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# Enhancing Teaching and Learning for Diverse Student Groups in Higher Education

## Introduction

Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education is a key consultative forum and an evidence-based change agent for higher education in Ireland. It acts as an enabler of teaching and learning enhancement and innovation for impact. Its work is characterised by sectoral consultation, scholarly research, strategic framework development and fostering a coherent and connected approach to higher education pedagogy.

The Forum supports and engages with all 38 higher education institutions inclusive of both publicly and privately funded institutions. It operates according to the principle that 'together we can do more' and it seeks to develop mutually beneficial solutions to shared problems that add value for national impact. The National Forum works in partnership with students, teachers, experts, learner support providers and researchers - and with institutional and system level leadership throughout the sector to provide thought leadership on developing future-orientated aspects of teaching and learning on Ireland's emerging higher education landscape. The National Forum also has a central role in taking forward the recommendations of the Hunt report (HEA, 2011). Its work is informed by the European Commission's HLG reports on the modernisation of higher education (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013 and 2014), A key dimensions of the Forum's focus is to ensure the effective distribution of limited funding for enhancement activity across the sector through establishing 'informed, expert groups to make the most of the great legacy work that has been achieved through a number of previous initiatives within the sector' (National Forum, 2015).

## Sectoral Level Enhancement of Teaching and Learning

The work of the National Forum must be considered against the backdrop of the predicted changes to the higher education population of learners. This is expected to show a 10% increase in student numbers by 2016, a 25% increase in new full-time entrants by 2030 with an increasingly diverse student body. The overall staff/ student ratio for the sector is currently 1:19, (as against the OECD average of 1:15-1:16) and there is significant variability between different parts of the sector (HEA, 2014).

The Forum aims to ensure that the enhancement of teaching and learning is focused on building national and regional capacity across a number of strategically important themes and initiatives. These are aligned with the overall policy directions for the management of the higher education system and the longer-term priorities of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Its activities relate to enabling purposeful collaboration and efficiency of approach towards issues with a focus on developments in policy and practice which are research-informed.

Key activities include:

- achieving coherence in the approach to building digital capacity

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- supporting and developing the scholarship of teaching and learning
  - leading a national learning impact award system
  - facilitating a sectoral approach to professional development for those who teach in higher education.

Through partnership and collaboration with the higher education sector, the Forum has developed a national vision for building digital capacity and is currently designing a Professional Development Framework for learning. In all of these core activities there is a focus on supporting institutional and sectoral responses to increasing student diversity and the changing higher education landscape.

## Building Digital Capacity

The National Forum's digital roadmap - Teaching and Learning in Irish Higher Education: A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-17 – was developed in collaboration with all higher education institutions and is designed to help guide institutions and organisations in the advancement of local and national digital strategies. This is with a strong view to ensuring alignment, coherence and a sense of common endeavour at sectoral level. The roadmap gives voice to the multi-layered nature of building digital capacity, which reflects sector-wide efforts and concerns. Strategic and sectoral digital capacity building offers new ways of addressing complex problems of increasing participation rates and student diversity. It emphasises the importance of strategic integration and advocates a focus on how technology can be used to enhance the experiences of all students from all backgrounds with a multiplicity of needs.

## Professional Development

Increasing diversity coupled with a reduced resource base for higher education places additional emphasis on the capacity of higher education staff to respond to a dynamic educational environment. The provision of an outstanding teaching and learning experience for Irish higher education students will be greatly enhanced by the adoption of a sector-wide commitment to professional development. A national professional development framework (scheduled for piloting at end of 2015) will help develop all those who support learning, inspire great practice and enable innovation in a fast-changing educational environment.

## Looking to the future

The National Forum is committed to developing and implementing initiatives that work across institutions – and to understand and enhance the teaching and learning experience of our increasingly diverse student population. While many key innovations in Irish higher education have been developed to address specific sectoral themes such as first year retention, there has been much less focus on the very real differences that exist between the learning needs of diverse student groups who face particular barriers in terms of their teaching and learning experiences, for example, mature students, international students, those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities etc. There is a clear need to build an evidence base to inform how diversity-supportive teaching and learning environments can be created, sustained and enhanced in higher education.

Knowing how and why students' learning and teaching needs may vary according to their particular needs can drive the development of evidence-based improvements in effective teaching and learning. The National Forum will lead and support initiatives to support the design and delivery of targeted innovations to enhance teaching and learning. These initiatives will focus on building processes and frameworks that can be used by institutions to

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inform and optimise their institutional practices and processes.

The scope of the National Forum's role is wide. Across all dimensions of its work plan, it is committed to:

- engaging with the higher education sector and other lead bodies to identify key aspects of higher education provision that have particular importance to enhancing teaching and learning for diverse student groups.
- developing a teaching and learning framework that recognises the needs of different diverse student groups as a resource to institutions in order to identify and improve excellence in teaching and learning.
- building a commitment to the utilisation of student data within institutions and regional clusters in effective and evidencebased ways.
- engaging with students as partners to seek out students' perspectives on all aspects of the Forum's work plan.
- ensuring that outputs will be integrated with the developing national framework for professional development.

## References

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### **Dr. Terry Maguire**

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

Dr Terry Maguire is a senior manager and Irish educator with a passion for adult mathematics education; she is actively committed to supporting student success in and through higher education. After 25 years working in higher education in Scotland and Ireland, pioneering flexible, blended approaches to teaching and learning, she was seconded (2013-2017) from her role as Head of Lifelong Learning at Institute of Technology Tallaght to the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.



### **Elizabeth Noonan**

Research Coordinator, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in HE

Elizabeth Noonan is responsible for developing a number of the Forum's research activities including: sectoral level Focused Research Projects, the Forum's Research Ethics Framework, a research project on the inaugural Forum Teaching Heroes, the National Forum IRC Scholarships, and a scoping project on unaccredited CPD for teaching and learning. Research and scholarship is central to the Forum's mission to work in partnership with the academic community to foster teaching and learning that is informed by up-to-date pedagogical research and scholarship. Elizabeth is currently on secondment to the Forum, from University College Dublin (UCD) where she is Director of Academic Development.

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