



Insights from a National Approach to Supporting the Professional Development of Those Who Teach

This *Forum Insight* focuses on the national Open Courses initiative, established by the National Forum and sectoral colleagues in 2017. It considers what has been learned from this flexible, innovative approach to supporting the professional development of those who teach across higher and further education.

Context

Following an extensive process of national consultation and evidence building, Ireland published its National Framework for the Professional Development of All Staff Who Teach in Higher Education¹ in 2016. The Framework was piloted in 2017 among 230 staff across Irish higher education² and its nationwide implementation was since incorporated as a high-level target within various national policies (see, for example, the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-20³ and the Charter for Irish Universities⁴). The Framework is grounded in a desire, voiced by those who teach across all institutions, that the value of professional development be understood and recognised, in all its forms, for all who teach.

As part of the implementation of the Framework, the National Forum, in collaboration with teams of colleagues across the higher education sector, undertook the development of a range of open-access professional development opportunities - Open Courses⁵. Each Open Course is linked to the National Professional Development Framework and has an associated digital badge, offering national recognition for commitment to professional development and supporting lifelong learning and career mobility across the sector. Through facilitator training, course participants can also earn a facilitator badge enabling them to go on to deliver the given Open Courses in the future.

Open Courses have allowed emerging professional development needs to be responded to in a timely manner. The development process is established and supporting resources are available so that when a need is identified, a development team can be put in place. Open Courses have also leveraged existing expertise and fostered partnerships between national bodies. Courses have been developed by the National Forum in collaboration with, for example, the Irish University Association, the

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD), the Library Association of Ireland and the National Student Engagement Programme. Topics of existing courses include, for example, getting started with personal and professional digital capacity, universal design for learning, community-engaged learning, student engagement in decision-making, entrepreneurship education, digital policy development, and programme-focused assessment.

To date, 21 Open Courses have been developed, with over 500 facilitators trained and over 3,000 participants taking part.

Key Insights from Open Courses

The following insights have been gathered from participant feedback and ongoing internal evaluations of the Open Courses initiative.

- 1 As with any initiative, communication is key ...**
... The main ways participants hear about Open Courses is from colleagues, the National Forum website or through social media. Individual emails from course facilitators to participants were also seen as highly effective in supporting participants during a course.
- 2 Links to national frameworks and structures matter ...**
... The majority of participants who complete an Open Course plan to continue to engage with the National Professional Development Framework following the course, allowing for sustained professional development over the longer term.
- 3 Giving an option to complete a facilitator course builds capacity and fosters collective ownership ...**
... Approximately half of participants have indicated an intention to also complete the facilitator badge at some point. To date, one in six participants have already done so.
- 4 It is important to engage with participant expectations from the outset ...**
... The expectations from an Open Course were exceeded, met or mostly met for the majority of participants.

1 See the Framework here: <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/resource/national-professional-development-framework-for-all-staff-who-teach-in-higher-education/>
2 See pilot report here: <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/resource/irelands-national-professional-development-framework-summary-findings-of-the-initial-implementation/>
3 See Performance Framework here: <https://hea.ie/resources/publications/higher-education-system-performance-framework-2018-2020/>
4 See Charter here: <https://www.iua.ie/ouruniversities/charter-for-irish-universities/>
5 Further detail on the nature, structure and range of Open Courses can be accessed at opencourses.ie



5 Underpinning technologies and platforms need constant monitoring, as well as participant familiarisation...

... The majority of participants reported the Open Courses web platform worked well. But for those not familiar with Moodle some time was required to become familiar with the interface and course layout.

6 Time...time...time...

... A major concern amongst participants prior to starting a course is the availability of time to complete the work required. Allocating time to complete the workload of a course is a persistent issue that needs to be highlighted from the outset and communicated to those wishing for more professional development for those who teach.

7 Peer groups are an excellent support for professional development...

... A peer triad system of assessment is used in Open Courses. A peer triad is a small group of usually three participants who are encouraged to work together to share and discuss their approach to professional development. Peer triads are seen by participants as one of the most helpful supports provided while completing an Open Course.

8 Having a practice-oriented approach is essential ...

... Providing the opportunity to redesign practice as part of the Open Course was regarded as extremely valuable for ensuring sustainable change to individual practice. The vast majority of surveyed Open Course participants planned to incorporate what they had learnt on their course into their practice.