



Insights from Practice About Impact in Teaching and Learning

32 projects were funded across 25 Irish higher education institutions through the National Forum's Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund from 2014 to 2018. These projects involved over 400 members of the Irish higher education community working collaboratively to engage a further 12,500 senior managers, staff and students in the enhancement of teaching and learning over a five-year period. This *Forum Insight* outlines lessons learned from a review of the impact of these projects regarding how impact can best be achieved, sustained, captured and communicated within the context of teaching and learning in higher education.

Background

The establishment of the National Forum's Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund in 2013 was a fundamental step in supporting innovative, evidence-based teaching approaches, and teaching and learning enhancement efforts which are characterised by collaboration, sharing of good practice, and meaningful staff and student involvement. In the years since the establishment of the Fund, thinking and understanding about how impact is achieved, evidenced and communicated has evolved significantly.

In 2019, the National Forum undertook a review of the impact of the 32 projects it had funded across the sector from 2014 to 2018. This review leveraged the power of hindsight to look back and reflect on the impact these projects have had, and how that impact was achieved. This allowed us to learn for the future and advance our approaches to ensure the positive consequences of teaching and learning enhancement efforts are optimised and impact is captured and communicated in a meaningful way which reflects the value of what has been achieved.

Sources of Evidence

The 2019 review of impact was based on:

- a review of related literature on impact
- final open-forum presentations given by project teams
- impact reports submitted by project teams
- individual discussions on impact conducted with project representatives
- high-level metrics submitted by project teams

Impacts Achieved

An overview of impacts achieved across the 32 projects can be found on the final page of this Insight. A more detailed overview is available in the full report, 'Learning about Impact and Looking to the Future: Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund Projects 2014-18', available at www.teachingandlearning.ie/publications.

Lessons Learned About Achieving and Sustaining Impact

Learnings from these projects and the review of impact literature have provided increased clarity for those intending to engage in teaching and learning enhancement at local and/or national level.

At institutional level, a number of lessons were recorded regarding how impact can be achieved and sustained:

- An enhancement initiative is most likely to reach its potential, and therefore achieve meaningful impact, if it is responding to an authentic need for which an achievable solution has been identified, the timing is right, and the value of the initiative is clearly understood and articulated.
- Careful planning at the proposal stage will have long-term benefits. It is important to take the time to explore and understand what knowledge/skills/interest key team members have and account for any gaps. Equally, agreeing realistic expectations with participants and preparing contingency plans for unexpected events will increase the ability to achieve intended impact.
- Consulting key participants, students, senior managers, discipline leaders and/or external partners at every stage creates a sense of shared ownership and investment, which in turn optimises the impact potential.
- Alignment with existing and upcoming strategic/policy developments at institutional/national level increases the likelihood of being impactful at system level. Due to the dynamic nature of the higher education context, a key to such alignment is ensuring that enhancement initiatives remain flexible and responsive to change.
- The sustainability of impact is best considered from the beginning, at planning stage: What positive change is the initiative striving to embed and how? How will the content and availability of any developed resources be future-proofed? What actions will be needed beyond the initiative timeframe to ensure sustainability of impact?

At national level, a number of elements were also noted to influence the achievement of impact:

- The allocation of funding, in itself, allows for space and time to be created for focused teaching and learning conversations and the exploration and embedding of innovative practice. Large-scale investment in teaching and learning enhancement demonstrates the value placed on teaching and learning in higher education by decision-makers at system level and this can have a positive influence on institutional priorities.



- Underpinning this, for such funding to have maximal impact, there is a need for funding and support structures for teaching and learning within and across institutions to be optimised. The well-established institutional support structures for research funding are not yet echoed for teaching and learning across Irish institutions, although significant advances have been made in recent years.
- Selection and review criteria and processes can be important in shaping the nature and extent of impact achieved. For example, the advice and feedback from students and international reviewers in the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund represented additional expertise on which teams built effectively. Similarly, the requirements for collaboration and for meaningful student involvement impacted positively on understandings, practices and the wider culture of enhancement.
- Encouraging networking and collaboration and stipulating that applicants for funding take account of previous work done in similar areas is important in fostering synergies and allowing enhancements to build on each other, encouraging collective progress for the benefit of the entire higher education community.
- Impact in teaching and learning is a complex, long-term endeavour. Different initiatives can result in different forms of impact, prompting a need for varied approaches to capturing and communicating this impact. There is a need for continued, responsive support for those involved in teaching and learning enhancement in the capture and communication of impact across institutional and disciplinary contexts.

Considerations for Capturing and Communicating Impact

Discussions with project teams highlighted the need for support and guidance in how to capture and communicate the impact of future teaching and learning enhancement initiatives. Considerations for the capture and communication of impact are outlined below, based on impact discussions and presentations and related scholarly insights compiled during the review of literature.

What purpose is the impact linked to?

It is crucial that the purpose that an enhancement initiative strives towards is clearly understood and articulated. All considerations in capturing and communicating impact will come back to this key foundation. The evidence gathered and communicated must be appropriate to the demonstration of the achievement of this purpose.

Where is the strategic/policy alignment?

A strategic approach to impact and its evaluation is important to ensure the value of any impact is communicated to beneficiaries and linked to policymaking. Making links between strategies/policies at local and national level and the purpose and anticipated impact(s) can assist in communicating impact to key audiences and beneficiaries at a later stage. Further, this can help to ensure the initiative and its impact is connected to future developments and sustained beyond the funding period.

How is the long and short term being taken into account?

Impact evaluation needs to take a long-term view to ensure emerging, 'slow-burn', long-term impacts are not missed, and that initial impacts are monitored over time to establish their real value. Just as it is important to consider the sustainability of impact beyond the initiative timeframe, capturing the long-term impact of the initiative needs to be planned for. What short- and long-term impacts are anticipated, based on the purpose of the initiative? How is the ongoing capture of these impacts being accounted for during the planning stage? What evidence will best demonstrate these impacts?

How are unexpected impacts allowed for?

In planning to capture and communicate short- and long-term impacts, it is also helpful to remember that some impacts may be unanticipated. Flexibility and regular review over an extended time frame, including after the end of the activity, is needed to ensure that any unexpected impacts can be identified, and further levels/depth of impact can be captured. Methods selected for gathering evidence should therefore allow for the capture of unanticipated impacts.

How is context taken into account?

The occurrence of impact is not often a simple linear process, and a tailored approach has to be taken in its capture and evaluation. This is because the evidencing of impact is context-dependent, requiring consideration of the specific dimensions of the given intervention and of the environment in which it occurs. Environmental influences may be cultural, political, economic and/or demographic. As options for evidencing impact are considered, it is worth thinking through how these measures may need to be adapted for the specific context and whether such adaptations need to be included in the eventual communication of impact.

What evidence mix is appropriate to the evaluation of impact?

It is essential that any forms of measurement used to evidence impact are 'fit-for-purpose' and are not selected simply because they are the easiest to use or most easily communicated. Measures used should reflect what is important to measure, as reflected in the original purpose of the intervention. Any evaluation approach should also embrace and reflect the perspectives of all stakeholders and beneficiaries, such as students, staff, senior managers, external partners, and policymakers. The particular mix of evidence gathered for a given initiative will depend on the nature of the impact to be captured, allowing for unanticipated impacts, the context in which impact occurs, and how such impact can be best communicated to the intended audience(s).

What communication form is appropriate to the audience(s)?

There may be a number of potential audiences for any communication of impact, including funders, beneficiaries, participants, the wider higher education community, or those hoping to achieve similar impacts within their own contexts. These audiences may each see different impacts as valuable or may each see the same impact as valuable in different ways. Similarly, they may each see different representations

of impact as more or less valid. It will be important to consider how communications can take account of the perspectives and expectations of different audiences so that the nature of each impact can be understood, and its value represented appropriately.

How might the communication form influence the evidence mix and vice versa?

The communication form chosen to respond to different audiences may influence the evidence mix chosen to represent the impact achieved and vice versa. Different forms of impact may be best communicated through, for example, metrics, case studies, testimonials or quotes. In the planning stage, gathering ideas for the variety of ways in which a given impact can be communicated and involving stakeholders in such discussions can be useful. Such a discussion can then inform the agreed evaluation approach.

To what degree can a link to impact be proven?

A common expectation in any evaluation of impact is that it can be proven that the captured impact would not have occurred without the intervention. The practical application of this expectation within the dynamic context of education can be challenging and it is worth thinking this through. What legitimate claims can be made about the impact achieved? While it may be possible to demonstrate a clear link to some impacts, in some cases links to impact can be inferred but not proven. Being transparent regarding what has been found, and how, allowing audiences to make their own judgements, is fundamental to the clear communication of impact.

What can be learned from the process of capturing and communicating impact?

The capture and communication of impact can feed forward for development and improvement purposes, rather than being seen solely as a mechanism of public accountability. The exercise of exploring what impact was achieved and how reveals a lot about achieving and sustaining impact in the first place and it is worth considering how such learning can be recorded for the benefit of future enhancement initiatives.

In Conclusion

The combination of increased investment in teaching and learning at national level and the acknowledged progress and maturity of teaching and learning enhancement in higher education in Ireland brings with it an increased focus on evidencing impact. Cognisant of this expectation, the National Forum has already proactively devoted considerable time and expertise to the questions of impact and value in terms of teaching and learning in higher education. Through the review reported in this Insight, we have gained a better understanding of the concept of impact, and how those in the Irish higher education community are achieving, recording and representing the impact of their teaching and learning enhancement work. A lot has been learned which will inform local and national processes and structures in the future.

Looking to the Future

We have reached a key moment for teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The fundamental link between teaching and learning and key educational imperatives such as employability, internationalisation, innovation, equality of opportunity, academic excellence and student success, is coming into sharp focus. National structures and approaches to underpin teaching and learning enhancement have been established and are being emulated internationally. In every higher education institution across Ireland people are engaging in and committing to teaching and learning enhancement. A key aspect of understanding the impact of this engagement and commitment, and what is considered impact by different stakeholders, is understanding how teaching and learning is valued by each.

There is a truth to the saying 'what gets measured gets done'. What gets measured, and how, can be influential in the context of evidence-based decision-making at every level of higher education. Another saying, commonly used in discussions on impact, highlights the importance of 'measuring what we value rather than valuing what we measure'. The review of literature informing the impact review detailed in this Insight indicated that the way evidence is gathered and presented can reflect the value of what has been achieved.

In the coming year the National Forum will work in partnership with the Irish higher education community to explore how teaching and learning is valued across a range of levels: individual, discipline, institution and system. The national consultation, Valuing Ireland's Teaching and Learning (VITAL), will involve students, staff, leaders and policymakers and will centre on three questions:

- How is teaching and learning currently valued and recognised?
- Ideally, how could it be valued and recognised?
- What influences how teaching and learning is valued and recognised?

The vision of the National Forum, which was endorsed by the sector in 2018, is a valued and informed teaching and learning culture in Irish higher education. If engagement in, and commitment to, the enhancement of teaching and learning is to be valued, that value must first be understood and articulated. Through this consultation, a national picture will be developed and an evidence base for future decisions will be established. This will be an important first step in working towards a truly consultative, context-appropriate approach to valuing and recognising teaching and learning enhancement in Irish higher education. We believe that valuing teaching and learning, with recognition as a key enabler, is an essential next step in our understanding of impact.

For more information on the VITAL consultation visit
www.teachingandlearning.ie/vital



KEY IMPACTS

The Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund projects 2014-18 represented an investment of circa **€4.74m over five years** in teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The evidence presented in this report indicates that this investment resulted in enhanced learning experiences, advances in underpinning systems and structures and a culture of enhancement which has developed significantly in the years since 2014. In addition, **Ireland's international reputation** as a leader in the area of teaching and learning was reinforced. Key impacts are listed below.

Student learning enhanced through:

- Increased student engagement
- More efficient use of class time
- More meaningful learning experiences
- Improved understanding of subject matter
- Enhanced digital capabilities
- Increased accessibility to course content
- Better understanding of future work expectations and contexts
- Improved assessment and feedback practices
- Improved understanding of student transitions
- Increased involvement in teaching and learning decision-making

Student involvement in enhancement of teaching and learning more valued and widespread

Centrality of teaching and learning better understood and supported

Increased collaboration across roles, fields of study, and institutions

Culture of enhancement fostered across the sector

Professional learning and development of participants and team members enhanced

More confident, sophisticated and widespread engagement with digital technology among those who teach

Clearer understanding of the nature and importance of professional development among those who teach and lead

Innovative teaching and learning practices supported and embedded

Increased engagement with scholarship of teaching and learning