides funding for all the project costs, with no co-funding required. This is contrary to what is often the case in international projects. No information is required at design/application stages on plans to sustain the outcome beyond the project timeframe.

There does not seem to be any direct connection between this project and the Department of Education.

- **What are the key issues for the project to be sustainable?**

There is strong commitment from the partners and a great willingness to continue the collaboration beyond the project timeframe. The outcomes will be mainstreamed in the partner institutions. The participation of NIBRT and IChemE offer the opportunity to upscale the outcomes at national level and international level (through accreditation).

It would be helpful for the National Forum to define sustainability criteria for each project to respond to, at the stage of initial application, at the implementation and monitoring stage, and at the final stage of the project completion. The project is building a good foundation to meet these indicators even if only a few key indicators related to sustainability are considered, such as acceptance in academia, the continuity of project outcomes, financial sustainability and the maintenance of the IT infrastructure.

- **Recommendations for the partners and National Forum:**

- At the start of each project establish the precise metrics that will be used to conduct an impact assessment of the new teaching practices, which will be developed and the learning outcomes;
- Make structural arrangements for the repository of project outcomes and the potential transfer of new teaching and learning approaches to other disciplines;
- Make provisions to cooperate with other departments other than those involved in the project in each partner institution to ensure a multiplier effect of the project outcomes.

- **Good practice**

- Strong student engagement (in testing new simulation tools and internships in private companies);
- Gaining insight from professional practice and labour market needs with the active participation of private companies in the project;
- Connecting to international practice outside Ireland (in international discipline networks or with individual higher education institutions); seeking to enhance quality standards in the discipline by linking to an international accreditation body.

SWOT

| Strengths | Weakness |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A strong and dynamic multi-institutional partnership working at the national level so that the curriculum is relevant to industrial needs. - A wide range of digital learning objects and resources were developed. - A clear support and monitoring from the NF - A constant involvement of students in all stages of the project | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The National Forum funding still seems sometimes overly complex. The funding requires an important level of administrative reporting. |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gaining insight from professional practice and labour market needs with the active participation of private companies in the project - The project is supporting the development of professionally relevant graduate skills and having a significant impact at the various levels in institutions (student practical work, teacher-student relations, new methodologies and teaching practices, curriculum and course updates). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It would be important to make provisions to cooperate with other departments other than those involved in the project in each partner institution to ensure a multiplier effect of the project outcomes |

10.3 Case-study: MOOC project – Get Ready Education, A MOOC to improve the transition from second to third-level education

The project at a glance

The MOOC project, Get Ready Education, was funded under the 2014 Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund. This MOOC has been designed to address the needs of students making this transition from secondary to tertiary-level education. The MOOC is available to second-level students in Ireland from transition-year to the Leaving Certificate examination. The MOOC combines online-content with optional teacher-led classroom activities, online fora and quizzes. Digital Badges are awarded to participants. The MOOC was designed as ten modules with different start and completion dates. Each module is about 4–5 weeks long.

The project consortium comprised: the Institute of Technology, Sligo (project-leader), the University of Limerick, National University of Ireland, Galway, Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology, Limerick Institute of Technology, Mary Immaculate College, and Letterkenny Institute of Technology (project-partners). It covered the north–west and mid-west education clusters in Ireland.

The informants interviewed and documents used

Informants

- Gavin Clinch, Institute of Technology, Sligo (project leader)
- Seamus Hoyne, Limerick Institute of Technology

Documents

- “A MOOC to improve the Transition from 2nd to 3rd level education” - T&L Enhancement Fund 2014 <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/a-mooc-to-improve-the-transition-from-2nd-to-3rd-level-education/>
- Project Presentation, October 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RlchbnuX05Q&index=7&list=PLhJYW28cw2ebni8VyUf-TSH8Gbmt8L7bn>

Analysis

- **Rationale of the projects, why and how it has emerged. Why these partners?**

The MOOC project, *Get Ready Education*, was funded under the 2014 Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund. It was designed to address the needs of students making the transition from second to third level education. Partner-institutions shared the common concern that better preparation of secondary school-students was needed. The project was also conceived to assist schools (teachers) and tertiary-level institutions (student-services, counsellors) with new learning resources to support students in the broader context of digital learning and enhancing digital capacity. The project is a direct response to the National Forum’s 2015 Digital Roadmap in support of digital literacy.

The partners were obvious choices as they were familiar with each other from previous cooperation, such as in the dynamic Shannon Consortium of higher education institutions.

While the project-leader initiated the idea in 2012, the launch of the TLEF and the call for proposals made it possible to commence the project once funding was obtained. IT Sligo took the lead with its expertise in online education and other partners brought expertise in the project's thematic areas.

- **The level of engagement of National Forum and of the partners**

The project is a strong partnership among higher education institutions working on a common theme. As the consortium leader, IT Sligo played a key role and project-partners cooperated closely to deliver the intended project-outcomes

The overall work programme was divided into several work packages assigned to different partners. IT Sligo carried out the final integration of individual partner work (material, activities, learning resources).

Regular partner meetings were organised (virtual and face-to-face meetings) to discuss progress with project-tasks and expected outcomes (content design, material, resources, etc.). The piloting of the modules took place in three phases in ten schools across the two target regions. It was reported to have been a highly enjoyable experience providing an opportunity to meet and work with teachers, students and counsellors.

Some partners were more involved in the earlier project phases while the participation of others was more for learning purposes than in the actual design of the MOOC. Significant feedback was received that could feed into the further development of the MOOC.

The National Forum's support was highly praised for the one-day monitoring meetings that provided constructive feedback on all projects. The open and live-streamed presentations of all projects under thematic strands allowed for constructive feedback from the international panel that selected the project, as well as between the projects. The presentations also enabled the cross-fertilisation and integration of ideas. The National Forum provided clear milestones for the projects to make consistent progress.

- **What are the main characteristics of the project in terms of T&L?**

The project is developing an innovative approach to assist secondary school-students transitioning into higher education. Self-directed learning and teacher led learning offer students a choice of the methodology and learning pathways. The initiative is an example of flexible and individualised learning tailored to students' needs (self-paced learning, which is one of the features of online education). The MOOC provides knowledge, understanding and skill development, both online and in the classroom.

The teaching and learning approach is also designed with and for secondary school-teachers who receive training in digital education with which they are often less familiar. It actively brings the parents into the education process with a MOOC designed specifically for them. E-moderators provide overall support; learning resources were produced, which are linked to other open educational resources.

The MOOC combines online content with optional teacher-led classroom activities, online fora and quizzes. Digital badges are awarded to participants. The MOOC was designed as ten modules, each of 4–5 weeks' duration, with different start and completion dates, namely:

- Learning to learn (at third-level);
- Preparing for success;
- Critical and creative thinking;
- Digital literacy;
- Communication skills;
- Personal effectiveness;
- Career advice;
- Transition from work to higher education;
- Section for parents (aimed at parents of first-generation undergraduates);
- Section for faculty to understand the student-experience.

All content was quality assured and published as OER in line with the principle outlined in the Digital Roadmap.

- **Has the project been supported by the institution?**

The project drew on earlier cooperation between the partners, in particular in the Shannon consortium.⁴³ It builds on the permanent structural cooperation between the institutions and on previous projects in related areas.

Discussions are currently being held between the partner institutions to integrate the project outcomes into their regular activities (student services, school liaison, counselling).

- **To what extent has the project provided an added value to: the partners, the department or faculty, to the institution as a whole?**

The project provided much added value for the partner institutions, the schools involved in the three pilot programmes, individual school-teachers and students:

- In the partner institutions, the project highlighted the need to provide more support to students transitioning between secondary and tertiary-level education. It broadened the understanding of the problem, which led to new solutions. The partners are planning to compile the project results in a toolbox that will be made available to counsellors, school liaison units and student services. All were involved in the project from the start. Staff training will also be offered.
- Schools had access to new material and online resources that can be integrated into the curriculum to assist them with student preparation in the transition to third level education.
- Individual teachers, as well as individual students, received training in online education and digital skills.

- **Is there any impact or condition already met that indicates change?**

An impact-report was produced on the early findings from the project-outcomes, yet it is still premature to measure the precise impact on the students in terms of rates of success and different behaviours when they will enter higher education. Further student observation will be needed over a few years to feed into a longitudinal study on the issue of dropouts in the early years of tertiary education. However, the project has had much positive response and interest

⁴³ Four institutions in the Mid-West make up the Shannon Consortium.

from individual teachers, students and the institutions in terms of the acquisition of new digital skills and new knowledge to make more informed choices.

- **Are there any further opportunities to promote the project's value?**

The project has been presented at several national conferences and has been discussed internationally. At this stage, the partners are looking for opportunities to mainstream the experience within the institutions. They will also look for opportunities to work with other institutions in Europe on the MOOC, which is also problematic in other parts of Europe.

Partners are aware that MOOCs are mostly used by students to improve their English. Therefore, the project aims to widen the experience to other countries so as to share experiences on how to address this issue and share experiences of the most effective use of MOOCs.

To the external consultant's knowledge there has been no formal discussions between the National Forum and the project organisers regarding the project sustainability. One of the roles of the National Forum would be to trigger the discussion itself when the projects do not take the initiative, since the issue of sustainability is so critical for individual projects as well as for the National Forum to demonstrate the value of its work.

- **What are the obstacles that you have identified, that could have increased the relevance or effectiveness of the project?**

The partners are discussing how to maintain cooperation beyond the project timeframe. The issue of sustainability will need to be addressed. The National Forum could provide more expertise on sustainability from the start of the project with support from national/international-specialised experts.

Conclusions and perspectives for the National Forum

- **To what extent does this project seem relevant for National Forum and for T&L in Ireland, in general?**

The project is relevant to the National Forum, the 2015 Digital Roadmap, as well as the priorities to promote digital institutional capacity and literacy. It responds to the National Forum's priorities to develop new practices in teaching and learning.

The project is in line with teaching and learning policy in Ireland as it responds to the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*.⁴⁴ It focuses on improving access and transition into higher education. The project provides the components for a better first year experience for students along with greater student engagement, while also attempting to address the high dropout rate. Using digital technology, it thus contributes to the National Forum's priority to develop digital literacy and new skill development for students and secondary education teachers.

⁴⁴ http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/national_strategy_for_higher_education_2030.pdf

- **What makes this project different from other projects?**

The project helped two levels of education to join forces to address the problem of access and transition.

Toward the end of the project, new ideas emerged regarding how to develop the MOOC further, focusing on careers and professions.

The project provided the National Forum with expertise specifically on transitioning from secondary to higher education.

The National Forum approach is highly innovative insofar as proposals are presented in an open selection meeting attended by representatives of all project proposals. The selection meeting is also streamed live, making the entire process very open and transparent.

The biannual project monitoring meetings are held in the same format and contribute to the significant cross-fertilisation of ideas between projects and with the international panel.

The National Forum website provides detailed information on the application stages and the required information. The National Forum seems to provide funding for all the project costs with no co-funding required, contrary to what is often the case in international projects. No information is required at the design/application stages on plans to sustain the outcome beyond the project timeframe. There does not seem to be any direct connection between the projects and the Department of Education

- **What are the key issues for the project to be sustainable?**

In addition to funding the project, the first priority for the partners is to find resources to continue to pay the annual maintenance fee for the selected Moodle platform. During the project presentation in October 2016 it was indicated that the fee would most likely be divided between the partner institutions. As the experience is now integrated, it would seem that a (small) financial commitment (when divided among partners) would be the best approach.

In addition to the full integration of the outcomes in partner institutions (which may be challenging for some institutions), now that the project funding has ended the critical issue will be to maintain momentum and continue to increase expertise with the same core partners and/or an extended partnership (at national or international level).

Maintaining momentum and increasing expertise raises the issue for the National Forum on ways to continue to support the project in addition to funding the project with examples of good practices, expertise and sharing methods for sustainability. In this case the National Forum could offer a national platform where groups of institutions could securely host their digital online courses, in restricted or open resources, instead of funding the IT developments of many separate initiatives under the TLEF.

- **Recommendations for the partners and National Forum:**

- Make structural arrangements for the repository of project outcomes beyond the project timeframe;
- Define sustainability criteria (National Forum level) for each project at the initial application of the implementation and monitoring, and at project completion (e.g. acceptance in academia, continuity of project-outcomes, financial sustainability,

- maintenance of the IT infrastructure)
- Foster regular and forward-looking discussions with project-partners on the sustainability issue.

- **Good practice:**

- Increase faculty awareness on secondary-school student profiles and learning styles;
- Secondary-school student and teacher engagement and enhancement of tertiary-level teaching and learning;
- Structured skill-based approach with online courses to prepare students for university (7 modules, 4–5 weeks each).

SWOT

| Strengths | Weakness |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flexible and individualised learning tailored to students' needs - A strong National Forum support: one-day monitoring meetings that provided constructive feedback on all projects. The presentations also enabled the cross-fertilisation and integration of ideas. - Increase faculty awareness on secondary school student profiles and learning styles; - Structured skill-based approach with online courses to prepare students for university (7 modules, 4 to 5 weeks each). - | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The integration of the outcomes in partner institutions still be challenging for some institutions |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actively brings the parents into the education process with a MOOC designed specifically for them - The project has been presented at several national conferences and has been discussed internationally | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Now that the project funding has ended the critical issue will be to maintain momentum and continue to increase expertise with the same core partners and/or an extended partnership (at national or international level). So, there is a need to find resources to continue to pay the annual maintenance fee for the selected Moodle platform. |

10.4 Case-study: The Geoscience e-Laboratory: Developing Digital Teaching and Learning Resources for the Virtual Microscope

The project at a glance

The Geoscience e-Laboratory (GeoLAB) project is designed to deliver teaching and learning resources for new and existing Irish geoscience programmes with an optical microscopy and petrology component.⁴⁵ The project will introduce novel methods to deliver technology enhanced learning (TEL) programmes at the main national geoscience centres. The Geoscience e-Laboratory (GeoLAB) project provides students with unlimited 24/7 access to high-quality digital rock thin sections and associated learning support guides to foster the development of essential petrological skills. The project is a collaboration among the four national geoscience centres in Irish higher education institutions and the Open University, U.K. Despite the delayed commencement of the project in April 2016, the project has maintained the proposed work package timeline.

With the inclusion of Trinity College Dublin's virtual teaching collection, the GeoLab Irish University Rocks collection has increased to 67 samples compared with the initial 40, which were to be set in place as the project progressed into the implementation stages. The 67 samples are live and have been used as a teaching resource at each institution during the 2017 spring semester.

The informants interviewed and documents used

Informants:

- Dr. Pat Meere, School of Biological, Earth & Environmental Sciences, University College Cork
- Dr. Ronan Hennessy, School of Biological, Earth & Environmental Sciences, University College Cork
- Prof. Balz Kamber, School of Natural Sciences, Trinity College Dublin
- Dr. Shane Tyrrell, School of Earth & Ocean Sciences, National University of Ireland, Galway.
- Dr. Julian Menuge, School of Earth Sciences, University College Dublin.
- Prof. Simon Kelley, Department of Environment, Earth & Ecosystems, The Open University

Documents

- Forum Insights, National Forum, 2015
- Director's report, April 2017

Analysis

- **Rationale of the project, why and how it has emerged. Why these partners?**

The project's rationale states, "learning to independently identify and classify minerals and rocks, interpret their textures, and explain their origin, requires well-developed skills in optical

⁴⁵ Petrology refers to a science that deals with the origin, history, occurrence, structure, chemical composition, and classification of rocks.

microscopy. These skills take time and significant effort to acquire. Skills-development is encouraged by formative and summative assessments throughout a four-year degree programme. However, due to resource limitations, most undergraduate students can only gain access to specialised microscopes for 2–4 hours per week. First-year students, due to larger classes (>140 students), may not be exposed to microscope-work while students in large classes share equipment.

Formative and summative assessments, using petrological (i.e. *regular*) microscopes, have been restricted to face-to-face class time. The virtual microscope should provide Irish students with an effective tool to examine rock thin sections (slides) with flexible 24/7 access. Academics realised that students continuously request additional access to microscopes to supplement their classes in which there are time limitations. In addition, students consider that using the microscope to investigate and interpret rock/fossil evidence is the most important technique that they deploy.

After the initial period of developing hardware and software, and the roll-out of the U.K. virtual microscope, The Open University recognised the potential to expand the teaching utility of this resource, which depends on the provision and distribution of appropriate e-tutorials and e-assessments. The project is multi-fold: a platform hosting the scanned rock collection, tutorials for teachers and assessment provisions for students, as well as the appropriate software.

Geoscience academics realised the challenges of teaching students with a microscope. Microscopes are costly, fragile instruments requiring constant maintenance. Pairs of students would share a regular microscope. In addition, the samples to observe are never the same and students, especially undergraduates, find it difficult to target what to see and often misunderstand the oral instruction given by the teachers: where to find the right place on the rock that he/she are observing. This generates frustration and tension and wastes time. During exams, students complain that they do not work on the same samples; it is difficult to correct exams fairly.

The Open University (OU) in the U.K. inspired the GeoLab project. The development of the Virtual Microscope for Earth Sciences as an Open Educational Resource by the OU introduced change in teaching and learning for Earth Sciences students by broadening student access (anytime, anywhere) to world-class rock collections that are currently located in museums and universities around the world. Trinity College was already cooperating with the OU on a visual microscope. Within Trinity College, each faculty member could benefit from funds for digital learning and were thus incentivised to submit projects using IT. The Department of Engineering was awarded €10,000 to launch the project with a sample of 12 rocks. A trial was organised and indicated the interest of students and teachers in the virtual microscope. The obstacle was the limited size of the rock samples.

- **Has the project been supported by the institution?**

As the Departments of Geosciences know each other well in Ireland (there are four departments in total within the country based in UCC, NUIG, UCD and TCD), the initiator from TCD contacted his colleagues to draw up and submit a proposal for the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund. The purpose of the proposal was also to develop an Irish-specific virtual microscope so as to no longer be dependent on the OU and build a collection of scanned rocks that would make sense for Irish students.

The call from the National Forum was well advertised and all academics were aware of the funding opportunity, as the information had circulated through the HEIs of Ireland and across

departments within each institution.

Despite a discipline-specific focus, the project was designed to serve the national community of geologists and students in geosciences. The submission process emphasised the national span of the project and its likely transferability to any institution and discipline. According to the project leader, Irish universities find it challenging to share practices and equipment with other universities. The National Forum helped integrate the project into the national higher education system thereby preventing it from serving a narrow scientific community.

At the same time of the submission, the National Forum helped the university partners think beyond their disciplinary horizon by providing constant reminders and examples of similar projects combining a disciplinary focus with national coverage.

In addition, the National Forum advised the partners to create a tool – here, the virtual microscope – which could easily be used by a wide range of users, including those teachers and students who might not be familiar with technology or complex software. Consequently, any student or teacher can become familiar in a few hours and use the virtual microscope in class.

- **The level of engagement of National Forum and the partners**

Some external success factors facilitated the project's design and implementation:

- Personalities and the commitment of partners who were already convinced that teaching with a classic microscope was no longer appropriate.
- An earlier initiative at Trinity College and the Open University, U.K. paved the way for the GeoLab project. Otherwise the 18 months allotted to the project might have been too short a period to develop a tool, test it out and implement it in classrooms.
- The European network of geologists faces similar challenges with large groups of students, with a desire to practice and a need to renew the pedagogy in order to generate interest. The European network ensured the GeoLab partners that they were on the right track and not inventing a kind of prototype with little chance of being adopted by the community of geologists who were reluctant to use new technology (*how many prototypes remain as such and never get implemented in class?* said one partner). At the outset of the GeoLab, the partners saw the up-scaling opportunities thanks to these geoscience networks but also in other scientific domains.
- The project could rely on a well-established track record of inter-institutional cooperation among the four geosciences units related to research activities.
- There was a give-and-take agreement between the OU and the 43 Irish partners. The U.K. software could be used through a tablet computer or a smart phone even with modest data bandwidth. In return, the OU believed it could benefit from the international collaboration and expertise that course designers established in face-to-face teaching within the Irish institutions.

The partners had difficulty completing the project within the time-span. At the beginning, they had little time between being awarded funding for the project and its commencement. The project was delayed also due to the late recruitment of the research assistant, as the partners could not start the recruitment process prior to award confirmation

- **What are the main characteristics of the project in terms of teaching and learning?**

The project is in line with the pedagogical trends in sciences using instruments. There are groups

of academics in geology and science searching for improved teaching and learning practices through new technologies. The Irish experience will be presented at a major event on geosciences to be held in Vienna at the end of April, with a specific session on the virtual microscope.

The project's duration is considered brief at 18 months but prompts the partners to move at a fast pace. An assistant was recruited who maintains the momentum, ensures constant partner involvement and keeps an eye on the work-plan, the timeframe and the budget, which is key to the project's success.

The partners consider the amount of the award to be sufficient to roll out the project as initially planned. The partners are confident that the project will raise other funds, e.g. from the European Union and extend its potential to a more systemic level. In order to come to a proper end, the partners asked for a no cost extension to the end of 2017. This extra time will allow data to be collected and finalised.

- **To what extent does the project provide added value to: the partners, the department and faculty, to the institution as a whole?**

As of now, only the academics involved in the project are realising the added value of the GeoLab. Each institution has supported the project, yet how it enhances quality has yet to be seen. For instance, the teaching units are not fully engaged in the project and the whole university community cannot capitalise on its benefits.

The partners expressed the need to assess the impacts on learning achievements of students using the virtual microscope and the project's efficiency (was the scanning worth it?).

The project included pedagogical aspects that are worth expanding within and across institutions. Academics have posted their instructions and tutorials on the platform supporting the virtual microscope, which only teachers can access. This constitutes a bulk of pedagogical practices to be shared with colleagues (e.g. how to conduct a session with specific scanned rocks, what are the recurrent mistakes, what kind of evaluation could be implemented to check student knowledge, etc.).

Partners administered questionnaires to students to check the user friendliness of the virtual microscope and the perception of its value.

- **Is there any impact or condition already met that shows change on the ground?**

All informants interviewed underlined some changes already noticed in the classroom, such as:

- Student interest; *First-year students who might drop-out suddenly find geosciences fun*, reported an academic;
- The facilitation of the course: students know exactly where and what to observe;
- Student autonomy: as everyone can use the virtual microscope, they no longer share the instrument;
- The virtual microscope allows for more formative evaluation. As a result, students are keener to self-assess their skills and see the value of the evaluation as a tool for improvement;
- The possibility for students to use the virtual microscope out of the university and thus prepare to redo the observations from anywhere;
- The possibility to use costly and fragile instruments with large groups of young undergraduate students who might not behave like more mature students at master or

doctorate levels;

- Peer discussions with students and teachers are likely to take place, observing the same samples leading to a common ground for discussion.

- **Are there any further opportunities to capitalise on the project?**

There is information on the project at the deanship level of the institutions (*people know what we are doing although not in detail*, said a partner). The dissemination through national and international conferences will outline the value of the project for other departments.

As the partners share the same networks in geosciences, they are keen to present the project and are eager to demonstrate its impact on student achievements. For instance, there is an annual conference on geosciences and other events organised by the research organisation, Irish Centre for Research in Applied Geosciences, which gathers all geologists of Ireland. So far few have presented the project to other departments like in biology or medicine, where observations are common practice.

- **What are the key issues for the project's sustainability?**

The use of the virtual microscope is cost-effective. Once the rocks are scanned, there is no need to maintain the virtual collection, just to enrich it. Scans last a long time, as will the pedagogical instructions and tutorials that could be further streamlined and organised for wider use by any teacher. The GeoLab is free to any institution in Ireland and elsewhere, provided access codes are given.

One concern relates to the **ownership** of the virtual microscope once the virtual collection is completed. Academics in other departments should be informed of the instrument's potential. Some academics happen to be conservative when it comes to changing practices (*"a geologist must know how to use a regular microscope, it is part of the required skills"*). The increased learning through the project could be jeopardised if there is no one to explain the potential of the virtual microscope, how to and when to use it, how it could substitute for and in some cases, supplement the regular microscope.

The project galvanised a group of associated academics initially convinced by the virtual microscope. The termination of any project often leads to a loss of energy and commitment. Hence the GeoLab partners are aware that the expected changes need to continue after the projects ends. The project should instigate changes in the teaching and learning of geology. The upcoming years will be a test to make sure that the changes occur.

There are opportunities to transfer the project to other disciplines that use a microscope. Scientific domains requiring observations like physics or biology may benefit directly from a virtual microscope with specific samples. The universities that benefited from the TLEF should incentivise the use of the instrument for other domains, like in archaeology or documentation retention (e.g. scanning old books). While presidents and deans might not be aware of the project, it is essential that the teaching units are fully aware of its potential so that they include the virtual microscope as a promising instrument offering new teaching and learning opportunities. However, without the impetus from the National Forum, such extension may not happen within the institutions and across the sector.

As the project is relatively new there are currently few tangible impacts. Partners fear that there may be a lack of interest from their deanship and university management teams if they are unable to make the case for a virtual microscope. It is likely that without demonstrating the virtual

microscope's teaching and learning added value, the project will be considered as a pilot with little chance to expand. Therefore, there is a need for in-depth exploration of the project's outcomes and impacts. The National Forum could assist the partners in evaluating the project impacts.

- **What makes the project different from other projects?**

The project enabled a nascent initiative to reach the national level yet within a narrow disciplinary area. The project was not framed as a pilot for a very small-scale beneficiary but as a nation-wide endeavour that would further expand. The National Forum was able to boost the ambition of the project while keeping costs low and the project manageable during its development.

The project is intrinsically meant to help the students with a rock collection analysis. The creation of samples is not the essence of the project. The project was driven by the expectation that students must learn more and better thanks to GeoLab. Hence, assessment of the impact on students learning is key, otherwise the GeoLab will only be judged according to the scientific value of the rock collection.

The project was inspired by the lessons learned and risks associated with distance learning and virtual tools.

- **Recommendations for the partners and National Forum**

- Explore at the end of the project what kind of metrics, including qualitative, could be established to conduct an impact assessment, on both teaching practices and learning achievements;
- How it transfers to other disciplines, where teaching and learning changes could be applied;
- Better connect with the teaching units and other departments of the university, to show the benefits of the projects and lessons to be shared in terms of pedagogy, assessment, student-teacher interaction and teaching and learning practices in science.
- Explore how this kind of project could be applicable to other groups of academics (e.g. humanities).

- **Good practice**

- Realistic objectives assigned to the project;
- Online teaching resources have been added to the GeoLab website to provide geoscience teachers with resources to enhance the use of the virtual microscope.
- Questionnaires to students and teachers during the implementation of the project;
- A research assistant to alleviate the workload of partners;
- A fast pace of implementation, compelling the partners to seek efficiency;
- A connection with international practices initially raised by the partners and encouraged by the National Forum.

SWOT

| Strengths | Weakness |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Despite a discipline-specific focus, the project was designed to serve the national community of geologists and students in geosciences and the National Forum helped integrate the project into the national higher education system thereby preventing it from serving a narrow scientific community - All informants interviewed underlined positives changes already noticed in the classroom (related to student interest, student autonomy...) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The partners had difficulty completing the project within the time span - As of now, only the academics involved in the project are realising the added value of the GeoLab. Each institution has supported the project, yet how it enhances quality has yet to be seen. For instance, the teaching units are not fully engaged in the project and the whole university community cannot capitalise on its benefits. |
| Opportunities | Threats |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The dissemination through national and international conferences sheds light on the value of the project for other departments. There are opportunities to transfer the project to other disciplines that use a microscope. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The increased learning through the project could be jeopardised if there is no one to explain the potential of the virtual microscope. - The project galvanised a group of associated academics initially convinced by the virtual microscope. The termination of any project often leads to a loss of energy and commitment. |

10.5 How to assess capacity-building: food for thought

What are the challenges?

Due to some of the challenges outlined in the vague definition of capacity building, most capacity development measurements today rely on anecdotal evidence of change and assess effectiveness through outputs like numbers of people trained or strategic plans developed. Many international, regional, and national institutions have designed an Organisational Capacity Assessment tool to measure capacity development to address this issue.

What are the traditional limits of the evaluation methodology for capacity building?

- Evaluation tools are typically limited to short-term results of concrete activities (for example, setting up a new M&E system).
- Evaluation tools rarely take into account the influence of the external environment, i.e. change in political, economic, legislative, cultural, and social spheres, on the entity whose capacity is being developed.
- The evaluation cannot demonstrate capacity strengthening outcomes: changes in how the organisation behaves and functions, and consequently how capacity-development impacts the lives of its targeted beneficiaries.

How to move ahead?

In order to understand the longer-term influence of capacity-development on an entity, practitioners need to be able to see whether the entity has improved its performance over time for instance if the theory of change connects organisational change at the output level (change in the systems, skills, and policies of entities) to changes at the impact level (influence at the community level) through measuring growth in organisational performance.

A capacity development framework should ideally describe 3 aspects that are interrelated:

- 1. The range of recipients for capacity-development support.** This includes individuals and organisations, networks and systems, and complex ecosystems of diverse actors engaged in development processes in multiple ways and with different perspectives on social change. Traditionally, capacity development efforts have focused at the individual and organisational levels. Recently, however, capacity-development practitioners are increasingly recognising the importance of working at the system and network levels in order to bring multiple competencies to work on complex challenges.
- 2. The range of methodologies for capacity-development interventions.** Capacity-development interventions vary from expert-driven consultancy services and trainings to participant-driven peer-to-peer exchanges.
- 3. The range of capacities that the institutions seek to develop.** These include:
 - Technical capacities related to the impact area of any given intervention;
 - Operational capacities needed to accomplish individual tasks;
 - Systemic capacities to ensure that key functions are performed continuously over time;
 - Adaptive capacities to respond to changes in their operating environment;
 - Influencing capacities enabling an entity to bring about change within its environment.

Adapted from BetterEvaluation blog, as of 17th May 2017. BetterEvaluation is an international collaboration to improve evaluation practice and theory by sharing and generating information about options (methods or processes) and approaches.

10.6 Example of the provision of access to data and resources: the OECD GPS on education policy and data

The rationale

The volume of data and publications on education available nowadays is often difficult to handle, and – as in many other fields – getting access to evidence for policy-design, and to feed into discussions, is not always an easy task. In order to simplify the exploration of these materials, information must be available that is ever better adapted to the needs of the media, the public at large, and those in charge of policy. Comparing experience and data from different systems, and understanding the key elements in each area, and the links between different factors, and are fundamental tools in order to be able to use available evidence in a dynamic way that stimulates reflection on a topic as complex as education.

The OECD released the education GPS designed precisely to provide direct access to the rich source of statistics and analysis on education policy and practice, generated by the OECD. Accessible round the clock, in real time, and free of charge, Education GPS offers its users the most up-to-date data and analysis on countries' performance in providing quality Education for All.

This tool allows users to compare different countries, to explore data using interactive visualisations and tables, to fine-tune choices of indicators, and to organise and filter information based on different criteria. All of the data feed into country profiles, and reports on topics such as early childhood education or gender differences in education and the workplace. The platform also allows print-ready reports and graphics to be created.

For Ireland, the objective would be to set up a GPS at national level, including data, documents and analysis and connecting to other national and international information available on higher education teaching and learning.

The screenshot shows the top section of the OECD Education GPS website. At the top left is the OECD logo with the tagline "BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES". To its right is the "Education GPS" logo with the tagline "THE WORLD OF EDUCATION AT YOUR FINGERTIPS". Below the logos is a blue navigation bar with four tabs: "Home", "Analyse by country", "Explore data", and "Review education policies". Below the navigation bar is a white content area with a blue header that reads: "Education GPS is the OECD source for internationally comparable data and analysis on education policies and practices, opportunities and outcomes. Accessible any time, in real time, the Education GPS provides you with the latest information on how countries are working to develop high-quality and equitable education systems." Below this header are three white boxes, each with a colored icon and a title. The first box has a blue icon of a globe and is titled "Analyse by country". The second box has an orange icon of a tree with arrows and is titled "Explore data". The third box has a green icon of a network of nodes and is titled "Review education policies".

OECD | **Education GPS**
BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES | THE WORLD OF EDUCATION AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Home | Analyse by country | Explore data | Review education policies

Education GPS is the OECD source for internationally comparable data and analysis on education policies and practices, opportunities and outcomes. Accessible any time, in real time, the Education GPS provides you with the latest information on how countries are working to develop high-quality and equitable education systems.

Analyse by country
Choose from a wide variety of themes and data to create your own, customised country reports.

Explore data
... By topic and by publication. Compare countries' by their success in providing a high-quality education for all.

Review education policies
Examine the OECD's extensive research and analysis of education policy around the world.

10.7 A self-positioning tool for institutions on quality teaching

The OECD guide on quality teaching⁴⁶ is meant to be used as a self-assessment and reflection tool as an aid to deciding what the institutions priorities should be for fostering quality teaching and what actions the presidents/deans might take. There are no right or wrong answers and it is intended to be adapted to take account of the institution's mission, strategic objectives and context.

It is intended for use by anyone within the institution (or its stakeholders) with a role to play in fostering quality teaching, including institutional leaders, deans and heads of programmes, or individual teachers and researchers. It can be used by an individual or as part of a collaborative reflection and dialogue.

The guide is broken down into 7 policy-levers on quality teaching (e.g. raising awareness on teaching and learning, assessing the impacts of teaching and learning, etc). The self-assessment scale invites the rector/deans to evaluate the current situation on a scale of 1–5, within which 1 is very poor and 5 is very good. However, one may consider that in particular circumstances some aspects are very important while others are not at all.

The self-assessment and questions for further reflection for each policy-lever is self-contained, so one may choose to work through the policy-levers, or simply use the individual policy-lever that most directly relates to the institution's current challenges and priorities.

Policy lever 1. Raising awareness of quality teaching

Self assessment questions

| | <i>Current situation</i> | | <i>Importance</i> | | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------|-------------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| 1a. Quality teaching is clearly defined as a strategic objective of my institution. | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | Don't know | Not relevant |
| 1b. A teaching and learning framework for the institution has been developed that reflects my institution's mission, values and context. | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | Don't know | Not relevant |
| 1c. The specific teaching and learning frameworks at department, school or programme level are consistent with my institution's framework. | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | Don't know | Not relevant |
| 1d. The teaching and learning frameworks in use define the objectives of teaching and the expected learning outcomes for students. | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | Don't know | Not relevant |
| 1e. The teaching and learning frameworks have been developed in consultation with all stakeholders including students. | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | Don't know | Not relevant |
| 1f. The teaching and learning frameworks is used as a tool for aligning the teaching and learning process, including student assessment. | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | Don't know | Not relevant |
| 1g. The value and importance of quality teaching to my institution is emphasised through all possible contexts, avenues and occasions. | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | <u>1</u> | <u>5</u> | Don't know | Not relevant |

⁴⁶ <https://www.oecd.org/edu/imhe/QT%20policies%20and%20practices.pdf>

10.8 Acronyms and abbreviations

- AISHE: All Ireland Society for Higher Education
- ALTC: Australian Learning and Teaching Council
- AMUE (France): Agence de Mutualisation des universités et Etablissements d'Enseignement supérieur – Universities Mutualization Agency and Institutions of Higher Education
- CELT: Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
- CIT: Cork Institute of Technology
- DCU: Dublin City University
- DELTA: Disciplinary Excellence in Learning, Teaching and Assessment
- DES: Department of Education and Skills
- DR: Digital Roadmap
- EACEA: Executive Agency Education, Audio-visual and Culture
- EDIN: Educational Developers in Ireland Network
- ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- ESU: European Students' Union
- EUA: European Universities Association
- EURASHE: European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
- FACiLiTATE: The Irish Enquiry / Problem Based Learning Network
- FET: Further education and training
- GCD: Griffith College Dublin
- GMIT: Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology
- GPS: Global positioning system
- HEA: Higher Education Authority
- HECA: Higher Education Colleges Association
- HEFCE (U.K.): Higher Education Funding Council for England
- HEI: Higher education institutions
- HRK: German Rectors' Conference
- ICT: Information and communication technologies
- ILTA: Irish Learning Technology Association
- IMLSN: Irish Mathematics Learning Support Network
- ISSE: Irish Survey of Student Engagement
- ITS: Institute of Technology, Sligo
- IUA: Irish Universities Association
- LIN: Learning Innovation Network
- LIT: Limerick Institute of Technology
- M&E: Monitoring and evaluation
- MOOC: Massive open online course
- OECD: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
- OER: Open educational resources
- OU: The Open University
- PDF: Professional Development Framework
- QA: Quality Assurance
- QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland
- MIC: Mary Immaculate College
- MoU: Memorandum of Understanding between the Higher Education Authority and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
- MU: Maynooth University

- NAIRTL: National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning
- NIBRT: National Institution for Bioprocessing Research & Training
- NUIG: National University of Ireland, Galway
- RPL: Recognition of prior learning
- T&L: Teaching and learning
- TCD: Trinity College Dublin
- THEA, Technological Higher Education Association
- TLEF: Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund
- ToR: Terms of reference
- UCC: University College Cork
- UCD: University College Dublin
- UL: University of Limerick
- USI: Union of Students in Ireland
- VET: Vocational education and training

10.9 Stakeholders consulted

| Name | Institution |
|--------------------|---|
| Bermingham, Marese | Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) |
| Brownlee, Andrew | Higher Education Authority (HEA) |
| Casey, Eoin | University College Dublin (UCD) |
| Chantler, Abigail | Higher Education Authority (HEA) |
| Clinch, Gavin | Institute of Technology, Sligo (ITS) |
| Collins, Thomas | Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) |
| Costello, Fergal | Higher Education Authority (HEA) |
| Cullinane, Tim | Department of Education and Skills (DES) |
| Devlin, Marcia | Federation University Australia |
| Dore, Liz | University of Limerick (UL) |
| Farr, Fiona | University of Limerick (UL) |
| Farrell, Alison | Maynooth University (MU) |
| Fitzgerald, Martin | Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) |
| Flynn, Sharon | National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) |
| Freeland, Brian | Dublin City University (DCU) |
| Galvin, Áine | University College Dublin (UCD) |
| Gately, Leone | University College Dublin (UCD) |
| Gaynor, Tony | Department of Education and Skills (DES) |
| Geraghty, Aoife | University of Limerick (UL) |
| Ginty, Carina | Galway–Mayo IT (GMIT) |
| Glennon, Brian | APC |
| Hegarty, Dermot | Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) |
| Hennessy, Ronan | University College Cork (UCC) |
| Hensey, Carmel | University College Dublin (UCD) |
| Hogan, Eileen | University College Cork (UCC) |
| Hoyne, Seamus | Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) |
| Irvine, Gemma | Higher Education Authority (HEA) |
| Jackson, Naomi | College of Computing Technology |
| Kamber, Balz | Trinity College Dublin (TCD) |
| Keegan, Brian | APC |
| Kelley, Simon | The Open University (OU) |
| Kieran, Patricia | University College Dublin (UCD) |
| Leahy, Jack | Union of Students in Ireland (USI) |
| Looney, Anne | Higher Education Authority (HEA) |
| MacLaren, Iain | National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) |
| Maguire, Bryan | Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) |
| Maguire, Terry | National Forum |
| McDonald, Bláithín | National Forum |
| McDonnell, Deirdre | Department of Education and Skills (DES) |
| McLean, Colin | Institute of Technology, Sligo (ITS) |
| McSharry, Bláithín | National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) |

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Meere, Patrick | University College Cork (UCC) |
| Menuge, Julian | University College Dublin (UCD) |
| Mooney, Damian | University College Dublin (UCD) |
| Moore, Sarah | National Forum |
| Murray, Jim | Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) |
| O'Farrell, Lee | National Forum |
| O'Neill, Geraldine | National Forum |
| O'Reilly, Sean | Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) |
| Ó Súilleabháin, Gearóid | Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) |
| O'Keefe, Anne | Mary Immaculate College (MIC) |
| O'Riordan, Gobnait | University of Limerick (UL) |
| O'Driscoll, Caitríona | University College Cork (UCC) |
| O'Halloran, John | University College Cork (UCC) |
| Orefice, Federico | University College Dublin (UCD) |
| O'Riordan, Fiona | Griffith College Dublin (GCD) |
| Purser, Lewis | Irish Universities Association (IUA) |
| Ryan, Brendan | Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board |
| Ryan, Caitríona | Higher Education Authority |
| Ryan, Deirdre | Mary Immaculate College (MIC) |
| Ryan, Joseph | Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) |
| Sweetman, Jane | Higher Education Authority (HEA) |
| Tauch, Christian | German Rectors' Conference (HRK) |
| Tooher, Michelle | National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) |
| Tyrrell, Shane | National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) |
| Walsh, Pdraig | Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) |

10.10 Documentation

- **Publications of the National Forum**

- Devine, J., *Strategic and Leadership Perspectives on Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education*, National Forum, 2015.
- National Forum, *A MOOC to improve the Transition from 2nd to 3rd Level Education*, 2014.
- National Forum, *Learning Resources and Open Access in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland*, May 2015.
- National Forum, *A Current Overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education*, June 2015.
- National Forum, *Transition from Second Level and Further Education to Higher Education*, June 2015.
- National Forum, *Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research into Student Non-completion in Higher Education in Ireland*, July 2015.
- National Forum, *A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015–2017*, 2015.
- National Forum, *Student Non-Completion on ICT Programmes*, 2015.
- National Forum Director's Update, *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, June 2016.
- National Forum, *Irish Engineering Graduates Advancing Global Manufacturing Competitiveness – Forum Insight*, July 2016.
- National Forum, *National Professional Development Framework for All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education*, August 2016.
- National Forum, *Transition from Further Education Training to Higher Education*, October 2016.
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- **Other sources**

- De Grauwe, A., *There is no Development without Capacity*, UNESCO, 2012.
- DES, *Action Plan for Education 2016–2019*, September 2016.
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- DES, *Irish Educated, Globally Connected: An International Education Strategy for Ireland 2016–2020*, October 2016.
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- EACEA, *Capacity-building in the Field of Higher Education*, European Commission 2017.
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- HEA, *Higher Education System Performance 2014–2016, First Report*, 2014.
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- Lemoine, P., Richardson, M., *Micro-Credentials, Nano-Degrees, and Digital Badges: New Credentials for Global Higher Education*, [International Journal of Technology and Educational Marketing \(IJTEM\)](#), 2015.
- McMahon, F., *Joint and Double/Multiple Degrees in Ireland*, HEA, 2013.

10.11 Evaluation criteria and questions utilised in the review

| Evaluation criteria | Evaluation question | Criteria against which the evaluation questions will be assessed |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Relevance | Stakeholder-engagement | |
| | <p>1. To what extent has the National Forum been successful in mobilising and leveraging external expertise and resources?</p> <p>2. To what extent has the National Forum been successful in engaging with the Irish higher education community, policy-makers and other stakeholders?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum routinely engages with a wide range of stakeholders at national level. • The National Forum has cultivated strong links with colleagues internationally. • The National Forum has synergised and leveraged pre-existing teaching and learning networks and expertise across the sector to support a vibrant community of grass-roots' activity. • The National Forum's Associate Assembly includes representatives from all HEA-funded higher education institutions and supports engagement across the Irish higher education sector. • There has been strong interest from across the Irish higher education community in the National Forum's calls for proposals (for collaborative projects, pre-specified national projects, national seminars, network funding, discipline funding, etc.). • There has been strong interest in the secondment opportunities offered by the National Forum. • There has been strong attendance at National Forum events, and strong engagement with National Forum-coordinated consultation processes. • There has been strong engagement with the online resources provided by the National Forum. |
| Efficiency | Governance and management of the National Forum | |
| | <p>3. Does the governance and organisational structure of the National Forum optimise its performance?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The governance and organisational structure of the National Forum is optimal. • The roles of board members and international advisers are clearly defined. • The organisational structure of the National Forum optimises engagement with the academic community as well as the National Forum's leadership capacity. • As administrative custodian, the University of Limerick fulfils its role, supporting the work of the National Forum as set out in the service-level agreement with the HEA. • The structure of the National Forum supports accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, long-term planning and sustainability. |
| | <p>4. Is the size of the Executive optimal to support the work of the National Forum within the Irish context?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The work of the National Forum is fully supported by the 5 full-time equivalent staff which comprise the Executive. • The definition of roles within the Executive ensures that all of the National Forum's skills needs are met. |

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| | 5. Are appropriate structures in place to facilitate responsiveness to emerging policy-priorities? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The arrangements for communication between the HEA and the DES, as set out in the MoU between the National Forum and the HEA, support responsiveness to emerging policy-priorities. • The National Forum's engagement with other stakeholders in the policy arena is adequately supported. |
| Effectiveness | Performance (effectiveness) | |
| | 6. To what extent have the key objectives and functions of the National Forum, as detailed in the 'Implementation Plan' of 2012, been advanced; and to what extent has the National Forum fulfilled its mandate, as set out in the 'Implementation Plan' and MoU? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum has supported excellence in teaching and learning and the enhancement of students' learning-experience across the sector. • The National Forum has provided a national platform for academically led teaching-quality enhancement, building on the achievements of pre-existing networks. • The National Forum has advanced the national strategic priorities for teaching and learning detailed in <i>the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030</i>. • The work of the National Forum has informed policy-making and quality-enhancement initiatives. • Linking practitioners in Ireland with their counterparts abroad, the National Forum has enhanced the international reputation of Irish higher education. • The National Forum has established and maintained a strong evidence-base for the advancement of national strategic priorities in teaching and learning in Irish higher education. • The National Forum has pursued its work through the lens of key priority themes ('enhancement themes'). • The National Forum has operated national teaching awards schemes. • The National Forum has supported scholarship in teaching and learning. • The National Forum has supported innovation in teaching and learning through collaborative endeavour. • The National Forum has facilitated and promoted professional development for the enhancement of teaching and learning. • The National Forum has supported open access to teaching and learning resources and research outputs within the context of building digital capacity in Irish higher education. |
| | 7. To what extent has the National Forum supported the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education institutions? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since the establishment of the National Forum, awareness of, and engagement with, the teaching mission of higher education institutions has been enhanced across the sector. • The research and scholarship supported by the National Forum is informing teaching-practice and students' learning-experience within institutions, with evidence of the mainstreaming of identified good practice across the sector. • The National Forum's teaching awards have raised the profile of teaching and learning within institutions. • The National Professional Development Framework is galvanising institutions to enhance CPD provision for their staff. |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Forum has supported pre-existing teaching and learning and disciplinary networks to pool their resources and to undertake work that has had national impact. • The projects funded by the National Forum have enhanced teaching and learning within the project-consortia and beyond and will have lasting impact. • The National Forum has supported pedagogical innovation across the sector. • The National Forum has fostered engagement with the available data on teaching and learning in Irish higher education (such as that collated through the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, the Eurostudent survey and the International Student Barometer) to support teaching-quality enhancement. |
| | 9 How does the performance of the National Forum compare to other similar international initiatives? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The outputs, outcomes and emerging impact of the National Forum compare well to that of similar international initiatives at a relatively early stage of development. |
| Impact | | |
| | 9. What have the outputs of the National Forum been and what has their emerging impact been on teaching and learning in Irish higher education? 10. Has the National Forum been successful in raising awareness of the value of teaching and learning in Irish higher education? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The outputs of the National Forum reflect the advancement of the functions and objectives set out in the 'Implementation Plan' and the MoU. • There is evidence (as reflected in the 'judgement criteria' outlined above for evaluation question 7) of the emerging impact of the work of the National Forum on teaching and learning in Irish higher education. • Engagement with the National Forum has raised the profile of teaching and learning, and enhanced appreciation of its value, within Irish higher education. |
| | 11. To what extent has the National Forum supported policy-implementation, e.g. through the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is tangible evidence of the impact of the work of the National Forum on the practical implementation of policies and the advancement of national strategic priorities in the area of teaching and learning. |
| Sustainability and future-planning | | |
| | 12. How should the mandate and functions of the National Forum be developed to optimise the HEA's support for the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The current work-programme of the National Forum reflects, and is responsive to, emerging policy-priorities. • The evolution of the mandate and functions of the National Forum reflects their achievements to date as well as the changing policy-context within which they operate. |
| | 13. What role should the National Forum play in responding to, and advising on, policy-priorities? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The positioning of the National Forum in relation to the higher education sector and the state (the HEA, DES, and other agencies and departments) is optimal, fully supporting the National Forum's responsiveness on a flexible basis to emerging policy-priorities. |