

National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning

Implementation Plan 20 December 2012

Introduction

Providing teaching and facilitating learning are core roles of all higher education institutions, and a central challenge facing the sector as it undergoes a period of intense transformation is the enhancement of the quality of the student-learning experience. Against a backdrop of declining resources, institutions will need to cater for greater demand for higher education from an increasing diversity of individuals in order to be responsive to the evolving skills needs of the 'knowledge society'.

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* identifies key objectives for the advancement of the teaching mission at institutional and sectoral levels.¹ These objectives include providing all students with a teaching and learning experience of the highest quality through engagement with innovative pedagogies and with the technologies that support these; the integration of research with teaching and learning; enhancing the first-year experience through the expansion of induction programmes and the provision of more broad-based, interdisciplinary curricula at undergraduate level; enhancing the flexibility of programme provision; and strengthening the focus on learning outcomes to ensure that all graduates acquire the key transferable skills and core competences that the economy and society of the twenty-first century demand. The *National Strategy* recognises that this enhancement of the student-learning experience will necessitate system-wide provision of academic professional development (APD) to ensure that teaching staff are not just specialists in their field, but also competent professionals who develop and update their teaching skills throughout their careers.

The establishment of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (hereinafter referred to as the National Forum) provides the key, system-level infrastructure for the support of the implementation of the *National Strategy* in respect of the teaching mission of higher education. As the organisational structure of the National Forum recognises, the advancement of this mission must be academically driven and academically led. It will be supported by the National Forum through the enhancement of the quality and accessibility of APD, through the establishment of a professional standards framework, through the advancement of the scholarship of teaching and learning, and through the establishment of an integrated national digital platform for teaching and research resources. By these means the National Forum will also enhance the evidence-base for policy-making and quality assurance initiatives in respect of

¹ See Department of Education and Skills, *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Dublin: DES, 2011), 52–62. (http://www.heai.ie/files/files/DES_Higher_Ed_Main_Report.pdf.)

teaching and learning at institutional and national levels. Through the operation of national grants, fellowships, and awards schemes, the National Forum will raise the profile of teaching and learning in Irish higher education, and provide recognition of teaching excellence across the sector.

1. Key objectives

With a central focus on enhancing the quality of the learning experience of all students, full-time, part-time and flexible learners, the National Forum will have a vital role to play at sectoral level in supporting excellence in teaching and learning across all institutions. A major outcome of the system-level investment in teaching and learning over the past decade, and of the initiatives that this has supported, has been the level of contact and collaboration engendered between academics across higher education institutions. Building on this collective endeavour, the National Forum will serve as a national platform for the academic-led enhancement of teaching and learning, linking institutional initiatives and existing networks. Its focus will be on ‘adding value’ by providing a structure through which these institutional and network initiatives can be synergised and leveraged to support a vibrant community of grass-roots’ activity.

The National Forum will advance national strategic objectives in the area of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. In the immediate future, it will focus on addressing the national priorities detailed in the *National Strategy*, including:

- the enhancement of engagement with innovative pedagogies and with the technologies that support these;
- the enhancement of the first-year experience;
- enhanced flexibility in the delivery of higher education programmes; and
- the enhancement of students’ proficiency in mathematics and science.²

In addressing national priorities, the National Forum will aim to enhance the quality of teaching practice and student-learning across the sector.

In accordance with the recommendations of the *National Strategy*, a key objective of the National Forum will be to foster the integration of high-quality research with the mission and practice of teaching and learning.³ The exposure of learners to original research outputs and state-of-the-art research methods is an increasingly significant part of the preparation of Irish graduates for the ‘knowledge society’. Within this context, the National Forum will also have a vital role to play in advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning to ensure that teaching practice in Irish higher education is informed by up-to-date and relevant pedagogical research. It will aim to support innovation and experimentation across the sector at the frontiers of international ‘best practice’, and to facilitate the development of an open eco-system for scholarship in teaching and learning for the academic community.

² *Ibid.*, 61–62, 36, 48.

³ *Ibid.*, 4, 53–54.

While the National Forum will not itself assume a regulatory or bureaucratic role, it will inform policy-making and quality assurance initiatives in teaching and learning at institutional and national levels. Maintaining an international perspective on the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education, one of the core objectives of the National Forum will be to link practitioners in Ireland and abroad, facilitating the exchange of 'best practice'. The National Forum will thereby enhance the international reputation of Irish higher education.

2. Key functions

2.1 To establish and maintain a strong evidence-base for the advancement of national strategic priorities in teaching and learning in Irish higher education

Obtaining an accurate picture of existing teaching and learning initiatives is an essential prerequisite for the advancement of national strategic priorities in teaching and learning in Irish higher education. To ensure that the achievements of these initiatives are built upon, it is anticipated that the Management Board of the National Forum will initiate a review of existing activity across the sector. The submissions to the consultation process on the establishment of the National Forum provide a rich source of information on current teaching and learning activities on which this review can draw. Thereafter it will be incumbent on the Management Board of the National Forum to monitor and keep abreast of the development of teaching and learning capacity and capability across the sector.

2.2 To identify key priority themes

In the first instance the National Forum will focus on addressing the strategic priorities for the enhancement of teaching and learning detailed in the *National Strategy*. Thereafter the Management Board of the National Forum will assume responsibility for the identification of the key priority themes on which its work will focus. These themes will be regularly reviewed and refreshed to ensure their relevance and responsiveness to the emerging challenges of enhancing teaching and learning in Irish higher education.

2.3 To operate a national teaching fellowship scheme and a national teaching awards scheme

Building on the success of institutional and network fellowship schemes, the National Forum will establish a national fellowship scheme as a mechanism for advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning, and ensuring that teaching practice across the sector is informed by cutting-edge research. The national fellowship scheme will contribute greatly to leadership on the key priority themes identified by the National Forum. Fellows will serve as ambassadors in teaching and learning for Irish higher education, at home and internationally, disseminating effective policy and practice. In

addition, building on the ‘best practice’ emergent from the SIF, the National Forum will operate a national teaching awards scheme to provide recognition of, and to incentivise, teaching excellence in Irish higher education.

2.4 To operate a national grants scheme

The inter-institutional collaboration that the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) and Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTL) have supported has demonstrated that, with modest levels of investment, substantial advances can be achieved through collective endeavour. Cognisant of the benefits of academics and institutions working together, the National Forum will establish and manage a national grants scheme to support collaborative and innovative endeavour in teaching and learning; to provide seed-funding; and to showcase ‘bottom-up’ innovation. The national grants scheme will underpin the advancement of the key priority themes identified by the National Forum Management Board.

2.5 To facilitate Academic Professional Development (APD)

In enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, a key function of the National Forum will be to facilitate greater access to, and uptake of, high-quality professional development opportunities by the staff in Irish higher education institutions. This is one of the areas in which the National Forum is expected to make the greatest impact. By undertaking a comprehensive mapping of all existing APD provision across Irish higher education (and elsewhere, where this is accessible) and making this widely known and available, the National Forum will serve as a portal through which existing APD opportunities can be accessed by all academics, thus supporting institutional strategies for the professional development of staff. In this way, the National Forum will also promote the provision of APD opportunities which correspond to the identified key priority themes, and support the development and provision of additional specialist training in such areas as required.

The National Forum should also seek to establish a professional standards framework, developed through broad consultation with the higher education community. This framework will provide a mechanism for recording and recognising the continuing professional development of higher education professionals in academic practice. Additional options to facilitate the development and practice of APD across Irish higher education will need to be considered by the Management Board.

2.6 To establish a national digital platform

Ireland has the capacity to break new ground in terms of the comprehensiveness of our national digital resources for teaching and learning. Building on, and combining, the achievements of the NDLR, the RIAN portal and other web resources, the National Forum has the opportunity to establish a national digital platform that will bring together the teaching and learning resources and research outputs of the Irish academic

community in an open-knowledge forum. These resources and outputs will be fully accessible both nationally and internationally, and will continue to assist in the promotion of Ireland's international academic standing.

While the national digital platform will be future-oriented and visionary, it will also ensure that the outputs of predecessor networks for teaching and learning will continue to be available to the higher education community. The National Forum will not just manage the virtual platform but also the activities around it, and will disseminate its outputs in order to enhance teaching and learning. Given the distributed nature of much of the National Forum's activity, a fully enabled website which can facilitate the various priority activities, communications, digital resources and archive strands will be one of its essential features.

3. Organisational structure and governance

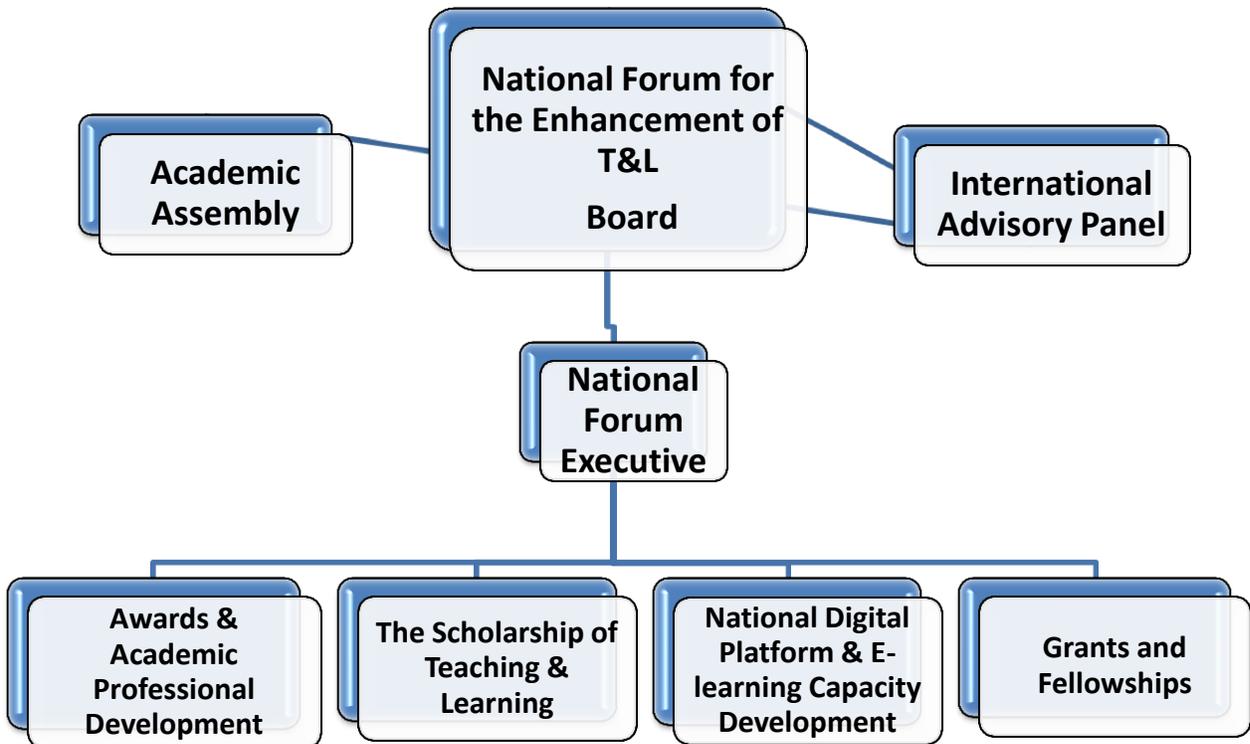
As illustrated in Figure 1 (below), the governance structure of the National Forum comprises an International Advisory Panel, an Academic Assembly, an Executive, and working groups, as well as a Management Board which will be the key decision-making body of the National Forum. The Management Board will comprise nominees from the IUA (3), IOTI (3), HEA / DES (3), QQI (1), and the USI (1) plus a Chairperson.⁴

Management Board membership will be non-remunerated and the standard term of office will be 3 years with some roll-over. The Management Board will take advice from an International Advisory Panel and from an Academic Assembly convened annually to facilitate input from the broader academic community on the Forum's priorities and performance. The full engagement of all higher education institutions will be critical and will be achieved through nominated points of contact within each institution at both senior management and operational levels.

The National Forum will not be established as a new, separate entity. Instead, under the accounting authority of the HEA, it will bring together higher education institutions to facilitate academic-led innovation in teaching and learning. The independence of the Management Board of the National Forum will be ensured through the academic-led structures. The National Forum will adopt organisational and administrative structures which are lean, dedicated and fit-for-purpose, as well as optimal in their use of cutting-edge technologies. The organisational model of the National Forum will be designed to ensure maximum engagement from the academic community on the key priority themes identified by the Management Board. These will be progressed through working groups which will be led by senior academics and be organised by the Executive of the National Forum.

⁴ In the identification of nominees, responsibility for consultation with the colleges of education will rest with the IUA, and the IOTI will be responsible for liaison with the Dublin Institute of Technology.

Figure 1
Structure of the National Forum



Led by a Director, the Executive of the National Forum will be answerable to the Management Board, and will comprise up to 5 full-time equivalent, remunerated personnel (including the Director). Personnel seconded from higher education institutions or State agencies will remain employees of these entities. Any back-filling of these posts by institutions/agencies must be undertaken within Employment Control Framework (ECF) targets. The issue of the location, co-location, or virtual location of the Executive will be determined by the Management Board.

4. Funding

A key objective of the National Forum is to build on the investments and the achievements of the recent past in order to support the continued enhancement of quality in teaching and learning in Irish higher education. At a time of declining public resources available for investment in higher education, the maintenance of a modest amount of system-level investment for collaborative action in the field of teaching and learning will be vital to maximise the impact of overall public investment in higher education, as well as to support the implementation of the *National Strategy* in the area.

In 2012 the National Forum will receive ~€500k of SIF funding in addition to funding of ~€700k from the core recurrent grant. This base-line funding of ~€700k, formerly invested in the NDLR, will also be allocated to the National Forum in 2013 and 2014. This investment will cover both the pay and non-pay costs of the National Forum. Any further system-level investments in teaching and learning in Irish higher education will be consolidated and vested in the National Forum, which will become the single funding stream for all teaching and learning enhancement initiatives which are not funded through the institutions' core grant mechanisms. It is expected that the use of this budget will clearly match the remit of the National Forum to enhance teaching and learning across Irish higher education. The Management Board will determine the prioritisation and utilisation of resources on an annual basis, including any contingency arrangements.

5. Impact

While the Management Board will determine how the mission of the National Forum is advanced, it is anticipated that its key outputs will include the establishment of a national digital platform, a professional standards framework, a fellowship scheme, a national grants scheme, a national awards scheme, and an annual conference, as well as the production and dissemination of research, scholarship and resources in teaching and learning. While its principal outcome will be the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in Irish higher education, it will also provide an enhanced evidence-base for policy-making and quality assurance in teaching and learning at institutional and national levels.

The National Forum will not impinge on individual institutional autonomy in relation to teaching and learning developments. Rather it will support this through the provision of a platform and a creative inclusive space within which teaching and learning will be advanced in a spirit of collegiality—a platform from which existing knowledge of effective practice can be transmitted and critiqued, and from which new knowledge and understanding can be created. The National Forum will foster a culture of innovation and experimentation in teaching and learning informed by systematic enquiry and open dialogue. A comprehensive and independent review of the performance and impact of the National Forum will be undertaken in January 2016 to determine future strategy and development. The future funding of the National Forum will be contingent upon the outcome of this review.

6. Next steps

It is imperative that the inaugural Management Board of the National Forum be convened without delay in order to appoint the Executive and commence its work.