

# **Academic Development Provision: Impact and Sustainability Challenges**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this extended abstract is to explore how professional development initiatives in institutes of higher education are deemed to be successful. The discussion will use the work in Dublin City University (DCU) Teaching Enhancement Unit (TEU) as a case study to contextualize ways in which they are seeking to ensure their provision offers value for those engaging in professional development activities, for the University, and ultimately the students. Understandably, teaching and learning support units are increasingly being put under pressure to demonstrate impact and value. Units, such as the TEU are a cost to the University and as such must be held accountable for their work. Spowart et al (2017) discuss impact as meaningful and lasting change. They acknowledge that evidencing impact in this way is challenging because of all the ‘indirect influences involved’ (p. 360). Meaningful and lasting change can be in the academic engaging in professional development, or their students experiencing interventions as a result of the academic working with the teaching and learning unit, or impact may be on their colleagues and the wider academic community e.g. changed practices in how the programme is organised. This paper is intended to be a discussion paper, presenting some current research in the area, outlining the approach DCU TEU take, and

seeking input from the ICEP audience on what they feel works in terms of professional development support and initiatives.

Keywords:

Professional development, teaching and learning units, evidencing impact, sustainability, professional teaching in HE

Professionalising teaching in higher education has been gaining momentum over the last two decades. In the UK the Dearing report (Dearing, 1997) pushed the agenda, in Ireland the driving force was the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). One of the high-level recommendations made in this report was that ‘All higher education institutions must ensure that all teaching staff are both qualified and competent in teaching and learning and should support ongoing development and improvement of their skills’ (2011, p.62). This was on the back of the expert committee recognising that ‘[T]eachers at other levels of the education system, from primary to further education, are required to have a professional qualification’ (2011, p.60). This national drive was influenced by international trends and requirements, in particular the work of ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), who called on all Higher Education (HE) providers to ‘ensure teaching staff were competent and qualified and provided teachers with opportunities to engage in professional development’ (ENQA, 2009, p.18). As a result of the National Strategy report (2011), the Higher Education Authority (HEA) was strengthened, allowing them to lead and drive the structural changes outlined in the strategy, one of which was the establishment of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum). The National Forum was established in October 2013.

This is an exciting time in Ireland for academic Professional Development (PD). There is a real sense of value and recognition for the professional teacher in HE. The challenge is that provision of PD was driven traditionally by the institution’s strategy and this, for many, involved the development of an accredited professional qualification for teachers. There is merit in this approach as it is visible and can be measured in some way. Although measurement in terms of completion rates is questionable. Completion of a professional programme does not imply the graduate is a better teacher. One assumes and hopes they are, but the ultimate impact is in their changed behaviour and more importantly the effect of this on student learning.

Spowart et al (2017) draw on research (e.g. Hughes et al., 2016; Parsons, Hill, Holland, & Willis, 2012) to show PD provision can be broadly classified into support for new HE

educators as distinct to experienced academics. Provision for early career academics tends to be through accredited programmes, as discussed above, that introduce HE teachers to teaching tools and techniques to engage learners. On the other hand, more experienced academics engage through SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) initiated often through engagement with workshops and other types of PD supports, and recognition programmes. Sugrue et al (2018, p.2343) conducted a systematic review of academic development work and suggest where PD initiatives are ‘harnessed in a more strategic manner’ they offer greater visibility and prominence. However they do caution, that as the work of academic development becomes too driven by senior management changing agendas they risk becoming ‘performative’ and ‘rudderless’, or what Carrese and Wright (2007) refer to as ‘elastic practice’. Their (Sugrue et al, 2018) review of reviews calls for evaluation of academic PD that is more than cause and effect, and rather focused on student learning outcomes. This is reflective of the SoTL approach i.e. academics conducting research to ascertain the impact of their PD interventions on students.

Other PD drivers are related to funding opportunities such as European funding through EU projects, and national funding through HEA and National Forum initiatives. Alignment with funding may mean non-alignment with institutional imperatives, or perhaps at best weak alignment. It is important this alignment become more explicit and transparent. Another motivation comes from recognition through a professional framework, for example the National Forum Professional Development Framework; or fellowship. A fellowship scheme such as the Advance HE fellowship offers academics a framework for recognition as an associate fellow, fellow, senior fellow, and principal fellow. Shaw (2018, p.146) say ‘[A] key focal point for the development of teacher professionalism in HE in the UK has been the UKPSF’. Currently the National Forum are developing both a fellowship programme which will be announced in November 2019, and a recognition approach related to the Professional Development Framework. Both of these pieces of work will evolve over the coming year through extensive consultation with the broader sector.

In a PD space where there are many modes of development and recognition, it is imperative that the University have a cohesive plan. This can be challenging given the variety of

approaches. Bamber calls for a move from evaluation to evidencing value because in the current agenda of impact and accountability we need to ‘...evaluate and demonstrate value, or perish’(2013, p.11); and perish is not an option. She offers an approach to evaluate what we do beyond offering accredited programmes and calls on us to ‘find out what is going on as a result of our work ...and interrogate why it works’ (2013, p.42). The TEU are systematically moving towards evaluating impact by framing our work in Bamber’s ‘desideratum of evidencing value’ (2013, p.44). In the meantime, the manner in which TEU walk the tightrope between impact and sustainability is to identify overlaps and multiple uses for initiatives and resources we provide and develop. Invitations to take part in European funded projects and calls for national funding must be explicitly mapped to the Universities strategy, and the TEU objectives. Thus, in an effort to sustain our work all initiatives we are engaged with are mapped to multiple frameworks. This is to recognise that academic professional development in DCU is navigable in many ways. In the first instance, academics will be influenced by the DCU Academic Development and Promotion Framework (2018). There are three domains in this framework, one of which is teaching and learning. In supporting academic staff development through the teaching and learning domain, the TEU offer a suite of PD opportunities that are mapped to each dimension of the DCU framework. Furthermore, provision is mapped to the AdvanceHE framework so staff who wish to apply for AdvanceHE fellowship can see clearly where and how TEU initiatives support them. Our workshops and initiatives are also mapped to the national Professional Development Framework (2016) and DigCompEdu. This demonstrates an explicit and cohesive approach to professional development provision for DCU academic staff.

In addition to calling out where and how our provision meets national and international strategic imperatives, TEU academic developers and learning technologists are committed to engaging with SoTL research with academics to demonstrate the impact of TEU interventions on learners. The objective for this is two fold - evidence based pedagogical practice; and impact of our interventions and supports. Whilst this commitment to SoTL and benchmarking our provision to national and international frameworks is viewed as good practice, we could further demonstrate our impact if we applied Bamber’s desideratum of evidencing value (2013, p.44) to each and every activity we are engaged with. For example, every project (e.g.

funded projects, accredited programmes, non-accredited workshops and supports etc) can be aligned with evidence through research (SoTL); evaluation (peer and student feedback); practice wisdom (impact or reach on policy and practices both within our institution, and externally nationally and internationally). This is the next step for TEU as we seek to further evidence impact of our support for academics.

To summarise, it is challenging to demonstrate impact but we must do so in order to sustain our unit. In an era of accountability, initiatives designed to enhance teaching and learning in Higher Education, are increasingly under the spotlight. Significant investments in terms of resources and time are being made to help enhance the student learning experience. Professionalisation of teaching in higher education is a hot topic. How we create and sustain this professionalisation is being explored by many in the HE space. This paper seeks to share the experience of the TEU and our PD provision. It is an open and honest account of how we strive to provide a cohesive offering that can be navigated in a transparent manner by academics in DCU wishing to invest time in becoming professional higher education teachers. Whilst we acknowledge that we have some way to go in demonstrating the impact of our provision we do believe that we are making efforts through systematic mapping and considered reflection on where our initiatives and resources should be deployed. We welcome an open and frank discussion with academics in relation to our approach with a view to making it more valuable and targeted to the needs of academics, and ultimately their learners. As with all teaching and learning units, our aim is to be of value to the University, academics and the wider society our learners are embracing.

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