

Enhancing Digital Capacity in Teaching and Learning in Irish Universities

Abstract

The IUA-led project, Enhancing Digital Capacity in Teaching and Learning in Irish Universities, is a 3-year project involving all seven Irish universities. The aim is to enhance the digital attributes and educational experiences of Irish university students through enabling the mainstreamed and integrated use of digital technologies across the teaching and learning process. To achieve this, the project focuses on the professional development of all staff who teach or support learning.

The project started in January 2019 and will run until the end of 2021. This paper describes the organisation of the project, which brings together academic leaders in each of the universities to provide oversight, as well as a project team with members embedded in each university context. The project activities in the first year are described, including the collection of data related to CPD opportunities to provide a baseline, and the launch of seven pilots across the university sector.

Keywords

Professional Development, Digital Competence, Digital Skills

1. Introduction

The Enhancing Digital Capacity in Teaching and Learning in Irish Universities (EDTL) project is an ambitious 3-year project, funded by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) Innovation and Transformation Programme, which commenced in January 2019. Led by the Irish Universities Association (IUA), it brings together the seven Irish universities with the high-level aim of enhancing the digital attributes and educational experiences of Irish university students through enabling the mainstreamed and integrated use of digital technologies across the teaching and learning process.

The project aims to mainstream digital in teaching and learning activities in Irish universities, by addressing the professional development of all who teach or support teaching and learning.

Higher Education is facing a number of challenges that effect teaching and learning. Student numbers are increasing, while the staff/student ratio has decreased (Irish Universities Association, 2018) (Higher Education Authority, 2018). The student population is increasing in diversity and there are demands for increased flexibility in when and how learning opportunities are provided. Digital devices and applications are ubiquitous. To respond to the changes in student population and the increasingly digital environment, educators have to develop their digital skills and adapt to more innovative teaching approaches.

This paper describes how the project is organised, its underpinning principles, and the progress made over the first year.

2. Organisation and oversight

The EDTL project is managed centrally by the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the representative body for Ireland's seven universities, under the responsibility of the IUA Director for Academic Affairs. It is overseen by a steering group made up of nominees from each university, and includes representation from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Irish Higher Education (NFETL) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). A project manager based in the IUA has been recruited to oversee the day to day implementation, and the project costs provide the provision of one full-time (or equivalent) programme support to act as project lead

within each university. The project team comprises the project manager, the programme supports and a student associate intern, who work together to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to the development of the programme. The key impact of the project will be the development of critical mass and a shared service approach to enhancing digital capacity across the university sector.

3. Underpinning principles

The direction and activities of the project are based on four underpinning principles, developed in consultation with the university partners and programme supports.

First, we recognise that the project is not starting from ground zero, and that each university has been engaging in staff development activities to build digital confidence and competence for some years. Each university has its own digital context, including strategic goals, policies and practices, development programmes, tools and technologies. Any staff development programme must align with strategic goals for each partner, building on existing expertise and structures. In addition, the National Forum (NFETL) has already undertaken a significant body of work to assist the HE sector to prepare for building digital capacity (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2015). The project aims to align with existing schemes and resources available through the NFETL, as well as committing to contribute project outputs, such as training materials, to the NFETL through Open Access arrangements. This will make any outputs open for use across the wider HE sector in Ireland.

Second, the project takes its lead from the NFETL in taking a discipline-based approach (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, n.d.). The National Forum has identified that engagement at the level of disciplines is key for meaningful and sustainable change to the practices of individuals and to have an impact on learning. Therefore, the professional development activities emerging from this project will work, where possible, directly with discipline groups, both intra- and inter-institutional. Rather than building individual technology champions, as has tended to happen in the past, the needs and goals of a whole group can be addressed, raising the skills across a whole programme, school or discipline team.

Third, the staff development programme will focus on pedagogy, and not on tools, technologies and training for digital skills. Activities will take a pedagogy-first approach, conducting an initial needs assessment with a discipline group, before considering if and how technology might be used to support innovation and change. The intention is to empower all staff who teach and support learning to build digital competence and confidence, and thus become the drivers and key enablers of change themselves.

Finally, since the overall aim of the project is to enhance the digital skills and the learning environment of university students in Ireland, partnership with students is essential. A student associate intern is joining the project team as a core member, and student voice will be built into all project activities at a local university level.

4. Establishing a baseline

An immediate consideration by the project steering group was to establish a baseline of the current digital experience of staff and students in Irish universities, and the current provision of professional development activities for all staff who teach and support learning.

The Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey (National Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2019) is a national survey of the digital engagement, experiences and expectations of students and staff who teach in Irish higher education. It was officially launched in October 2019, and involves 34 Irish higher education institutions, including all seven of the IUA universities. The EDTL steering group agreed a common question, in addition to the set of core questions, to be asked as part of the survey for the universities. The data from the survey will be used at the level of each university to inform strategy, and the amalgamated data across the 7 universities will be vital to inform the direction of the EDTL project.

To understand the local context and strategic priorities of each partner university with respect to digital capacity in teaching and learning, a scoping exercise was carried out to establish an overview of continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities available for all staff who teach, across the seven universities and through the NFETL. Data was compiled and collated based on information submitted by the members of the project steering group, desk research and informal conversations. The data is broken

into three categories, based on the NFETL typology of professional development activities (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2016):

- Support for Unstructured, Non-accredited CPD – typically online resources;
- Structured, Non-accredited CPD – typically workshops and events;
- Accredited CPD – formal accredited modules and programmes

With respect to accredited CPD, the scoping exercise shows that each university has an existing accredited postgraduate qualification in teaching and learning available to staff who teach. These are all module-based. The credit weighting varies significantly between universities (15, 21 or 30 ECTS). Table 1 represents just the postgraduate certificate programmes in each university. Some universities also offer a postgraduate diploma and masters level qualification.

University	Programme Title	Credits	Note
DCU	PG Cert in Learning Transformations for Higher Education	30 ECTS 2 x 15 ECTS core modules	New programme to commence in January 2020
MU	PG Cert in Higher Education Teaching, Learning and Assessment	30 ECTS 15 ECTS core module + combination of 5 and 10 ECTS elective modules	Revised programme to commence in September 2019
NUIG	PG Cert in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education	30 ECTS 3 x 10 ECTS core modules	
TCD	Special Purpose Professional Certificate in Academic Practice	15 ECTS 3 x 5 ECTS elective modules	
UCC	PG Cert in Teaching and Learning	30 ECTS 2 x 15 ECTS core modules	Offered online
UCD	Professional Certificate University Teaching and Learning	15 ECTS 2 x 7.5 ECTS elective modules	Can achieve Certificate of CPD University Teaching and Learning based on single 7.5 ECTS elective
UL	Certificate in Teaching, Learning and Scholarship	21 ECTS Core modules ranging from 3 to 9 ECTS	Exit route from 60 ECTS Graduate Diploma in Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Table 1 – Overview of postgraduate certificate programmes in the seven universities

Some programmes include at least one module specifically on some aspect of Digital Teaching and Learning, which may be part of the PG Cert (as in Table 1) or a postgraduate diploma. Such modules range in credit weighting from 3 to 10 ECTS, and variations between. Other programmes have aspects of Digital Teaching and Learning embedded as elements of core modules.

From the review of existing CPD it is clear that this project should not aim to produce a single programme or module on Digital Teaching and Learning that can simply be rolled out and accredited in each university. Such modules already exist, or are embedded, and each university context, with respect to CPD, is unique to that environment.

5. The pilot phase

Following initial consultation with each partner university a pilot phase commenced in September 2019, after a planning phase from the end of June 2019. Each university is running its own pilot, which looks different in each institution, based on university strategic aims, existing expertise and available resources. The programme support, embedded within the university context, is leading the professional development of 2-3 discipline or programme groups. As far as possible, there is some overlap in the disciplines across the seven universities, so that synergies across similar disciplines can be established. Equally, there is overlap in the pedagogical focus between discipline groups across the universities.

Pilot activities vary across the seven universities, with a balance between accredited modules and structured, non-accredited workshops, all aligned with the European Framework for the Digital Competency of Educators (DigCompEdu) (Redecker, 2017). Areas of focus include technology enhanced assessment, structured course design, universal design for learning, creation of digital resources, supporting active learning in the classroom.

To recognise the participation of any individual academic or teaching staff member in the pilot activities, the project team is developing a digital badge, *Getting Started with Personal and Professional Digital Capacity*, which will be awarded through the NFETL. Any discipline group that participates in the pilot phase should also be in a good position to apply for the NFETL DELTA award scheme (National Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, n.d.).

6. Conclusions and future work

One of the challenges faced by the project team is how to make a national project work in each university context. The pilot activities vary across the seven universities, as they should, but each serves to meet overall project goals. Moreover, the learnings from each

individual pilot will be shared across the project team, initially, and will be used to inform the further development of a national programme.

Longer term, the national programme is likely to be comprised of three components. First, a framework that can unify staff development activities across the seven universities. We believe that the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu) provides this structure. Second, the project aims to build a sustainable connected network of staff developers, developing a critical mass and a shared service approach to enhancing digital capacity across the university sector. The third component is the collection of resources, lesson plans, short courses, micro-credentials, digital artefacts, case studies, etc that will be produced as outputs of the project. All such project outputs will be made available through Open Access arrangements to the NFETL and more broadly for further use across the wider higher education sector, within and beyond Ireland.

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