

# **Voices of Academics in Irish Higher Education**

Perspectives on  
Professional Development



Maria Slowey and  
Ekaterina Kozina with Eloise Tan



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The study was designed to inform practice so from an early stage interim results were presented to relevant committees, workshops, conferences and the like. However, this is the first publication which brings together the main findings in one location. We appreciate the expert and enthusiastic support of Saranne Magennis and colleagues on the Publications Committee of AISHE (All Ireland Society for Higher Education) in bringing the study to a wider audience.

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# Preface

Professional development for academics in higher education lies at the heart of teaching and learning enhancement. How we see ourselves as teachers is just as important as the competence and insight that we develop over time. It is crucial that as teachers in higher education we reflect on and update our practice, monitor and develop our own professional impact, and draw on evidence and research in order to inform our practice. The time we can commit to accredited or non-accredited professional development activity is not always a given, but it is profoundly important.

Without professional development support, teaching can be an isolating activity. It has always been my experience that teachers benefit hugely when they feel part of a network of practitioners and when they are actively connected to experts, research, know-how and development opportunities. Such opportunities serve to enhance their practice, develop their careers and enrich the experience of their students.



When devising professional development strategies and frameworks it is essential that we listen to the voices of academics from a range of contexts within the sector – which is why studies like this one are so useful, and why this piece of research will contribute to a really valuable picture of some of our key concerns when it comes to teaching and learning enhancement.

This study has gathered and analysed academics' perceptions of the current teaching and learning environment within their contexts. It explores how the academic respondents engage with professional development in teaching and learning. It analyses the perceived barriers to academic engagement with professional development and it looks at how respondents understand that very contested relationship between teaching and research.

The following pages contain rich and interesting insights on which to build. In particular, respondents in this study, who have been drawn from a sample of universities and institutes of technology, suggest a range of implications: the importance of discipline-specific professional development; the strong appetite for professional development across different institutional contexts; and the similarities of teaching and learning development concerns across different types of higher education institutions. Within the analysis, the four emergent themes are among the main themes that we should pay attention to, namely, academics' working conditions, the institutional status of teaching as a core academic activity, the provision of academic and professional development opportunities and academic attitudes towards their roles and activities as teachers.

Such insights are of huge value to the work of the newly established National Forum. One of the main concerns of the Forum is to ensure that we learn from and build on the substantial work and research that has preceded it and to draw on the knowledge and expertise that already exists in our sector.

The challenges in producing consistently excellent teaching and learning in higher education are not insignificant. But, building on what we already have, and continuing to foster a genuinely collaborative approach to enhancing teaching and learning will help us to establish Irish higher education's global reputation for excellence. An evidence-based approach to enhancement will be central to that goal. And the contents of this useful report contribute greatly to that evidence.

I look forward to incorporating the results of this research into an informed and comprehensive picture of our professional development requirements and frameworks in the coming months and years. And I commend those committed educational developers who have worked hard to gather this data, engage in this analysis and strengthen our evidence base.

Professor Sarah Moore  
Chair, National Forum for the Enhancement  
of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

December 2013

**Part I:**  
**Context**



# 1

## **Chapter 1: Understanding teaching and student learning: Irish higher education in international context**

### **Introduction**

The various roles which higher education is called upon to play in contemporary society are multiple, complex and - not infrequently - contradictory. In recent decades, much of the policy debate at national and European levels has been dominated by discussions about the contribution which higher education can/ should make towards economic development with a strong emphasis on research, particularly in science and technology.

Education, however, remains at the core of the mission of universities and other institutions of higher education. And, at the core of the educational process lies human interaction: as Martin Trow, one of the founders of the contemporary study of higher education, put it: “teaching is not an action, but a transaction; not an outcome but a process; not a performance, but emotional and intellectual connection between teacher and learner” (2010 (reprint), 282).

Despite the centrality of teaching in higher education, academic staff are primarily appointed on the basis of their disciplinary knowledge - the knowledge which they ‘profess’. In contrast to other parts of the educational system in Ireland, as in most other European countries, there has been no requirement for those engaged in teaching in higher education to have any grounding in the theory or practice of pedagogical issues. The point is highlighted in a study undertaken by the European Science Foundation (ESF, 2011) which, in emphasising the importance of ‘effective teaching’ also identified a range of developments in higher education which create demands on teachers for which ‘many are unprepared’ (10).

The ESF report makes the case that the pace of change in higher education points to the necessity of increasing awareness of the theoretical underpinning of teaching and student learning, including: the focus on student-centred teaching; changing conceptions of education; an increasingly diverse student body; diversity of the teaching staff; new technological platforms for education; declining public expenditure; and the impact of rising costs for students. It also suggests that collaboration between active researchers and students is a key channel in which new knowledge can be disseminated, contested and advanced, yet, paradoxically “researchers are expected to introduce the most complex research findings to students who have much less disciplinary knowledge, but in many settings teachers are not offered adequate support to develop such pedagogic competence” (ESF, 2011: 10).

Higher education systems are culturally and historically specific, yet there is some evidence that globalization is leading towards greater convergence: isomorphism, in Meyer’s terms (Meyer et al., 2007). For this reason, we believe it is important to consider developments in Ireland in a wider international context. As higher education institutions are called upon to fulfil numerous roles, the pressures and demands on academic staff across Europe and globally have become the subject of a number of large scale comparative studies investigating the changing nature of the academic profession in terms of motivation, rewards, challenges, career trajectories and the like (Teichler, 2010; Bentley et al., 2013; Kehm and Teichler, 2013; Teichler and Höhle, 2013). However, relatively little is known about views of academic staff on their levels of interest in, and engagement with, conceptual and practical knowledge around teaching. This is despite the fact that claims to a distinctive form of teaching lie at the heart of what is actually ‘higher’ about the educational missions of universities and other institutions of higher education.

A review commissioned by UNESCO on global trends on higher education highlights the centrality of the academic profession for the achievement of successful societal, economic and personal outcomes from higher education, and draws attention to the fact that the success of universities at its core depends on well-qualified, committed academic staff.

**Neither an impressive campus nor an innovative curriculum will produce good results without great professors. Higher education worldwide focuses on “hardware”- buildings, laboratories, and the like - at the expense of “software”- the people who make any academic institution successful (Altbach et al., 2009: 85).**

This ‘software’ of higher education comprises a wide range of people with specialist expertise: librarians, student support services, technicians, administrators, registries, estates, human resources, finance, information systems, research offices and strategic planners to name but a few. All have roles to play in supporting student learning. However, at the heart of the success of the educational mission of an academic institution lies the quality of Trow’s “emotional and intellectual connection between teacher and learner”.

As will be discussed below, a good deal of the debate on teaching in higher education might be viewed as ‘top down’ from national policy and/or institutional perspectives. This report seeks to make a contribution to strengthening the evidence base in these debates in Ireland from a ‘bottom up’ perspective, focusing on the question of what, if any, formal structured professional development academics feel might assist them to enhance their teaching

## Teaching in contemporary higher education

In higher education, most academic staff combine research with significant teaching responsibilities at undergraduate and/or postgraduate levels (Teichler and Kogan, 2007). However, beyond the ‘traditional’ research-teaching nexus, as Musselin (2007) points out, academics are increasingly called on to undertake a wide range of other activities, including regional engagement, proposal writing, developing contracts, elaborating e-learning programmes, engaging in technology transfer and the like. These are, for good or bad, now part of the tasks required of academic staff and “...are no longer considered as peripheral, not compelling and secondary, but recognised as important aspects of academic work” (ibid.: 177). At a theoretical level there may be, for mainstream academics, some blurring of Bourdieu’s (1988) dichotomy between ‘pure scientific’ careers and careers built on the participation in the management of science.

More practically, however, a key point is that, despite these new demands, teaching not only remains at the heart of the academic role, but also remains quite different from other sectors of education insofar as academic staff, with some exceptions, are not required to have a pedagogic or teaching qualification for appointment and admission to the profession.

With increasingly diverse student populations, rising student numbers, declining units of resource, requirements for greater transparency, rising expectations, an emphasis on student feedback not to mention a growing 'complaints culture', higher education could be said to be brewing something of a 'perfect storm' from a teaching perspective (Jones, 2006).

Reviewing international developments, Henkel (2007) puts forward the view that there is a shift from "depth and authority" of subjects to "understanding of and skill in pedagogy" pointing out that this is a field that has formed "no part of academic training and been regarded with disdain by most academics" (201). Similar points about changing teaching in higher education in Ireland are made by MacLaren (2005) who suggests that the time of 'professional scholar, but amateur teacher' model may be increasingly "... untenable in an era of widening diversity, greater public accountability and technological and institutional transformation" (111). In this context, there has been a major growth in staff development policies in Ireland and internationally, accompanied by the establishment of specialist centres with the specific task of providing professional development for academic staff in relation to teaching and learning. The latter operate under a variety of titles such as Centres for Academic Development, Teaching and Learning, Academic Practice and Learning Innovation.

In Ireland, this issue features prominently in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011). While mainly focusing on structural matters (specifically, rationalization of universities, institutes of technology and specialist colleges through mergers and strategic alliances) the National Strategy reflects the dominant international trend discussed above on the contribution which higher education might make towards wider policy objectives. Amongst other things, this is seen to require a switch from over-specialisation towards an emphasis on "... learning objectives that explicitly seek to nurture in students the creativity, enthusiasm and skills required for continual engagement with learning" (Department of Education and Skills, 2011: 35).

Associated with this focus on student outcomes, the National Strategy draws attention to the importance of professional development for academic staff, and recommends that all higher education institutions

**...must ensure that all teaching and learning staff are both qualified and competent in teaching and learning, and should support ongoing development and improvement of their skills (Department of Education and Skills, 2011: 18).**

Irish universities and other institutions of higher education are thus expected to play an active role in providing opportunities for their academic staff to develop and enhance their skills in teaching and student learning. In practice, universities and institutes of technology had already taken on board this message to the extent that most, if not all, had, over the previous decade or so, established centres and units to support professional academic practice in teaching and learning.

At the national level a range of support networks was established - such as EDIN (Educational Developers of Ireland Network) - some of which were supported by targeted funding from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under a number of rounds of strategic funding.

While the details altered in each round, the core objectives of the most recent HEA strategic funding, the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) remained similar in relation to fostering "new approaches to enhancing quality and effectiveness within higher education and research, incorporating the use of existing resources (including capital resources) more effectively, as well as new funding" (HEA 2008). The criteria for success included innovation, transferability, matched funding from institutions and an associated commitment from senior levels that these should be 'strategic' initiatives (as opposed to one-off projects). There was also a strong steer towards inter-institutional and cross-sectoral collaboration (that is, between universities and institutes of technology).

In 2008 (predating the National Strategy by some three years) a competitive bidding round for a second cycle of SIF involved 31 projects across the country, aimed at driving 'reform' of structures and systems designed to achieve a range of objectives including catering for increasing student numbers while improving teaching and learning quality, preparing graduates for a lifetime of innovation and change in the workplace as well as "... enhancing research and innovation capacity" (Higher Education Authority, 2008).

## Contemporary environment of teaching in higher education

In emphasising the importance of enhancing quality teaching, the SIF initiatives of the HEA and the National Strategy reflect international policy trends. So, why is it that teaching has come to feature on the agenda for policy makers, institutional managers and academic leaders? Drawing on analyses by OECD (2008), UNESCO (Altbach et al., 2009) and ESF (2011) three contemporary processes which impact on approaches to teaching and learning in higher education in virtually all European societies can be identified: (1) the increasing influence of the state and public policy, which directly and indirectly, shape institutional policies and structures; (2) the changing nature of the student body and related changes in student expectations; and, (3) the interest of academic staff in their own professional development needs and interests relating to teaching and learning. These are considered briefly in turn below.

### (1) The increasing interest and influence of the state and public policy on teaching in higher education.

Factors contributing to this scenario include the following:

- Since the late twentieth century the view that developed countries are moving towards becoming knowledge economies and knowledge societies has been widespread both at the level of key international and intergovernmental organizations - UNESCO, OECD, the EU and the like - and at the level of national states. Consequently, higher education is seen as

playing a key role, not just in the education of the young and the elite, but also in the education of a growing, and more diverse proportion of the population. The state thus has a significantly increased interest in ensuring that higher education fulfils an appropriate (frequently as perceived through the prism of neo-liberal ideology) role for wider society.

- The rapid expansion of student numbers entails a far higher level of investment than before of public funds - with associated requirements for accountability for quality and volume of output.
- The increased emphasis on future employability of graduates in the labour market, and thus on programmes perceived to be more vocationally relevant - with implications for the curriculum and pedagogy.
- At national and at EU levels, governments have increasingly used targeted or earmarked funding as a mechanism to steer higher education institutions to innovate in teaching and learning practice and to concentrate on identified policy priorities - the power of the purse (Batory and Lindstrom, 2011) - for example, widening access to particular sections of society and the development of appropriate curricula and pedagogic approaches designed for a more diverse student body.
- The core of the Bologna Process concerns the concept of transferability and transparency of qualifications. This carries major implications not only for the 'reform' of higher education qualifications, but also for curriculum design and associated pedagogic approaches.
- Public policy in many countries looks to developments in learning technology to provide opportunities for greater flexibility in access to higher education teaching for larger numbers.

## **(2) The impact of changing student expectations**

A second factor leading to an increasing policy attention to teaching in higher education relates to a focus on students and their expectations. Here, while starting from different ideological and/or empirical positions, for practical purposes (that is, at the level of higher education institutions, or individual academics) a number of trends converge.

At one level, there is a demand for greater democratisation of access to knowledge and involvement by learners - these demands are not new, as reflected through student protests over centuries. However, the forms of engagement are new: for example, the EC supported project T4SCL (Time for Student Centred Teaching) led by the European Students' Union (ESU) and Education International (EI) which seeks to evolve a different relationship between teacher and learner (Smidt and Sursock, 2011).

This trend is reflected in Ireland, where a national Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) was piloted in (2013).

This survey aims to

**...Listen to students about their experiences of higher education. Students have a major contribution to make in influencing the design of curricula, and in reviewing and providing feedback on their experience of college. Good student feedback on engagement and satisfaction will contribute to students experiencing an education that is relevant and responsive to their personal development and growth as fully engaged citizens within society (ISSE, 2013).**

Associated with this 'democratization' trend, is the fact that in many countries students are now increasingly diverse in terms of age, socio-demographic background, entry qualifications, family situation and employment status (Slowey and Schuetze, 2012). While non-traditional students, including adults, have to overcome significant barriers to gain access to higher education, they can bring a new and dynamic wealth of experiences, knowledge, skills and expectations to higher education (Duke, 2002; Taylor et al., 2002; Watson, 2009; HEA, 2013).

A somewhat different aspect of an emphasis on students and their expectations reflects a wider societal trend, associated with the growth of consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998). In contemporary higher education debates rage as to the extent to which students might be seen, and to some extent might see themselves, as 'customers' or 'consumers' of higher education. Since 2005, a national survey of student 'satisfaction' has been conducted in the UK, asking undergraduates to provide 'honest feedback' on what it has been like to study their course at their institution (NSSS, 2013). The results are published and publically available to prospective students, employers and all interested parties.

At a European level, the large scale EuroStudent survey, while mainly focusing on social and economic issues, also seeks data on student satisfaction with their educational experience (EuroStudent, 2013). Associated with all of the above is the fact that student feedback and ratings exercises are now commonplace - ranging from those undertaken by national agencies and institutions to informal 'rate my professor' type exercises. One way or the other, the focus on hearing the student voice is another 'push' factor for greater attention being paid to the quality of teaching in higher education.

## **(3) Interest from academic staff in staff development to enhance teaching and learning.**

In terms of the classic neo-Weberian perspective, professions are defined by the interaction of the knowledge claims with the power dimensions associated with monopolies and the production of the producers (Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990). In the case of higher education - particularly in universities - research performance remains the main criterion for 'production' and admission to the academic profession.

Likewise, it remains a widespread view that the person who best 'professes' her/his subject is likely to be the best teacher, and

**...we must depend on our appointment procedures to ensure that teachers know their subjects and are competent to transmit knowledge, or broaden perspectives, to stimulate curiosity, or raise ambitions, or prepare students to be able to learn through their lifetimes, or to achieve some of the many other things that teachers accomplish through their relationships with students (Trow, 2010: 282).**

Trow does not deny the need for monitoring and review of teaching and the associated implications for ongoing professional development, but argues that policy makers and institutional leaders should place the emphasis on the 'inner motivations of teachers' and their professional commitment to their various roles rather than external assessment associated with a lack of trust in this professionalism.

In the United States, a landmark Carnegie report on the Scholarship of Teaching made the case that "good teaching means that faculty, as scholars, are also learners" (Boyer, 1990: 11). In passing, it is interesting to note that the same Commission considered, and rejected, a proposal for a new Doctor of Arts degree for college teaching. However, it did recommend that training in preparation for teaching should be incorporated into all graduate preparation.

Academic staff vary not only in terms of their personal values, skills and ambitions but also structurally in terms of their positions. These will vary in terms of: career span (early, senior etc.); employment situation (short-term contracts, permanent posts etc.); type of institution (university, institute of technology, specialist institution etc.); discipline (humanities, social sciences, 'applied' and 'pure' sciences etc.); capacity to generate external income etc.

In order to deal with the increasingly complex demands placed upon them, four factors might be hypothesized as leading academic staff to be more inclined to seek support from a variety of sources, including professional academic development:

- 1) *Awareness of the challenges and opportunities offered by new technology, and the need for relevant skill updating in relation to its use in teaching and learning.*
- 2) *Greater awareness of 'accountability' for teaching: now, notably- as mentioned above - through quality processes, audit, student ratings and the importance attached by higher education managers to these factors and achievement levels of students.*
- 3) *Some academic staff (in common with other lifelong learners) value the certification, which may be offered through staff development programmes in teaching and learning.*

- 4) *Internationally, the growth in scholarship relating to teaching and learning practice in higher education; this new 'sub-field' of research is being recognized as a legitimate part of the academy, with its own structures and staffing.*

## The academic profession

As mentioned above, teaching in higher education takes place in the context of increasingly complex demands on academic staff (Bexley, James, and Arkoudis, 2011; Teichler, Arimoto and Cummings, 2013). Jurgens and Enders (2009) refer to the changing ingredients of the academic profession that go beyond the standard interpretation of it as a blend of research and teaching (5). Our study is timely as Ireland can soon be seen in the wider context of a forthcoming international publication based on data from 18 countries *Teaching and Research in Contemporary Higher Education* (Shin, Arimoto, Cummings and Teichler, 2014).

The aforementioned National Strategy identifies teaching and learning in higher education as a priority for professional development. Specifically, it makes the case that it is "...not sufficient for academics to be experts in their disciplinary area; they also need to know how best to teach that discipline" (DES, 2011: 59). Teaching at third level should be research-led, research-based and research-informed (DES, 2011: 58). In this way, academics in Ireland, as elsewhere, are expected to weave together their research and teaching to create a higher education pedagogy that is closely connected to research.

Debates about the quality of teaching in higher education and the related commitment of academic staff to this part of their role enter the public arena through the media, a good deal of which appears to be based on anecdote and specific personal experience. We trust this publication makes a useful contribution to this discussion, providing empirical analyses of academics' perspectives on how they actually view their teaching role, and also the types of support they might wish to have in order to further enhance their teaching.

## The study: hearing the voices of academics

As we have seen, the National Strategy is clear on the importance of teaching.

**All students must have access to teaching that has been kept up to date and relevant through scholarship, research and professional development. Academic staff should make full use of the range of pedagogical methodologies available to them and be qualified as teachers as well as in their chosen discipline. All research and scholarship in higher education institutions should enhance the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. (DES, 2011: 13)**



The National Strategy could be read as placing the emphasis on what academics 'should' do - in the Voices survey we set out to address the topic from a somewhat different perspective by asking academics directly what they consider might support them to develop and enhance their teaching. In this report, we thematically present key results from this empirical study of the professional development interests of academics in Ireland (hereafter referred to as the *Voices study*).

The survey was primarily designed to feed into the planning of professional development programmes for the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance and its eight member institutions.

With the publication of this report, we bring the analysis to a wider audience with the intention of contributing to an evidence base for the development of policy, practice and further research in Irish higher education.

Specifically we explore:

- (1) How academics perceive the contemporary teaching environment in universities and institutions of higher education (student engagement, student diversity, technology)
- (2) How academics engage with professional development related to teaching
- (3) Perceptions of barriers to academics' engagement with professional development
- (4) Institutional and personal conceptions of the teaching-research nexus.

There are institutional, external, disciplinary and personal factors that combine in complex ways to influence how/when/why an academic decides to engage with professional development around teaching. Using data from the survey and open-ended questions, amongst others findings, we explore how the implementation of national strategies such as the Irish National Strategy for Higher Education may require institutional change around how higher education institutions value and accommodate professional development related to teaching, as well as greater understanding of academics' conceptions of teaching and the forms of support they regard as most useful in helping them to enhance their work.

In the following chapter (Chapter 2) the methodology of the study and profile of respondents is described. Chapter 3 provides a descriptive overview of survey results in relation to the highest and lowest ranking areas of interest for professional development. For comparative purposes the views of respondents from universities and institutes of technology are also examined. The data is additionally analysed with regard to respondents' level or rank, primary academic discipline and gender.

Chapter 5 explores respondents' perceptions of changes in the teaching environment in higher education. The intention was to cover a broad range of issues and to capture aspects of teaching that are relevant to the day-to-day experiences of academic staff. From the response distribution to the various statements on the changing teaching environment, we attempt to piece together a snapshot of how respondents perceive their teaching context.

In Chapter 6 we draw directly on the 'voices' of respondents as we present the findings from an open-ended question '*How would you promote good teaching in higher education?*'. From a qualitative thematic analysis of 169 responses this chapter works towards describing the phenomenon of why some academics actively engage in structured professional development.

The Afterword points to some implications for policy, practice and future areas of research.

# 2

## **Chapter 2: The Voices study: building an evidence base for professional development**

### **Introduction**

The Voices survey aimed to gain insight into the views of academic staff on their professional development interests in relation to teaching and learning. In 2008, one major initiative to be supported under a competitive bidding round for a second cycle of the Strategic Innovation Fund under the auspices of the Higher Education Authority included a range of projects jointly developed by the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA).

The eight member institutions of the Alliance represent about half of Ireland's higher education system (in terms of student numbers). The members of the Alliance comprise four universities - Dublin City University (DCU), National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD) - and four institutes of technology - Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Institute of Art Design and Technology (IADT), Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB), and Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT).

The largest strand within the DRHEA SIF programme of work related to the Enhancement of Learning and included a range of initiatives aimed at innovation and quality enhancement of core activities concerning educational provision across the region. One of many initiatives under the Enhancement of Learning Strand was the *Voices* survey, which aimed to establish a baseline of information on the views of academics about professional development in relation to enhancement of their teaching. The survey was explicitly designed to be part of a formative piece of work. Thus interim results were fed into programme planning meetings for professional academic development across members of the Alliance. When the survey was conducted the opportunity was taken, to explore respondents' views of the changing nature of teaching and learning and the student body in the context of wider changes in the higher education environment. As discussed in Chapter 1, we were particularly interested in how academics in Ireland perceive teaching in relation to major changes in higher education around massification, internationalisation, and digital literacy (Devlin and Samarawickrema, 2010).

Professional development related to teaching and learning is distinct from, but connected to, the disciplinary research with which academics engage throughout their careers. However, at national and international levels, there is an increasing emphasis on strengthening theoretical and practical pedagogic knowledge for higher education teachers on a regular basis. As discussed in Chapter 1, in the view of the National Strategy for Higher Education, it "...is not sufficient for academics to be experts in their disciplinary area; they also need to know how best to teach that discipline" (DES, 2011: 59).

In the literature, this type of professional development is referred to by various terms such as: "faculty development, educational development, instructional development, and academic development" (Amundsen and Wilson, 2012: 90). For the purpose of consistency in this publication we employ the term 'academic development' to refer to any type of professional development academics engage in to enhance teaching. (Barrow and Grant, 2012; Gosling, 2009).

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology of the survey, points to some of its strengths and limitations, and provides a profile of the respondents.

## The study

The study covers academics working in a wide range of situations reflecting the diversity of the sector in terms of institutional size, mission, age and focus, as well as in terms of the diversity between universities and institutes of technology. An Advisory Group was established to assist in the questionnaire and survey design, comprising members drawn from DRHEA institutions who had expertise in online survey methods and/or academic development. The Advisory Group was also consulted in relation to piloting and distribution mechanisms - including timing, as institutions operate to different academic calendars.

The advantages of an online survey were judged to outweigh the disadvantages: email is the primary means of communication in most institutions and an online survey allows for flexible access as academics often access work email away from their offices (Heijstra and Rafnsdottir, 2010); it also reduced the costs and administrative workload of distributing and collecting surveys from the eight institutions and reduced the possibility of loss of data (Lefever, Dal, Matthíasdóttir, 2007). The survey was piloted with academics in three institutions and approved by the DCU Research Ethics Committee.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, institutions survey academic and other staff to ascertain their views on a variety of matters. However, little research exists to date in Ireland on the views of academics across a range of institutions. It was decided that a survey would be an effective mechanism to gather data from as many academics as possible and therefore contribute towards filling the gap in knowledge. The survey can of course only reflect the views of those who chose to respond, which may be markedly different from those who chose not to participate (Nulty, 2008). Throughout this report we draw attention to the instances in which we put forward interpretations that draw on the literature and on experience in the national and international context. Alternative interpretations are possible, and this highlights the desirability of further research, in particular, qualitative approaches such as interviews, observation and the like.

The Institutional Research Officer of DCU provided the technical expertise in administering the online survey. To ensure the best possible level of response, it was decided that each institution would be responsible for circulating the invitation to engage in the survey. A standard letter of invitation was developed (Appendix I) which institutions were free to modify as they wished. This approach allowed for reporting of interim results to relevant committees to inform planning of staff development programmes.

Multiple strategies were adopted with a view to increasing the response rate, such as keeping the survey live for an extended period of seven weeks, sending email reminders from institutional contacts, ensuring anonymity, and persuading respondents that survey results would be communicated to stakeholders in issues related to teaching and academic development at their institution (Nulty, 2008).

Questionnaire and methodological matters

The survey was designed to be completed in around 10 to 15 minutes and consisted of 20 questions (Appendix II). The 20 questions were distributed across five sections:

- (1) Demographic information relating to the respondents’ current position, length of employment, discipline and gender, and other background information,
- (2) Views on the changing nature of teaching in higher education
- (3) Experience with academic development
- (4) Preference for type of academic development activities
- (5) Perception of institutional support for academic development.

Most of the questions were structured on a seven-point Likert-type scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” and on a four-point ordinal scale indicating the extent of interest from “no interest” to “great interest”. The ordinal scale also included a “neutral” option. The following two open-ended questions were also included:

- Could you please provide information on a structured professional development course or exercise which you found particularly useful for your teaching practice?
- Do you have any suggestions on more effective ways to value and promote good teaching in higher education?

The qualitative material from the open-ended questions is drawn upon to illustrate various points in this report but in particular, in chapter 6, it enables us to draw most directly on the words of respondents. **Over 800 academic staff completed part of the questionnaire, with 680 completing most or all questions.** Firm baseline figures were not available on which to calculate response rates, as each institution was responsible for distribution (some, for example distributed to ‘all-staff’ mailing lists while others were directed to full-time academic staff). Based on HEA statistics for full-time academic staff employed in surveyed institutions at the time the response rate is estimated at being in the region of 25% to 30% (Appendix III).

Profile of respondents

The survey asked respondents to identify themselves in terms of gender, type of higher education institution, discipline, level of teaching, length of employment in higher education, current position, and focus on research or teaching. We will now build a profile of the respondent population for each of these contextual variables. Where possible, the profile is compared against statistics on higher education staff from the HEA (HEA, 2013).

Type of higher education institution

In relation to the type of higher education institution in which the respondents work, the distribution reflects the relative size of the two sectors with 71% working in the four universities and 28% working in DIT and the other three institutes of technology

(Appendix III). ‘Other’ responses accounted for 1% and included several institutions that were not part of the target population for this survey.

Table 1 – Respondents by type of higher education institution

Type of higher education institution	%
All Universities	71
All Institutes of Technology (including DIT)	28
Other	1
Total	100

Current position

Respondents were asked to indicate the level of their current position (or equivalent as titles are not the same across universities and institutes of technology). As **Table 2** shows, participants were drawn from across the full range of academic levels, from junior to senior grades. As might be expected, there is a pyramid structure, ranging from the Lecturer level (53%) up to the Professor level (5%)

Table 2 – Respondents’ current position

Current position	%
Professor	5
Associate Professor	5
Senior Lecturer	17
Lecturer	53
Junior/Associate Lecturer	7
Researcher	8
Other	5
Total	100

For the purposes of analysis, the six response categories were collapsed into three bands: ‘Professor, Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer’, ‘Lecturer and Junior/Associate Lecturer’ and ‘Researcher’.

Table 3 – Respondents’ current position grouped into three categories

	%
Professor, Associate professor, Senior Lecturer	28
Lecturer, Junior/Associate Lecturer	63
Researcher	8
Total	100

## Primary academic discipline

In relation to respondents' primary academic discipline, **Table 4** shows that the largest single group of respondents are from the Social Sciences and Humanities (46%), with a slightly smaller proportion in Science and Technology (39%), and a smaller proportion again (14%) (n=97) in Medical and Health Sciences.

**Table 4 – Primary academic discipline of respondents**

		%
Social Sciences and Humanities	Education	5
	Humanities/Arts	17
	Social and Behavioural Sciences	12
	Business and Administration, Economics	11
	Law	2
Science and Technology	Life Sciences	
	Physical Sciences	11
	Computer Sciences	8
	Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction, Architecture	10
	Agriculture	1
Medical and Health Sciences	Medical Sciences, Health Sciences	14
Total		100

Again, for the purposes of analysis, the eleven disciplinary categories were collapsed into three bands: 'Social Sciences and Humanities', 'Medical and Health Sciences' and 'Science and Technology' (**Table 5**).

**Table 5 – Academic discipline grouped into three categories**

	%
Social Sciences and Humanities	47
Medical and Health Sciences	14
Science and Technology	39
Total	100

## Balance of research and teaching

In the *Voices* survey we regarded it as important to find out how respondents viewed their work in terms of the relative balance they placed on teaching compared to research. Here, for comparative purposes the questionnaire included a question derived directly from several large scale comparative surveys of academic staff across Europe and globally (CAP and EUROAC as mentioned in Chapter 1). Respondents were asked to identify the extent to which their current work interests leaned more in the direction of research or more in the direction of teaching.

Respondents were offered four options: whether their current work interests were either 'primarily in teaching' 'teaching and research with a focus on teaching' 'primarily in research' or 'research and teaching with a focus on research'.

The first point to note is that the overwhelming majority of respondents (75%) saw their work as combining *both* teaching and research. Within this, identical proportions (37.5%) reported their current work interest as being in 'teaching and research with a focus on teaching' and in 'research and teaching with a focus on research'. Just over 15% reported their interest as 'primarily in teaching', with almost 10% saying their current interest as 'primarily in research'.

It might be reasonable to hypothesize that those who choose to respond to a survey on the topic of teaching and learning might lean towards the teaching end of the spectrum. And, while respondents to the *Voices* study were reasonably well spread across the two categories, a slightly higher proportion did identify their interest as being 'primarily in teaching' or 'teaching and research with a focus on teaching' (53%) compared to those leaning towards research.

It is interesting to compare this distribution with data from the EURAC data for Ireland (Drennan, 2011) in which the balance is somewhat different with the comparable figure for those having an orientation towards teaching being 46%. At the two ends of the spectrum, 15% of respondents in the *Voices* survey on teaching and learning describe their current work interest as being 'primarily' in teaching, compared to 13% of the EURAC cohort; while the proportion describing their interests as being 'primarily in research' is almost identical (c9%).

As we discuss elsewhere (Slowey and Kozina, 2014), the balance of teaching and research varies over the course of an individual academic's career trajectory. These patterns are reflected in our survey results, with almost four-fifths of respondents in the earlier stages of their careers (Junior/Associate Lecturer) indicating they were primarily focused on teaching (79%), while a smaller majority at the next level (Lecturer/Senior Lecturer) indicated they were primarily interested in teaching (58.6%).

At the more senior levels of Professor / Associate Professor (reflecting Boyer's model of career trajectories, 1990) a large majority (73%) highlighted research as their current work interest, with only a quarter saying they were primarily focused on teaching. In terms of disciplinary differences, within the Professor/Associate Professor grouping a slightly higher proportion of respondents from Social Sciences and Humanities (79%) focused on research as their current work interest than from Science and Technology (72%) and Medical and Health Sciences (67%).

## Level of teaching

**Table 6** shows the current focus of respondents' teaching commitments (undergraduate and postgraduate). Slightly more lecturing staff were teaching undergraduate courses (42%) than were teaching a combination of undergraduate and postgraduate courses (40%). A very small proportion indicated that they were involved in continuing education (2 %).

With respect to postgraduate courses and research, 12% were predominantly teaching postgraduate courses with around 4% being involved exclusively in research supervision.

**Table 6 – Level of teaching**

		%
Undergraduate	Undergraduate	42
Taught postgraduate and research supervision	Taught postgraduate	12
	Research supervision	4
Combination of undergraduate and postgraduate	Combination of undergraduate and postgraduate	40
Continuing education	2	
	Total	100

## Length of employment in higher education

**Table 7 – The length of employment (in years) in higher education**

	%
5 years and less	14
6 to 10 years	28
11 to 20 years	38
More than 21 years	20
Total	100

In relation to the length of employment in higher education, **Table 7** indicates that the highest proportion of the respondents (38%) had between 11 and 20 years of experience, while a smaller proportion (28%) had between 6 to 10 years. As can be seen, smaller proportions of the respondents had been working in the area for 5 years or less (14%) and for more than 21 years (20%).

## Sex

A majority of respondents were women (56%). The sex distribution of academics in Ireland is 43% female/57% male in universities and institutes of technology. (HEA, 2013: 119-120). When asked to choose between teaching and research as their primary interest, the male respondents were distributed more evenly with 50% of males identifying their current work interests as being primarily situated within research. In contrast, 57% of female respondents identified teaching as their primary focus.

While we cannot say whether the focus on research or teaching is a personal choice or is mandated by respondents' job descriptions, we can point towards possible implications for focusing on teaching rather than adopting a more balanced approach to the research/teaching nexus. Parker's (2008) examination of criteria for promotion in UK universities (including both pre- and post- 1992 universities) demonstrates that, at the level of Senior Lecturer, the majority of universities included in the study held research and teaching in equal

esteem. This would suggest that female academics' decision to focus on teaching will not negatively affect their career progression if they maintain a research profile. However, Parker (2008) found that this trend towards parity does not apply when promotion criteria to the grade of Professor are considered. Thus the decision of female academics to focus on teaching may have negative repercussions further along their career progression. Parker's findings suggest that higher education institutions value teaching in relation to entry-level academic positions but that teaching loses its strategic importance where senior posts are concerned.

HEA statistics show that, in both universities and institutes of technology in Ireland, there is a trend towards relative gender parity at the lower levels of academic ranking, but that parity gives way to a definite majority of male academics at the higher levels (HEA, 2013). Of the respondents, only 10% (n=66) identified themselves as being Professors or Associate Professors. Of respondents who identified as Professor/Associate Professor, 49 were male and 17 were female. This is representative of the gender breakdown at the national level for Professors/Associate Professors. The trend can be noted with reference to one particular institution: at Dublin City University, the gender breakdown shifts from a male/female percentage of 47%/53% at the Lecturer level to 84%/16% at the Professor level (ibid., p.118). As mentioned earlier in this section, the gender distribution for academic staff in Ireland is 57% male/43% female.

Ireland and the UK are not alone in having these uneven gender distributions in higher academic rankings; Times Higher Education has created a Global Gender Index to measure gender inequalities in universities worldwide, gathering data from universities ranked in the top 400 of the THE rankings (Grove, 2013). This THE Global Gender Index found that the gender disparity is prevalent even in Scandinavian countries that are regarded as being highly progressive in gender equality issues. Citing a 1987 HEA report that highlighted "striking" gender imbalances in Irish academia, Linehan and Buckley (2009) describe change as "painfully slow" and currently "off the agenda" (p.413). Clearly there needs to be more research into what is causing these distinct patterns in gender distribution as one moves along the academic career track.

## Summary

In this chapter we set out the methodological approach to the online survey, and we record the profile of respondents. Around 680 respondents completed most of the questions in the survey, and the estimated response is comparable to response rates from a similar study conducted at the Open University (Knight, Tait, and Yorke, 2006). The profile of the respondents was compared with HEA staffing statistics and found to be representative of national statistics on gender in academia.



## **Part II:**

# **Voices of academics in Ireland**





# 3

## **Chapter 3: Views on priorities for professional development**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the primary focus of the survey, which was to ascertain the views of academics on priority themes for professional development in relation to teaching and learning. In Ireland, as in the UK, while there have been some studies on how, where, and why academics engage in professional learning, little work has been undertaken on what academics say they want to learn about (Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006).

In this chapter we analyse the highest and lowest areas of preference and attempt to draw out emerging themes from the findings. We also analyse the rankings by the type of institution where respondents are employed, their primary academic discipline, and their academic position.

## Professional development for academics

Conceptualising professional development for academics can be difficult as mentioned in Chapter 1 because of the increasing complexity of the roles they are expected to undertake, the types of posts available and career trajectories (Bexley, James, and Arkoudis, 2011; Teichler, Arimoto and Cummings, 2013). Jurgens and Enders (2009) refer to the “changing ingredients” of the academic profession that go beyond the standard interpretation of it as a blend of research and teaching (5). Academics can be called upon to undertake many tasks that fall outside teaching and research, such as administrative or ‘engagement’ tasks with stakeholders outside the formal university community (ibid.). The approach adopted in this study therefore reflects that of a review of ‘faculty growth’ (the common term for professional development of academic staff in the USA and Canada) as being:

- (1) Ongoing and in a constant state of becoming as opposed to being fixed
- (2) Facilitated by external environments but needed to be viewed in terms of what individuals themselves want and need as developing persons, and
- (3) Set in a specific sociocultural and personal context relative to faculty members’ identities and roles.

The establishment in Irish higher education institutions of academic development centres, operating under a variety of different titles, can be regarded as an attempt both to cater for continuing growth of academic staff and to address the lack of ‘teacher training’ for academics who, in the main, have been appointed on the basis of their disciplinary knowledge. Academic development seeks to support academics with theoretical knowledge and practical skills specifically relevant to teaching in higher education, which is different from teaching in other sectors, as we discussed in Chapter 1, insofar as it aspires to be research-led, research-oriented, research-based or, at a minimum, research-informed (DES, 2011: 58). Kane, Sandretto, and Heath (2002) remark on the distinction between research and teaching preparedness, for “... academics trained as researchers, this means that they are often well prepared for the research role. In contrast, many academics have had little or no formal teacher education to prepare them for the teaching role” (181).

The National Strategy for Higher Education highlights the lack of professional teaching qualifications for academic staff and claims there is international recognition of the need to increase the rigour of professional qualifications in relation to teaching in a higher education environment (DES, 2011: 60). This assertion is not universally accepted: anecdotally, there would appear to be scepticism in the academic community and it emerged as a strongly expressed, albeit minority, view amongst respondents. As we will see in this and subsequent chapters, most respondents expressed a generally positive attitude towards the notion of academic development, but not all felt that the project of academic development was a worthwhile endeavour in higher education.

**Academics mostly do a great job in teaching if they are provided with the right academic context and motivated students. A context in which non-academics and institutions tell us how to teach our own areas of expertise is just farcical. Before all of this interference nonsense, we have been doing an excellent job literally for centuries and now we simply cannot be left to get on with the job. Good academics love to teach and do research because passing on knowledge is what we do... (Respondent)**

This particular respondent asserts that good-quality teaching in higher education is somehow inherent in academic work and that it comes naturally to academics. The respondent reasoned that by virtue of the longstanding existence of universities academics know how to get the job (teaching) done. This particular respondent is of a rather extreme, and minority perspective. As will be seen below, the majority of respondents were in fact positive in relation to professional development.

## Provision of academic development

With no little or no formal pedagogic training, some academics may be inclined to reproduce, in their teaching, their own experiences of being taught as undergraduates and postgraduates. Drawing upon previous experiences to inform current and future practice is not problematic in itself: indeed, ‘learning from doing’ is a key component in professional development (Nicholls, 2001). However, when ‘learning from doing’ becomes the sole means of informing teaching practice two outcomes may become apparent:

- (1) Academics may close themselves off from the knowledge and practice explored in theories of education and higher education research
- (2) Without reflective practice, ‘learning from doing’ may deteriorate into repeating teaching practices which may be detrimental to student learning.

Engagement in academic development does not mean that academics can no longer draw on their own experience; rather, it is important that to ensure that such engagement is embedded and socially situated in experience.

Respondents were asked to rate their level of interest in professional development activities that might be provided on a collaborative basis across a regional area. While, of course, a great deal of professional learning takes place outside formal courses, the focus of this study was explicitly on structured activity which, in the main, would necessitate academics’ attendance (physical or virtual) to ‘receive’ training (Amundsen and Wilson, 2012). Regardless of the form that this training or academic development might take, the National Strategy clearly states that it is the responsibility of the academic’s institution, individually or working in collaboration with other institutions, to provide such opportunities (DES, 2011: 60).

**Table 8 – Areas of professional development**

Planning and design	Curriculum design
	Writing learning outcomes
	Aligning assessment and learning outcomes
	Integrating research into the undergraduate curriculum
Delivery and practice	Innovative delivery methods
	Inquiry and problem-based learning
	Alternative assessment methods
	Small-group teaching methods
	Large-group teaching methods
	Use of new technology
	Managing teaching in a laboratory
Feedback on teaching	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students
	Expert assistance on interpreting student feedback
Peer-to-peer opportunities	Peer feedback on my teaching
	Microteaching to peer group
	Peer exchange on good practice
	Connecting with others within my discipline
Scholarship and research	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general
	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline
	Postgraduate qualification in teaching and learning
	Fellowship opportunities
Professional development and leadership	Preparation of teaching portfolio
	Administrative requirements around teaching
	Legal issues around teaching (health and safety, equality, etc.)
	Training on accessibility for learners with various disabilities

Respondents were offered a four-point scale to indicate their levels of interest in each of the activities, ranging from no interest, to little interest, to moderate interest, to great interest. A ‘neutral’ option was also available.

The limitations of this type of quantitative scale are obvious. If a respondent indicates ‘no interest’ in a topic it could mean simply that he/she is not interested. However, it could also indicate that he/she may previously have accessed professional development

## Respondents’ priorities for academic development

Drawing on relevant literature and the advice of the Expert Advisory Group, the Voices survey presented respondents with six broad areas of professional development, relating to: planning and design; delivery and practice; feedback on teaching; peer-to-peer opportunities; scholarship and research; professional development and leadership. Within the six areas, twenty-six specific themes were identified (**Table 8**):

in this area and sees no need for further engagement, or it could indicate that the topic relates to his/her active research domain, so professional development is not necessary. These matters could best be elucidated in interviews – a matter to which we return in the final chapter.

In **Table 9** the distributions of the responses are summarised and ranked according to the frequencies of responses falling into categories ‘moderate’ and ‘great interest’.

**Table 9 – Priority areas of interest for professional development**

Type of professional development activity	Respondents (%)	Rank
Innovative delivery methods	84	1
Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	84	1
Alternative assessment methods	80	3
Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	80	4
Peer exchange on good practice	78	5
Connecting with others within my own discipline	77	6
Use of new technology	77	7
Inquiry and problem-based learning	75	8
Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	73	9
Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	73	10
Large-group teaching methods	70	11
Curriculum design	68	12
Peer feedback on my teaching	67	13
Aligning assessment and learning outcomes	65	14
Small-group teaching methods	63	15
Training on accessibility for learners with various disabilities	61	16
Expert assistance on interpreting student feedback	61	17
Preparation of teaching portfolio	60	18
Fellowship opportunities	59	19
Writing learning outcomes	48	20
Postgraduate qualification in teaching and learning	48	21
Administrative requirements around teaching	46	22
Legal issues around teaching (health and safety, equality, etc.)	42	23
Microteaching to a peer group	40	24
Managing teaching in a laboratory	40	25

Note: This ranking is based on a combination of topics attracting ‘great’ and ‘moderate’ interest. Percentages have been rounded.

As can be seen from **Table 9**, professional development in relation to innovative delivery methods and access to research findings on teaching and learning in respondents’ own disciplines were ranked highly by over 84% of respondents. Given the focus in the National Strategy on student feedback, it is interesting to note that the next two highest ranked topics relate to two sides of this particular coin: on the one hand, development of alternative methods by which to assess student learning and, on the other, development of innovative approaches by which academics might obtain feedback from their students.

**Table 10** shows a little difference in the ranked responses of academic staff in universities and institutes of technology. However while rankings were similar, the strength of opinion appears higher amongst respondents from institutes of technology. For such respondents, the first- and second-ranked preferences were ‘access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline’ and ‘connecting with others within my discipline.’ ‘Connecting with others in my discipline’ appeared in the highest 10 rankings across both sectors, but it featured higher in the preferences of academic staff from the institutes of technology. This could perhaps reflect the fact that research may provide academics in universities with more opportunities to connect with colleagues in their disciplines than are available to those in institutes of technology.

**Table 10 – Ten highest ranked priority areas of interest for professional development by sector**

Response indicated	Universities		Institutes of Technology	
	(%)	Rank	(%)	Rank
Innovative delivery methods	82	1	89	3
Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	82	2	91	1
Alternative assessment methods	77	3	87	6
Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	76	4	87	4
Peer exchange on good practice	75	5	87	4
Use of new technology	74	6	83	8
Connecting with others within my own discipline	72	7	90	2
Inquiry and problem-based learning	72	8	84	7
Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	71	9	81	10
Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	70	10	81	9

### Highest ranked areas for professional development by primary discipline of the respondent

We were also interested in seeing if respondents' disciplinary background appeared to be connected with their priorities for professional development. Overall, as **Table 11** shows, there is a high degree of commonality in professional development areas identified by lecturing staff across the three disciplinary groupings of Social Science and Humanities, Science and technology, and Medical and Health Science.

Professional development activities around innovative delivery methods, and access to research findings on teaching and learning in respondents' disciplines, appear to be important to the respondents from the three disciplinary areas. Nevertheless, some minor differences can be discerned. For example, professional development in relation to methods of obtaining useful feedback from students is the first item in the list of priorities for respondents from Science and Technology. Peer exchange on good practice seems to be regarded as relatively less important for respondents from Medical and Health Sciences.

**Table 11 – Areas of highest interest for professional development for the respondents grouped by primary academic discipline**

Rank	Social Sciences and Humanities		Science and Technology		Medical and Health Sciences	
	Area selected	%	Area selected	%	Area selected	%
1	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	86	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	84	Innovative delivery methods	92
2	Innovative delivery methods	83	Innovative delivery methods	83	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	90
3	Peer exchange on good practice	81	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	81	Alternative assessment methods	89
4	Alternative assessment methods	80	Inquiry and problem-based learning	79	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	88
5	Connecting with others within my own discipline	79	Alternative assessment methods	77	Use of new technology	87
6	Use of new technology	76	Peer exchange on good practice	76	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	86
7	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	74	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	75	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	84
8	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	73	Use of new technology	74	Connecting with others within my own discipline	83
9	Inquiry and problem-based learning	72	Connecting with others within my own discipline	73	Expert assistance on interpreting student feedback	81
10	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	70	Curriculum design	72	Inquiry and problem-based learning	80

Peer collaboration and communication appears to be of relatively more interest for the respondents from Social Sciences and Humanities. The greatest differences between the rankings in items relate to interest in access to research findings in teaching and learning in general and expert assistance on interpreting student feedback.

Overall (according to the percentage of the respondents opting for the 'moderate' and 'great interest' response options on the scale), respondents from Medical and Health Sciences generally appear to express higher levels of interest in professional development. Respondents from Social Sciences and Humanities appear to consider professional development in relation to integrating research into the undergraduate curriculum as less important than do respondents from Medical and Health Sciences and Science and Technology.

### Highest ranked areas for professional development by academic grade

In **Table 12**, the levels of interest in professional development are analysed by the academic level/grade of respondents, organised into three groups: Professor, Associate Professor, Senior Lecturer; Lecturer, Junior/Associate Lecturer; and Researcher (or equivalent grades). Despite the fact that the rank order is generally similar, some differences do emerge. As can be seen, the respondents

from the Professor, Associate Professor, and Senior lecturer group express greater interest in professional development in relation to peer exchange on good practice. This item was ranked third by this group, while for the Lecturer/ Junior / Associate Lecturer group it is ranked seventh. 'Use of new technology' achieved the highest ranking overall and the lowest with Professor/Associate Professor/Senior Lecturers who ranked this as their tenth preference (**Table 12**).

In comparing the results with the Researcher category, a few remarks can be made about the findings. Firstly, problem-based learning and fellowship opportunities recorded considerably more interest for the Researcher category than for the others. Secondly, methods obtaining useful feedback from students were not as important for the Researcher category as for the Professor/ Associate Professor/Senior lecturer and Lecturer, Junior/ Associate lecturer categories.

The respondents in Lecturer, Junior/ Associate lecturer and Researcher seem to express greater interest in professional development activities in general than the respondents in Professor, Associate Professor, and Senior lecturer' band. This is particularly evident for access to research findings on 'teaching and learning in my discipline', inquiry and problem-based learning and the use of new technology. In turn, access to research findings in teaching and learning in general appeared to be of less interest for the respondents in the Researcher category than for the respondents in the remaining two categories.

**Table 12 – Areas of highest interest for professional development for the respondents by current position**

Rank	Professor/Assoc.Professor, Senior Lecturer		Lecturer, Junior/ Assoc. lecturer		Researcher	
	Area selected	%	Area selected	%	Area selected	%
1	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	84	Innovative delivery methods	85	Innovative delivery methods	92
2	Innovative delivery methods	80	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	84	Inquiry and problem-based learning	87
3	Peer exchange on good practice	79	Alternative assessment methods	81	Fellowship opportunities	84
4	Alternative assessment methods	77	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	81	Use of new technology	82
5	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	77	Use of new technology	80	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	82
6	Connecting with others within my own discipline	74	Connecting with others within my own discipline	79	Large-group teaching methods	82
7	Inquiry and problem-based learning	71	Peer exchange on good practice	78	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	80
8	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	70	Inquiry and problem-based learning	75	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	78
9	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	70	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	75	Curriculum design	77
10	Use of new technology	68	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	74	Preparation of teaching portfolio	77

## Emerging themes

The higher ranking attributed to topics such as 'innovative delivery methods', 'obtaining student feedback' and 'alternative assessment methods', suggests that academic staff, regardless of institution type, level of seniority or discipline, are interested in learning about enhancing their current methods of teaching. The openness of academics to learn about new methods, particularly in relation to new forms of assessment, could perhaps signal an acknowledgment that the format of the 'one-to-many' lecture, coupled with a high-pressure environment and end-of-semester examinations, may well require reconsideration. While these matters have long been aired in the higher education research community, it is important to have a reliable indication that many academics are interested in seeking support on how to implement change in their practice.

Another emerging trend is the emphasis which respondents place on *disciplinary* resources and training in relation to teaching and learning. The call for a disciplinary approach to teaching and learning is common among academic staff as a result of disciplinary approaches to the assessment of knowledge, teaching methods and curriculum (Neumann and Becher, 2010). As one respondent put it, in drawing a connection between the academic's disciplinary background and the context of teaching:

**The teaching of teaching needs to be more focused on the different demands of different disciplines - not lumping Humanities, Languages, Law, Sciences in together in seminars - and on the actual conditions teachers at universities are working in. (Respondent)**

There is also an interest in fora where academic staff can engage with their peers about teaching and, specifically, learn from others within their discipline. This suggests that perhaps networks might be created to facilitate knowledge and practice exchange at the disciplinary level. In the UK, the disciplinary networks established by the Higher Education Academy are example of a disciplinary approach to teaching and learning (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/disciplines>). Further exploration would be necessary to ascertain the extent to which staff are expressing an interest in informal peer exchange about practice as distinct from more formal disciplinary networks that they might be able to access in a flexible and independent manner. Informal peer exchange might take the form of talking about teaching over a coffee morning, while formal disciplinary networks might be disciplinary associations that require membership. Typical of the value of non-formal approaches highlighted by some respondents is a focus on mentoring and, once again, the importance of the connection with research is apparent:

**Mentoring of junior staff by senior colleagues, forming global subject based networks much of my innovation comes from my research networks which provide access to this type of support: encouragement for colleagues to get involved internationally so that the benchmarks are truly international. (Respondent)**

Another respondent has the following suggestion as to how peer exchange of practice might be integrated into academic development:

**Have the best lecturers in the system involved in training activities, not 'professional' teaching and learning staff who don't teach. (Respondent).**

There are two points of interest in the comment above: firstly, that lecturers should act as teachers to other lecturers, and secondly, a perception that academic developers are not actively involved in teaching. On the first point, peer exchange is commonly, in practice, a key component of many of the Postgraduate Certificates or Diplomas in Teaching and Learning and their equivalents offered in Irish institutions of higher education. As we will see below, lack of time was frequently cited as a reason for not engaging in professional development activities: if academics are under pressure, institutional approaches need to take this into consideration in order to ensure opportunities for engagement, building on what seems to us to be relatively high levels of interest.

The second criticism that academic developers are not actively teaching is another point raised in open-ended questions. In practice, many academic developers have similar research qualifications (such as Masters Degrees and Doctorates) to the academics they support, and they often have some teaching experience (Higgs and McCarthy, 2008). However, the way academic development roles are often conceived is such that the postholders tend to become 'teachers of teachers' fairly exclusively rather than engaging in a mix of teaching teachers and teaching 'regular' undergraduate and postgraduate students. It might be of interest to managers of academic development units to note that some respondents criticised academic developers for their lack of current teaching experience outside professional development modules. Fairly or unfairly, this perception appears quite widespread on the basis of the open-ended comments, and it could perhaps be addressed by more creative approaches to secondments, joint teaching and the like.

The results show a high degree of interest in 'innovative delivery methods' (ranked first overall) which are likely to include, but not be reduced to, the use of new technology (ranked seventh overall). This might suggest that the academic staff surveyed are selective about the learning technologies with which they engage, adopting an approach of 'pedagogy driving the technology' rather than vice versa.

## Analysis of lowest ranked areas for professional development

We now turn our attention to the areas that ranked lowest for preference in professional development. Of the twenty-six activities, only six got less than fifty percent rankings of 'Moderate' to 'Great interest' by participants. Those six lower-rated activities are (in order of ranking): writing learning outcomes; postgraduate qualification in teaching and learning; administrative requirements around teaching; legal issues around teaching (health and safety, equality, etc.); microteaching to a peer group; managing teaching in a laboratory. Here we will present some possible interpretations for the low ranking for some of these areas.



The lower level of interest in 'Microteaching to a peer group' may be due to lack of comprehension and/or awareness of the term (as was indicated by one respondent in the open-ended section). Aside from the possible confusion as to what microteaching is, the low interest in this technique might also be related to its resource-intensive nature (since it requires a space set up for video recording).

'Managing teaching in a laboratory' also rated low among options for professional development. At first glance this might be interpreted in relation to the large concentration of participants in Social Sciences and Humanities who do not teach in laboratory settings. However, 'Managing teaching in a laboratory' did not rank in the top ten preferences for either those in 'Science and Technology' or those in 'Medical and Health Sciences' (**Table 11**). While those in the science-based disciplines rated 'Innovative delivery methods' highly, there was no strong preference for the specific context of a laboratory. This can be interpreted in multiple ways: lecturers in science-based disciplines may not feel the need to access professional development in laboratory teaching, or lecturers in science-based disciplines may be more interested in engaging in professional development related to teaching in contexts outside the laboratory.

## Summary

This Chapter provided a descriptive overview of survey results in relation to the highest and lowest ranking areas of interest for professional development. The views of respondents from universities and institutes of technology were compared. The data was additionally analysed with regard to respondents' level of seniority and academic discipline. 'Professional development around innovative delivery methods' and 'Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline' ranked as the top preferences for academics surveyed. While 'Microteaching' and 'Managing teaching in a laboratory' recorded the least interest. Interestingly, the respondents from the institutes of technology seem to express greater interest in all areas of professional development than respondents from universities.

# 4

## **Chapter 4: Engagement with professional development**

### **Introduction**

As discussed in Chapter 1, a characteristic defining a profession is the expectation, in some cases the requirement, that practitioners not only maintain but seek to further enhance their knowledge and skills through participation in a range of professional development activities. In this Chapter we discuss respondents' previous experiences with professional development in relation to teaching and learning.

We look at the rates of participation in professional development activities and examine reasons given by respondents for non-participation. We then turn our attention towards the types of professional development activities with which respondents choose to engage and consider some open-ended responses related to respondents' experiences with past activities.

### Levels of engagement with structured professional development

Respondents were asked: "Over the last three years, have you participated in structured professional development relating to your teaching within your institution, or elsewhere?" To perhaps a greater extent than obtained with respect to any other question in the survey, the wording of this question was subject to revision in the light of expert input from the Advisory Group and piloting. The formulation 'structured professional development' is indeed rather awkward, but was selected after consideration of a range of alternatives. As we discuss elsewhere (Slowey and Kozina, 2013) the focus of the study was to ascertain levels of interest and participation in activities which lie at the more formal end of the spectrum. We take for granted that most, if not all, academics are expected to engage in non-formal learning relating to their discipline through research, reading, peer exchange, conferences and the like. Therefore we wished to set the bar deliberately high by making explicit the focus of the question was:

- Related to structured activities
- Directly related to teaching
- Over a specific time period of three years.

Respondents identified themselves within three bands of engagement with professional development: 'Participate regularly', 'Participate occasionally' and 'I do not participate' (**Table 13**). We see that almost half of respondents participate occasionally (49%), over a quarter of respondents participate regularly (27%), and just under a quarter of respondents had not participated (24%) in professional development activities related to teaching over the three years.

Structured professional development could be understood as activities that have an organised curriculum, a knowledge broker (facilitator, guest speaker, lecturer, academic developer), and an institutional association (for example teaching and learning unit, or faculty). Of course, a great deal of academic development occurs outside such structured activities. As Boud (2006) remarks: "It [academic development] takes the form of exchanges with colleagues, interacting with students, working on problems, writing and associated activities. It is informal and not normally viewed as development. Nonetheless, it often has a more profound influence on staff than activities explicitly labelled as such" (3). Thus, we cannot interpret the 24% of academics who responded 'do not participate' as representing a lack of engagement with professional development related to teaching; we can only surmise that they are not engaging in event-based opportunities.

**Table 13 – Level of engagement with structured professional development over three years prior to the survey.**

	%
Participate regularly	27
Participate occasionally	49
No participation	24
Total	100
Total	100

### Analysis of highest ranked areas for professional development by level of engagement with professional development

As in the case of the preceding chapter in this report, analysis was undertaken of how academics ranked their priorities for professional development in relation to the contextual variable of their level of previous engagement with professional development (**Table 14**). In terms of rank order, there is a higher degree of similarity with the first two items being the same i.e. access to research findings on teaching and learning in respondents' own discipline and innovative delivery methods.

**Table 14 – Areas of highest interest for professional development by levels of previous engagement with structured professional development**

Rank	Participate regularly		Participate occasionally		No participation	
	Area selected	%	Area selected	%	Area selected	%
1	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	95	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	85	Innovative delivery methods	77
2	Innovative delivery methods	94	Innovative delivery methods	83	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	72
3	Alternative assessment methods	92	Alternative assessment methods	81	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	71
4	Peer exchange on good practice	91	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	78	Peer exchange on good practice	68
5	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	90	Peer exchange on good practice	77	Inquiry and problem-based learning	67
6	Connecting with others within my own discipline	90	Connecting with others within my own discipline	76	Use of new technology	66
7	Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	89	Use of new technology	76	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	64
8	Use of new technology	87	Inquiry and problem-based learning	75	Connecting with others within my own discipline	64
9	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	86	Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	72	Alternative assessment methods	64
10	Inquiry and problem-based learning	84	Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	71	Peer feedback on my teaching	64

Where an interesting difference does emerge is in relation to what may be an indirect indication of strength of feeling. Thus, for example, 95% of those who define themselves as participating regularly say they would like access to research on teaching and learning in their discipline, compared to 85% of these who participate occasionally; while the highest ranked item for those who had not participated over the previous three years (innovative delivery methods) was selected by only 77%.

This might suggest that, while the topic will have some influence on whether or not academics will engage in professional development, if they are not open to participating then the topic may not have enough influence to move them from being 'non-participants' to 'participants'. This might also suggest that, once academics are open to engaging in professional development, they may also become more open to a wider range of activities and content. The conclusion might be that those who organise and provide professional development might consider focusing more on meeting the needs of those who participate regularly rather than trying to tailor their programmes to entice non-participants to join communities of practice.

## Reasons for not participating in professional development

Respondents were asked why they did not participate in structured professional development. Almost all of those who said they had not participated in structured professional development answered this question (166 out of 169).

**Table 15 – Reason given for not participating in professional development**

Response	%
Lack of time	35
Did not see an activity of interest/relevance	18
Satisfied with existing level of teaching expertise	17
I was not aware of opportunities available	12
Lack of support	5
Other	13

We can see from **Table 15** that lack of time was the most common reason given for not participating in professional development. At one level, 'lack of time' may be an easy answer to give. However, more detail emerged from the answers to the open-ended questions – for example "The times clashed with my lecture times". This seems to indicate that at least for some respondents interest in the topic is not the issue, rather they do not have the time to engage in academic development because they are busy teaching.

Another respondent made this strong statement about their non-participation in structured professional development: “No time and no support. Early-stage academics are thrown off a cliff and told to sink or swim” (Respondent). The high percentage of academics who indicated ‘lack of time’ (35%), combined with remarks such as these, suggests that flexible learning opportunities such as web-based resources might be valuable for some. Another possible suggestion is that structured opportunities could occur when academics are relatively free of teaching; however, this might also prove problematic as such times are typically reserved for research, writing, conference presentations and the like in an otherwise teaching-heavy schedule.

The respondent’s remark above about a ‘sink or swim’ environment highlights the frustration of at least one early-stage academic who appears to be struggling with a combination of a large teaching load and an apparent lack of support. Studies on doctoral programmes show the absence of focused preparation for the teaching aspect of an academic career (Acker and Haque, 2010; Austin, 2002). In their research on a Canadian doctoral programme, Acker and Haque (2010) found that “students did not on the whole discuss teaching work as an intentional bridge to academe. While some thought that the experience could help on the job market, for many, the work was seen as a necessary evil in the interests of financial survival...” (108). We are not suggesting that it be mandatory for doctoral programmes to provide teaching opportunities and/or courses related to teaching

for all students; to do so would ignore the reality that not all doctoral students wish to pursue an academic career that includes teaching. However, the possibility of such opportunities to engage in teaching and to reflect upon teaching would be beneficial in inducting aspiring lecturers into the world of third-level teaching. Increasingly, Irish institutions are introducing structured doctoral programmes to fill this gap, including collaborative programmes undertaken by the DRHEA and supported by SIF (<http://www.drhea.ie/>). The National Strategy proposes the adoption of “a PhD Graduate Skills Statement which sets out the attributes which modern PhD graduates should possess. These include research expertise and a range of generic and transferable skills and competencies” (DES, 2011: 68).

## Building a profile of academic engagement with professional development

Respondents were also asked the following open-ended question: ‘Could you please provide information on a structured professional development course or exercise which you found particularly useful for your teaching practice?’. Open-ended responses were given by 404 of the 659 respondents (61%). In this section we explore what types of professional development respondents engaged in (format and content).

**Table 16 – Format and content of professional development activities listed by respondents**

Format of professional development	N (371)	Examples of content given by respondents
Conferences	14	Engineering education; Mathematics education; Medical education; Problem-based learning (Facilitate); Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA); Teaching inclusion / special educational needs teaching methods; Educational philosophy
Degree: (MA; MSc; MEd; DEd; PhD)	25	MSc Applied eLearning; MSc Teaching and Learning *Not all respondents named full degree titles. Institutions named included: DIT; King’s College London; Maastricht University; The Open University; TCD; UCD; University of Brighton; University of Wales
Online courses/ resources	9	Curriculum development; Teaching online
PG Diploma/ PG Certificate	50	PGDip in Learning and Teaching (DIT); PGCert in Teaching and Learning & PGDip in Higher Education (NUIM); PGCert in Teaching and Learning (UCC); PGCert & Dip in University Teaching & Learning (UCD);
Structured courses/ workshops/ seminars; summer schools *varied in length from one hour to five days	254	Assessment techniques; Blogs; Cultural diversity in education; Curriculum design; Designing learning outcomes; Developing critical thinking skills; Disciplinary teaching focus (languages); DIT E-learning Summer School; DRHEA workshop on critical thinking; Emerging technologies; Integrating research and teaching; Language teaching; Presentation skills; Problem-based learning; Student feedback; Supporting students with learning disabilities; Teaching large groups; Teaching online; Teaching philosophy statement / developing a teaching portfolio; Use of technology; Use of video in the classroom; Virtual learning environments (Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle); Writing skills
Unstructured activities	19	Applying for teaching awards; Disciplinary associations; Reading disciplinary teaching and learning journals; Self-directed learning; Teaching and student feedback

Of the 404 respondents who answered the open-ended question, 371 named specific professional development activities in which they had taken part (**Table 16**). The responses that did not name specific professional development activities fell into one of two categories: respondents said they have never participated in such activities or they alluded to such an activity but did not name it specifically. From answers to the open-ended question we can build a picture of the types of ways academics engage in professional development in teaching and learning. We can discuss what formats the activities take, where academics go to access the professional development, and whether the activities are structured or unstructured. In the following section we will examine the range of format, places, and structures relating to the professional development activities listed by respondents.

A limitation of the open-ended question is that it did not require respondents to identify the motivation behind their participation. Thus, we have less evidence of what drives academics to become engaged with teaching and learning professional development: we know what they want to learn about, but we know less about why they want to learn it. Only a small number listed participating in induction courses on teaching and learning at their place of employment that were required or at least strongly recommended by their institution. We know that academics, much like students, are strategic about the activities they engage in, but we need to know more about what drives regular participants to take part in these activities.

## Format

Participants identified a range of activities, such as attending one-hour workshops within their institutions; pursuing a Postgraduate Certificate/Masters/Doctorate related to teaching and learning; attending a conference; participating in webinars; accessing resources online; attending stand-alone modules on teaching and learning; participating in disciplinary teaching and learning bodies; talking to colleagues; taking induction courses at the start of employment. From the wide range of activities named we get a sense that academics have a flexible understanding of professional development in teaching and learning; professional development is understood in many more contexts than attending workshops from their local teaching and learning centre. Thus, for some of these academics, professional development in teaching and learning is not characterised by the structure, the format, the facilitator, or the ability to point to a tangible outcome. Rather, it can be defined as any activity where they can access information on teaching and learning.

## Point of access

It is clear that respondents primarily access professional development opportunities either in their own institution or in other Dublin region institutions. Irish institutions outside Dublin were mentioned on occasion, such as University College Cork and IT Sligo for their webinar series. A few respondents listed activities undertaken in Finland, the Netherlands, and the UK. In addition to workplace-based professional development, many also listed participating in virtual activities such as browsing the web, reading journals online, or engaging in webinars (Dublin City University and IT Sligo were mentioned as providing professional development in the

form of webinars). It seems that respondents are resourceful when looking for professional development and will seek it outside their own institution if their needs are not met within it, particularly when they seek disciplinary-relevant knowledge.

## Structured versus unstructured professional development

For the most part, respondents listed structured activities (conferences, degree programmes, modules, workshops). However, a few respondents listed unstructured activities such as reading disciplinary-specific teaching and learning journals, exchanging good practice with peers, and participating in disciplinary-specific teaching and learning associations. It is interesting to note that some participants listed 'talking to peers about teaching' or 'reading student feedback' as professional development. Again, we can see that academics relish the opportunity to talk to each other about teaching, as seen in the high ranking of 'peer exchange on good practice' in the previous chapter in relation to the question about priorities for professional development. Yet, while they are open to listening to others discuss their teaching and seek out opportunities to share their experiences, they are less open to having their peers review their teaching.

## Perceptions of past experiences with professional development

The large majority of responses did not go beyond stating or describing the type of professional development activity engaged in. However, some responses went beyond description to an evaluation of the experience. While these types of responses represented a small representation of the total academics surveyed, we identified some themes that emerged: 1) An appreciation for structured degree programmes; 2) Transformation of teaching practice; 3) Call for disciplinary approach.

## Appreciate structured degree programmes in teaching and learning

As seen in **Table 15**, 75 respondents indicated that they had obtained or were in the process of obtaining accreditation related to teaching and learning. The most common accreditation was a Postgraduate Certificate, although some mentioned Postgraduate Diplomas, Masters programmes and PhD programmes. The focus of teaching and learning certificates, diplomas, and degrees may vary (eLearning, medical education). However, most have modules on learning theories, assessment and feedback, and reflective practice as well as an element of peer review. These modules aim to provide lecturers with a framework through which they can interpret and transform their teaching.

There is no national policy for higher education institutions that would require lecturers to have a qualification in Teaching and Learning: institutions have the flexibility to set their own requirements in relation to teaching competence. This type of flexibility is common in higher education institutions worldwide.

Currently, it is not common practice for institutions to require a qualification related to teaching: one institution included in this survey required lecturers who did not have such a qualification on appointment to obtain one within three years. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the National Strategy mentions the professionalisation of teaching in higher education. While it does not go so far as to say a qualification in such teaching should be mandatory, it does make reference to qualifications in teaching and learning: "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". (DES, 2011: 62). Research on possible compulsory pedagogical courses for lecturers suggests that academic development alone cannot guarantee a change in approach: institutional change must also take place (Trowler and Bamber, 2005).

It was interesting to note that respondents who commented on their experience in a structured degree/certificate/diploma programme evaluated it as positive. One respondent stated of their experience: "PGCert: excellent, stimulating, inspiring". Another respondent who is currently completing a Postgraduate Diploma said: "[the Postgraduate Diploma] has been excellent. The curriculum development module was particularly good in terms of structuring my teaching and seeing it within the big picture of a programme". Respondents who completed their certificate years ago still reap the benefits of their investment: "I completed a PG Cert in Teaching and Learning at [Irish university] some years ago and have found this very useful, in terms of understanding what ways students learn/understand and how teachers can address these ways". Another respondent added:

**The Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning at [Irish university] is an excellent and well worth the time/effort involved. Although I did not have to complete the course as I am employed since 2002 I found it excellent and should be compulsory for all. (Respondent)**

The positive feedback about these long-term structured initiatives stands in contrast to the mixed experiences of academics with workshops or shorter-term activities. This could be due to self-selection, as an individual who is willing to make a long-term investment such as pursuing a Postgraduate Certificate probably has a strong interest in teaching and learning. It could also be attributed to the experience of being immersed in teaching and learning issues for a prolonged period rather than trying to talk about teaching on the basis of limited time, as in a workshop.

## Transformation of teaching practice

Some respondents remarked that their participation in structured academic development activities informed their teaching practice. One respondent stated: "Creation of a teaching philosophy statement helped to clarify my approaches to teaching and provided space to consider what works and what does not". The respondent seems to be remarking that the role of the academic developer in this case facilitated their reflection. Thus, the activity was

not prescriptive but rather provided space and direction for the academic to think about their teaching in what we can assume is an otherwise busy teaching schedule. Another respondent stated: "Online teaching course - encouraged me to use more technology in my teaching". While the respondent does not say that they went on to use more technology than previously, it is clear that they felt more positively about using technology in their teaching than before the structured activity. A number of the institutions surveyed had induction-type short courses for new lecturers.

Another respondent described their experience in an induction-type academic development activity:

**On starting my contract, I was invited to attend a two-day course on Teaching and Learning. The course introduced teaching theory in an active and participatory way which actually showed how to make group teaching work. This was excellent and has informed the way I have approached teaching since then. I believe that people at any stage in their career could get a lot from such a course as it helped me to re-focus on my core teaching function and to do so from the point of view of the student. (Respondent)**

## Need for disciplinary focus

Again, the call for disciplinary approaches came through strongly in the open-ended remarks. In the previous chapter we saw that respondents ranked 'access to disciplinary teaching and learning resources' quite high. One respondent who appears to have a background in Mathematics wrote: "To be honest, none have really worked so far as, in spite of all that's said, much of the research in teaching practice appears to be focused on non-mathematical areas and/or small group teaching. Hence, courses in teaching practice tend to emphasise techniques that work well in, for example, the humanities and/or soft sciences". One means of addressing such disciplinary concerns is a decentralised approach to academic development whereby Faculties or Schools each have an Academic Developer/Learning Technologist.

## Summary

In this chapter we examined respondents' engagement with structured professional development activities related to their teaching. We looked at their levels of engagement, what areas interest them and their reasons for not participating in activities. Respondents who regularly participate in structured activities indicated more interest across the board with respect to any area of professional development than did respondents who do not participate. Lack of time, lack of support, and lack of disciplinary focus were cited as reasons for not engaging in structured activities. Those who do participate were positive about experiences with qualifications such as Post Graduate Diplomas/Certificates/Degrees. Many also drew connections between their participation in structured activities and transformations in their teaching practice.



# 5

## **Chapter 5: Perceptions of the contemporary teaching environment**

### **Introduction**

Universities are increasingly paying more attention to the quality of teaching and the student learning experience and they are addressing this through various activities such as established teaching and learning centres and required short courses in teaching for new lecturers. The establishment in 2013 of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) follows the international trend of seeking the student voice in conversations around quality in higher education (NAIRTL, 2011).



While feedback on teaching is not the sole motivation behind surveys such as ISSE or its UK counterpart the National Student Survey (NSS), such nationwide student surveys serve to provide a comprehensive portrayal of how students perceive their learning experience. As a survey of academics, *Voices* provides a portrayal of how academics perceive their teaching experience.

This chapter examines respondents' perceptions of their teaching environment. We build a profile of what teaching looks like for the majority of respondents. As in previous chapters, we analyse whether there are statistically significant differences in answers for respondents based on the type of institution they work at, their primary academic discipline and their length of employment in higher education.

## Academics' perspectives on the teaching environment

The intention was to cover a broad range of issues and to capture aspects of teaching that are relevant to the day-to-day experiences of academic staff. Respondents were presented with ten statements and were required to answer on a seven-point continuous Likert-type scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'. The first six statements aimed to capture respondents' perception of change within the student population – for example, they were asked to respond to this statement: 'The level of classroom engagement by students has improved in recent years'. Within those first six statements we also aimed to capture how respondents perceived the impact of the changing student population, as in this statement: 'Increased diversity of the student population has had a positive impact on the classroom learning environment'.

The last four statements asked respondents to reflect upon how teaching relates to other aspects of their job as an academic. The job of an academic is multi-faceted and spans the breadth of teaching (e.g. teaching classes, supervising postgraduate students), research (conducting research, presenting at conferences, disseminating knowledge) and administrative duties (e.g. serving on university committees). The profile of an academic's work might vary depending on the type of institution, with some institutions having a greater focus on research and others on teaching. Within this chapter we will look at how the contextual variable of sector type (University versus Institute of Technology) affects respondents' answers. As with previous chapters, we will ascertain whether or not there is any statistically significant difference in the responses in terms of the primary academic discipline of the respondent (Social Sciences & Humanities, Science & Technology, Medical & Health Sciences). In a departure from practice in previous analyses in this publication, this chapter also examines how the contextual variable of length of time employed in higher education relates to respondents' answers. Given that the ten statements relate to a process of change in the teaching environment, this additional contextual variable is helpful in illuminating possible trends both for those relatively new to the sector and those who have been teaching for up to more than twenty one years.

## Response distribution to statements on the changing teaching environment

As can be seen from the table, there is an interesting distribution of the responses across 'Disagree', 'Neutral', 'Agree' categories (**Table 17**). Here we will look at a breakdown of the statements that received responses that most participants agreed with, most participants disagreed with, and those that participants were divided on.

## Even distribution of the responses to questionnaire statements

There is quite an even distribution to two statements meaning that there was almost an equal amount of respondents who agreed as those who disagreed:

**Table 17 – Responses (%) to the statements focused on respondents' perceptions on aspects of teaching in higher education**

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
The level of classroom engagement by students has improved in recent years	37	26	37
Student attendance levels are declining	28	22	50
Increased diversity of the student population has had a positive impact on the classroom learning environment	10	32	58
Students are increasingly well prepared for third-level learning	71	17	12
I am teaching increasingly larger group sizes	18	23	59
I struggle to keep up with the use of technology demanded by students	67	16	17
Teaching is more demanding than any other aspect of my academic activities	39	19	42
My research informs my teaching	5	7	88
Teaching is a source of job satisfaction for me	2	6	92
Student evaluation of my teaching provides me with useful feedback	7	10	83

### 'The level of classroom engagement by students has improved in recent years'

In relation to the statement asking respondents to comment on improving student engagement, 37% expressed agreement (across a range of 'agreement' levels), while 37% expressed disagreement (across a range of 'disagreement' levels).

The even distribution of responses to this statement indicates that an equal proportion of respondents felt that student engagement has improved and has not improved. Further analysis of the disciplinary focus and length of time spent teaching, in relation to the responses, might highlight patterns in relation to this statement.

### **‘Teaching is more demanding than any other aspect of my academic activities’**

While 42% indicated general agreement with this statement, 39% expressed general disagreement, with teaching being perceived as the most demanding aspect of their academic activities. Again as with the previous statement, further analysis of the academic discipline and length of time spent teaching might highlight whether or not there are specific groups of academics surveyed who agree/disagree with this statement. While the responses to this statement were divided, the issue of teaching versus research workload came up repeatedly in responses to an open-ended question soliciting suggestions about ways to promote good teaching in higher education:

**...recognise that 16-18 hours of teaching (class contact) per week neither values nor promotes good teaching. It seriously underestimates the amount of preparation required, seriously hampers remaining current with one's field...(Respondent, Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Technology)**

**My institution should recognise the value of teaching by promoting more academics to associate or full professor based on excellence in teaching. It is not possible for every academic to have a research intensive career (research driven academics tend to reduce their teaching to the bare minimum). (Respondent, Medical and Health Sciences, University)**

## **Positive responses to questionnaire statements**

There is quite a positive responses to seven statements, meaning that for these statements most participants responding agreed:

### **Student attendance levels are declining’**

On the question of students’ attendance levels declining, 50% of respondents agreed, with 28% indicating disagreement with the statement.

### **‘I am teaching increasingly larger group sizes’**

In total, 59% expressed some level of agreement with the statement on teaching increasingly larger group sizes, with 41% indicating that they ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement. At the same time, just 10% of the sample stated ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ with the suggestion that they were teaching increasingly larger group sizes.

### **‘Increased diversity of the student population has had a positive impact on the classroom environment’**

There was quite a positive response to the statement about the effects of the diversity of the student population on the higher education environment. 58% expressed some agreement, with 37% stating ‘agreement’ or ‘strong agreement’. Nevertheless, 32% of the sample selected the option ‘neutral’ in response to this statement.

### **‘Student evaluation of my teaching provides me with useful feedback’**

On the basis of the distribution of the responses to this statement, it can be argued that the majority of the respondents may already ask students to provide constructive feedback on their teaching. 83% stated some form of agreement with the statement. More specifically, 63% stated ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ in their response to the statement.

### **‘My research informs my teaching’**

It is noteworthy that 88% of the survey respondents expressed agreement with the above statement, while 70% ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they link their research with teaching and learning in general.

### **‘Teaching is a source of job satisfaction for me’.**

Significantly, 92% indicated being satisfied with the teaching aspect of their academic responsibilities. More specifically, 81% indicated ‘agreement’ or ‘strong agreement’ with this statement.

### **‘I struggle to keep up with the use of technology demanded by students’**

A majority of respondents indicated being well prepared to use the technology demanded by students. In total, 51% opted for ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ in response to the statement, with a further 16% selecting ‘somewhat disagree’ option in response to this statement.

## Negative response to questionnaire statements

There was a relatively negative response to only one statement:

### **‘Students are increasingly well prepared for third-level learning’**

In total, 44% of respondents ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ with the statement. A further 27% indicated ‘somewhat disagree’. Nevertheless, a small minority of survey respondents (12%) expressed some form of agreement with the idea that students are well prepared for third-level learning. There were several statements related to students’ preparedness among the responses to the open-ended questions. Respondents made references to the prominence of rote-learning in second level education and to the lack of critical thinking and inquiry skills evidenced by students.

**One of the main problems in higher-education teaching is the comparably low-quality of pre-third-level education... development of self-initiative and independence in learning in second-level education seem not to be sufficiently supported. (Respondent, Science and Technology)**

**The principal T&L [teaching and learning] problem is not under-prepared staff – it is under-prepared students! Irish secondary schools do not prepare students to think critically and to articulate informed views on complex issues. Third level admissions based on one’s ability to download facts on the Leaving Cert make this worse. The best way for third-level institutions to address this problem, short of reforming the state’s entire educational system, would be to institute a mandatory writing requirement for all first year students. (Respondent, Social Sciences and Humanities)**

## Analysis of response distribution to statements on the changing teaching environment

From the response distribution to the various statements on the changing teaching environment presented, we can piece together a snapshot of how academics in the Dublin region perceive their teaching context.

For most respondents, teaching is a source of job satisfaction, they find meaningful ways to connect their research with their teaching, and they gain valuable information on their teaching from student evaluations. These three areas (teaching as job satisfaction, connection between research and teaching, and useful student evaluations) received the highest percentage of ‘agree’ responses, and academics felt quite strongly about them.

Most respondents feel they are meeting the technological needs of their students, or in any case are not struggling to keep up with their students where technology is concerned. Most feel student diversity is having a positive impact on the classroom environment, although almost a third are neutral on this issue (student diversity having a positive impact was the area that received the highest neutral responses). In conjunction with an increasingly diversified student population, most academics are experiencing larger class sizes combined with perceived decreasing levels of student attendance. So while there are more students to teach, and there is more diversity among the student population, attendance appears to be declining.

Respondents are divided on the issue of student engagement and whether or not teaching is more demanding than their other academic activities. The statement with which they most strongly disagreed related to their students being well prepared for third-level learning. Academics were clear on this: students need better preparation for the type of teaching and learning that takes place in universities and institutes of technology.

## Response distribution to statements on the changing teaching environment by sector of the respondent

The distribution of the responses to the ten statements was obtained and compared for academic staff from four universities and four institutes of technology. Teaching and research both play a part in an academic’s job. It can be argued there is a stronger emphasis in the university sector on the production of original research and the importance of teaching in a research-informed manner, while in the institutes original research is less of a priority. Keeping in mind these sectoral differences, a number of interesting results can be highlighted. Here, we highlight only instances where the comparison shows significant change from the general distribution of responses discussed previously.<sup>1</sup>

### **‘Student levels of attendance are declining’**

There is a greater agreement that student levels of attendance are declining in recent years among the respondents from institutes of technology than among the respondents from universities across the categories ‘Agree’ or ‘Strongly agree’ (36.5% as compared to 30%). It can be concluded that, in terms of the perception of academic staff surveyed, the attendance levels are perceived to be more stable in universities than in institutes of technology. There was a statistically significant difference in the responses of the two groups. This suggests that the participants, when grouped by higher education institution, seem to respond differently to the statement.

### **‘Teaching is more demanding than any other aspect of my academic activities’**

<sup>1</sup> Details of the statistical test used are discussed in Appendix III.

Interestingly, the response distribution to this statement was more positive for the respondents from institutes of technology, while the results revealed a negative response from universities. Teaching was perceived to be more demanding by the respondents from institutes of technology than by those from universities. In total, 58% of the respondents from institutes of technology expressed agreement with the statement. In contrast, only 35.9% of respondents from universities indicated such agreement.

### **‘My research informs my teaching’**

A higher proportion of the respondents from the universities agreed that their research informs their teaching than those from institutes of technology. 90% of those from universities selected the response option ‘somewhat agree’, ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’, while only 82% of the lecturing staff in institutes of technology selected the same response. There seemed to be an association between the type of higher education institution and respondents’ views on the extent to which their research informs their teaching.

In summary: academics in institutes of technology agree more strongly than their counterparts in universities that their student attendance levels are declining, and these academics also responded more strongly that teaching is more demanding than their other activities. Academics in universities responded more strongly that their teaching is research informed. Further qualitative research would be helpful in exploring these findings in greater detail.

## **Response distribution to statements on the changing teaching environment by primary discipline of the respondent<sup>1</sup>**

The section below discusses the results of the survey analysis on the changing nature of teaching and learning in relation to the discipline of the respondents. As in the previous section, we highlight a few statements where there is a significant departure from the general distribution.

### **‘Student attendance levels are declining’**

There is a positive response in the distribution for those from two disciplinary areas – Social Sciences and Humanities, and Science and Technology. In particular, over half of the respondents from these two areas expressed agreement with the statement that student attendance levels are declining. The percentage for those from Medical and Health Sciences was much smaller, with only 38% choosing the categories ‘somewhat agree’, ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’. To explore whether or not disciplinary area was a factor in how survey respondents answered this statement, a Kruskal-Wallis test was carried out. The result indicated that primary discipline was a statistically significant factor in the perceived decline in terms of student attendance

### **‘Increased diversity of the student population has had a positive impact on the classroom learning environment’**

Three observations were made in relation to this statement. Firstly, there was a slightly higher level on the part of the respondents from Social Science and Humanities. More specifically, 64% of the respondents in this category chose ‘somewhat agree’, ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’. Respondents from the Medical and Health Sciences expressed a lower level of agreement, with 58% opting for the same response options (‘somewhat agree’, ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’). And, finally, 51% of respondents from Science and Technology selected the same response options. A Kruskal-Wallis test established that there was a statistically significant difference in the responses across the three disciplinary areas.

### **‘My research informs my teaching’**

Just under 90% of the respondents indicated agreement with this statement. Nevertheless, a slightly higher percentage of those in the area of Social Sciences and Humanities (89%) than in other two disciplinary areas agreed that their research informs their teaching. Moreover, a Kruskal – Wallis test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in responses across the three groups.

In summary: academics based in Medical and Health Sciences felt the least strongly that their student attendance levels are declining and that student diversity has a positive impact on the learning environment. Academics based in Social Sciences and Humanities felt the most strongly that student diversity has a positive impact on the learning environment and that research informs their teaching.

## **Response distribution to statements on the changing teaching environment by years worked in the sector**

The following section discusses the levels of agreement/disagreement with the perceived changing nature of teaching and learning. More specifically, the data in this section were analysed with regard to the length of respondents’ employment in the area of higher education. These results were presented earlier in **Table 7** in Chapter 2. It indicates that the majority of the respondents (38%) have been working in higher education for between 11 and 20 years, while a smaller proportion (28%) have been working in the area for between 6 to 10 years, and smaller proportions again have been working in the area ‘5 years and less’ (15%) and ‘more than 21 years’ (20%).

### **‘The level of classroom engagement by students has improved in recent years’**

Interestingly, the greatest disagreement with this statement was expressed by respondents in the groups 'More than 21 years' – 43% and, '11 to 20 years' – 41%. In turn, the group which was more unsure about whether or not the level of classroom engagement has changed was those teaching 5 years and less. In total, just under 40% (3%) selected the response option 'neutral' when answering this statement. There was just a slight difference (difference in about 2%) in the proportion of respondents who opted for the 'somewhat agree' – 'strongly agree' response options. Overall, the respondents who worked in the area of higher education for between 6 to 10 years expressed a slightly stronger agreement with the statement. Nevertheless, a Kruskal-Wallis test confirmed that the difference was not statistically significant.

### **'Students are increasingly well prepared for third level learning'**

Firstly, there is a negative skew in the response distribution, with the responses across all four groups being clustered at the lower end of the scale. Secondly, there is a greater extent of disagreement expressed by the group 'More than 21 years'. In total, just under 75% of respondents in this group disagreed. The respondents in the group with 5 years and less teaching experience displayed lower levels of disagreement with the statement, with just one third (31%) opting for 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree' response options. A Kruskal-Wallis test revealed that the length of employment in years was a statistically significant factor in participants' views about students' preparation for third level learning.

### **'I struggle to keep up with the use of technology demanded by students'**

A Kruskal-Wallis test established a statistically significant difference in the results distribution in the responses to the above statement. This means that the length of employment was a factor in how survey participants answered. There was a general impression that the respondents defined themselves as quite competent and proficient users of the technology. There was a slightly more positive response from the respondents in the '6 to 10 years' group. It is noteworthy that over half of the respondents from the groups '6 to 10 years' (57%) and '11 to 20 years' (54.7%) 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' that they struggle to keep up with the use of technology demanded by students.

### **'Teaching is a source of job satisfaction for me'**

There was a positive distribution in the responses across all four groups. In fact, over 90% of the respondents in three groups expressed agreement that teaching was a source of job satisfaction for them. Similarly, up to 90% of the respondents who were teaching 5 years and less expressed agreement (selecting categories 'somewhat agree' – 'strongly agree') with the statement and 76% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. A Kruskal-Wallis test did not confirm that there was a statistically significant difference in the responses across the four groups. Teaching is a source of job satisfaction for academics, regardless of how long they have been employed.

## **Summary**

This chapter looked at how respondents perceived the changing nature of their teaching context. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 10 statements that addressed topics such as the increasing diversity in the classroom, their use of technology, and their perceptions of classroom engagement. The respondents' perceptions convey how they interpret their own context and should be taken as such. For example, respondents level of agreement with the statement 'Students are increasingly well prepared for third level learning' is not necessarily a valid indicator of whether or not the statement is true. However, the strength of the qualitative data within this chapter comes from the fact that we are putting together a snapshot of how academics perceive their lived experiences.

# 6

## **Chapter 6: In their own words: A thematic analysis of respondents' suggestions for enhancement of teaching**

### **Introduction**

This Chapter presents the findings from an open-ended survey question that asked, 'How would you promote good teaching in higher education?'. From a qualitative thematic analysis of the 169 responses, this chapter will attempt to explain why some academics actively engage in structured professional development activities/events around their teaching while others do not.



The previous chapters analysed questions that asked participants to rank preferences in professional development and to respond by means of a Likert scale to statements on their perception of the learning environment. This chapter focuses on the sole opportunity made available within the survey for academics to share their ideas for improving teaching in higher education.

Some of the results are perhaps unsurprising given what was mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3 about the changing nature of academic work in Ireland (see also Higgs and McCarthy, 2008; Slowey and Kozina, 2013). Some respondents stated that they had no time to participate in professional development around teaching, and some said that it was a strategic decision on their part to invest time in their research rather than in teaching and other activities. Shortage of time and the benefit of teaching in terms of facilitating promotion are two themes the researchers expected to emerge from this question. However, respondents also shared their attitudes about where good teaching comes from (innate ability or learned skill) as well as their suggestions for more engaging and accessible academic development provision. An unexpected finding was that some respondents highlighted the fact that academics are not homogeneous; there was a call for recognition that new academic staff, postdoctoral staff, and contract staff face severe and specific constraints in accessing professional development around teaching.

Building on previous chapters in this publication, the analysis of this open-ended question helps higher education researchers in Ireland build a portrait of how academics perceive the role of teaching in academic work. Do they see themselves as teachers? What are their perceptions of staff who provide training in university teaching? What do they want from their institutional frameworks in order to begin engaging with professional development in teaching?

This chapter begins with a contextual overview of what international and national higher education research says about how academics construct good teaching. Then it briefly lays out the methods by which the data were analysed. The final chapter then examines the emergent themes from the responses and hypothesises how these findings relate to the analysis in previous chapters. Elsewhere the results of this chapter have been presented within an Activity Theory framework positioning academics as decision-makers operating in response to a complex set of factors (Tan, 2013).

## Perceptions of teaching in higher education

**As part of University College Cork's staff induction programme in 2007-08, new academics were asked, 'What are you...?' (rather than 'Who are you?' or 'What do you do?'). This was part of an attempt to understand academic identity. Participants' answers fell into two clear categories: they saw themselves either as lecturers/teachers/facilitators of learning or as biologists/historians/economists/nurses and so on.**

**In other words, they tended to choose between their teaching and their disciplinary roles. (Higgs and McCarthy, p.4, 2008).**

The above quote from a study of academics' perceptions of their identities in an Irish higher education institution illustrates a fundamental tension in asking academics about promoting good teaching. The tension centres on the fact that some academics perceive themselves not as teachers but rather as disciplinary experts or researchers, or as people who combine teaching with other roles (e.g. that of researcher). Of course, the academic's identity is in constant flux and the multidimensional nature of the work demands that at certain times one is primarily a researcher and at others primarily a teacher. This ontological diversity was also present in the responses to the open-ended question, as evidenced in two responses from the Voices survey below:

**Good teaching is essential especially in first and second year in order to develop an interest in a subject among students. Good teaching is not easy and good academics are not necessarily good teachers. (Respondent).**

**Lecturers are moving more and more into a teaching role, and this is inappropriate. Students are supposed to be self-learners throughout their time in University. (Respondent).**

The first response demonstrates the view that teaching is crucial in higher education and that the ability to teach well is not innate to all academics, while the second response contrasts this with a view that resists the concept of university teacher and places the responsibility for learning squarely on the student's shoulders regardless of teaching. Akerlind's studies (2003; 2007) on academics' attitudes towards university teaching reinforce this ontological tension by finding that academics who do not see themselves as teachers will not value professional development in teaching. In a way, these academics may be an unreachable cohort for those who work in professional development in university teaching.

The question posed to respondents was 'how would you promote good teaching in higher education?' and, implicitly, it asks academics to consider what 'good teaching' might be in their context. Higher education has multiple instruments for defining what 'good research' is – what it looks like, where to find it, and how to best support it. But 'good teaching' remains an elusive concept, manifesting itself differently depending on disciplinary context, class size and type of institution. However, attempts have been made to work towards a definition of it (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Ramsden, 1991; Gibbs, 2010). The establishment of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Ireland perhaps signals a more focused national approach to defining good teaching in the sector.

## Analysis of open-ended questions

Qualitative thematic analysis (QTA) is well suited to the analysis of open-ended survey responses as it allows for the recognition of patterns (themes) across large quantities of data. As open-ended survey responses can range in length from one word to a paragraph or more, it was not considered suitable to apply discourse analysis methods given that the data comprised respondents' bounded statements around the topic of teaching in higher education rather than 'talk' about the subject. Qualitative thematic analysis differs from quantitative content analysis as it does not seek to enumerate the data through word frequency counts, co-occurrence of terms or comparative keyword analysis (Silverman, 2011). Rather QTA is a "search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon" (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p.82). A limitation of the analysis of this question and indeed of the survey as a whole is that member-checks could not be performed to validate the codes and their respective definitions because the survey was carried out anonymously.

## Themes and sub-themes

Within QTA, codes can be generated by theory, prior data/prior research, or the raw data (Boyatzis, 1998). This analysis adopted a hybrid approach of theory-driven and data-driven coding, similar to that adopted by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). The data were categorised within four themes:

- (1) The provision of academic development
- (2) Attitudes towards teaching
- (3) Institutional status of teaching
- (4) Working conditions.

The themes 'institutional status of teaching' and 'academic development provision' were generated by existing theory that informed the survey design, as we had hypothesized that institutional frameworks of promotion and the lack of time for academics were significant reasons for non-engagement with activities to improve teaching practice (McInnis, 2000; Young, 2006). After an initial pass at coding the responses, the themes 'attitudes towards teaching' and 'working conditions' emerged from the data inductively when we applied the theory-driven codes to the data to check for reliability (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). There were 11 responses related to survey design and non-responses, but these are not included in the analysis in this chapter. The coding manuals were developed and tested using QTA frameworks set out by Boyatzis (1998) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006).

Below, in **Table 18**, the themes and sub-themes are presented with their respective reference count within the data. It should be noted that responses that reflected more than one theme were coded at two themes at a maximum. This explains why the reference count exceeds the total number of 169 responses. Before we discuss the responses by theme, it is useful to reflect upon the frequency of themes. The theme most frequently cited in participants' responses was 'The provision of academic development' (60 references) and within that the sub-theme 'Format of provision' was the most frequently cited

category in terms of responses overall. This may suggest that, for the respondents, the most effective way of improving good teaching would be to reinvigorate the provision of academic development by considering more effective mechanisms for reaching academics. The second most cited sub-theme was 'Institutional recognition of good teaching' (23 references). Within this sub-theme there were calls for including evidence of good teaching as a criterion for promotion as well as calls for repercussions for what some respondents termed 'bad teaching'. This perhaps signals that, after creating more effective mechanisms to reach academic staff, the next most effective strategy would be to reform institutional promotional criteria.

Turning to the least cited themes, the respondents referenced the following with the least frequency: class sizes (5 references), administrative duties (4 references) and physical resources (3 references). It is perhaps interesting that the least cited themes deal with the changing nature of academic work. However, given that only approximately one-third of the total respondents for the *Voices* survey answered this question, it is unclear how representative of the total respondents this analysis is. As indicated in **Table 13** in Chapter 4, the respondents to *Voices* are a fairly diverse set of academics in relation to their engagement with professional development around teaching: roughly half participate occasionally, with a quarter not participating at all, and the remaining quarter participating quite regularly.

**Table 18: – Themes and sub-themes from analysis of the open-ended question: 'How would you promote good teaching in higher education?'**

Theme/subtheme	References within data
1. The provision of academic development	60
a. Format	33
b. Teaching and learning staff	10
c. Provision for new/postdoc/contract staff	10
d. Purpose of teaching and learning centres	7
2. Attitudes towards teaching	28
a. Teaching strategies	18
c. Where good teaching comes from	10
3. Institutional status of teaching	27
a. Institutional recognition of good teaching	23
b. Teaching award system	4
4. Working conditions	39
a. Time	17
b. Student ability	10
c. Class sizes	5
d. Administrative duties	4
e. Physical resources	3
5. Unrelated	11
a. Survey design	8
b. "None" as response	3



In the next section, each of the themes and their sub-themes will be represented by excerpts from participants' responses. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss each sub-theme in detail.

## **The provision of academic development**

As mentioned above, the most frequently cited theme was the provision of academic development. Responses within this theme related to academics' suggestions about what format of professional development would work for their context, their attitudes towards teaching and learning staff, concerns about the accessibility of training for those not on permanent contracts, and beliefs surrounding what teaching and learning centres should focus on.

### **Format of academic development provision**

As this was the most cited theme within the responses there was great diversity in the responses. The following were recurring responses with indicative comments from respondents:

#### **A call for a coherent accredited approach to qualifications in university teaching**

**Compulsory professionalisation of teaching for all. (Respondent)**

**Create a proper teaching qualification for higher education. (Respondent)**

#### **Accessible online resources:**

**Self-learn resources on-line I used in other places also v. useful as you can do them in your own time. (Respondent)**

#### **A disciplinary approach:**

**The teaching of teaching needs to be more focused on the different demands of different disciplines - not lumping Humanities, Languages, Law, Sciences in together in seminars - and on the actual conditions teachers at universities are working in. (Respondent)**

**You need to take into account the disciplines from which academics come. (Respondent)**

#### **An approach that is grounded in authentic contexts:**

**The courses I've been to tend to assume small class sizes or, at least, light teaching loads for academics. They are usually a demoralizing or patronizing mixture of business-speak theoretical jargon that,**

**at best, can describe rather than improve teaching practice, and pie-in-the-sky ideas that would be lovely if there were the resources to implement any of them. Teaching is important to me, and I am committed to improving my teaching and developing new skills where I can, but I'm not convinced the seminars on offer are likely to help much with this. (Respondent)**

#### **A collaborative inter-institutional approach to sharing best practice:**

**It would be nice to have a website in which lecturers in Irish universities could exchange comments, news, discussions etc. (Respondent)**

**Promotion of joint programmes between HEI's with opportunities for staff exchanges to experience teaching and learning in different environments, and networking (Respondent)**

**Establish a third level teaching portal wherein lecturers may upload MP3 and MP4 materials for use on an intra-institutional basis (Respondent)**

From the sampling of excerpts within this sub-theme it is evident that respondents had many realistic ideas about how teaching and learning centres could enhance their provision. It is of interest that many of their suggestions (an inter-institutional approach, compulsory accredited qualifications, a coherent approach to teaching qualifications) cannot be solely addressed at the level of individual teaching and learning centres and point to the desirability of coherent regional or national approaches that requires commitment on the part of all relevant institutions. Teaching and learning staff

**A context in which non-academics and institutions tell us how to teach our own areas of expertise is just farcical. (Respondent)**

**[The teaching and learning centre] have provided me with excellent courses since I started seven years ago. (Respondent)**

The above responses demonstrate how the responses within this theme were divided. There did not seem to be a spectrum: responses either saw staff as competent and valuable teaching and learning experts or as people unable to contribute to one's teaching development. Comments that identified teaching and learning staff as ineffective repeatedly cited a lack of teaching expertise and a lack of understanding of the current context of teaching. This might be interpreted in a variety of ways as far as the staffing of teaching and learning centres is concerned: for example, consideration might be given to implementing a secondment model of lecturers in Schools, or increasing the teaching load of teaching and learning staff. Thus

there seems, in some cases, to be a disconnect between academics' perceptions of the work of teaching and learning staff and their disciplinary expertise. Consider Higgs and McCarthy's (2008) articulation of the role of the educational developer in Ireland:

**...some educational developers are academics who have stepped temporarily but wholeheartedly from their disciplines into the teaching and learning arena...others are employed as full-time educational developers, a role which is sometimes defined as administrative and sometimes as academic...for some educational developers, there may be a gulf between their defined roles and their identities...such a position can be uncomfortable and can even undermine the educational development role (p.2)**

The role of teaching and learning staff is in flux and varies from institution to institution. This might suggest the need for professional development frameworks for those involved in teaching and learning in Ireland aimed at leading to an increased recognition of the professionalisation of the discipline. The work of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN) has been leading the way in Ireland in this respect.

#### **Provision for new/postdoc/contract staff**

**Much of the lecturing at third level is now carried out by occasional / part-time lecturers, as in my case. There is no support offered for these kind lecturers, and very little integration into the school or with the full time staff. (Respondent)**

**Professional development and teaching practice modules should be on offer to occasional staff and contract teaching/research staff. Staff at this level have an incentive to improve their teaching skills etc. to improve career prospects but are currently required to pay for to participate in the more relevant modules on offer. This is a farcical situation as staff at this level are generally not in a position to pay to attend such training. (Respondent)**

The above excerpts speak to the frustration of a situation where an increasing number of modules are taught by those who may not be in a position to access teacher development programmes. Gibbs (2010), in his review of quality in teaching in higher education, also found that much undergraduate teaching is undertaken by those who are not integrated into the school or department. This reinforces the earlier suggestion about accessible web-based resources that would be available to staff who are unable to attend seminars because of contractual factors. However, web-based resources are not a sustainable solution for occasional staff, as they do not address how they can engage in accredited training which might benefit them in the job search.

#### **Purpose of teaching and learning centres**

**Eliminate 80% of the activities of Teaching and Learning centres and concentrate all of the resources on the 20% of activities (VLE support etc) that actually support lecturers.(Respondent)**

**Given the very difficult promotion pathway, no one would trust another member in their own group such as a group head or a professor to help them improve teaching; it needs to be a separate and neutral person within each school....there should be a mini [Teaching and learning centre] in each School. (Respondent)**

The responses within this category indicate a variety of perceptions about the purpose of teaching and learning centres. This may be linked to the diversity of institutions involved in this survey. The second excerpt speaks to the value of having an external person with whom to discuss one's teaching and stands in contrast to calls to have existing lecturers provide the teaching (as mentioned in respondents statements). It highlights the value of having an inclusive and safe environment in which lecturers can share ideas and think about their teaching without concerns about repercussions.

#### **Attitudes towards teaching**

##### **Teaching strategies**

A few respondents interpreted the question 'How would you promote good teaching in higher education' as relating to teaching strategies. Some mentioned particular teaching strategies they find useful, such as Problem Based Learning, as seen in the response below. PBL was the only specific teaching strategy mentioned in the responses. This might be indicative of the substantial work by the Irish network of PBL practitioners, Facilitate, that holds bi-annual conferences on PBL strategies, as well as the fact that some of the world's leading researchers in PBL work in Ireland (Barrett and Moore, 2010). However, other respondents named PBL as a teaching strategy that while effective in small classes, is unsustainable in large ones.

**All third level lecturers should know the Principles & Practice of Enquiry Based Learning, particularly PBL. (Respondent)**

A more frequent comment within this sub-theme related to measures such as graduate attributes and learning outcomes. Respondents who wrote about these measures identified them as barriers to enhanced teaching and learning. Graduate attributes and learning outcomes were seen as coming from the top down and liable to promote the commercialisation of higher education. This suggests that, for these respondents, educational measures such as attributes and outcomes are positioned as inimical to the enhancement of teaching and learning. This might suggest that institutions have work to do in involving academic staff in these measures if they are to be implemented in any coherent manner.

**Stop adopting top down measures which are alienating e.g graduate attributes! (Respondent)**

**Current thinking on ‘teaching and learning’ as exemplified in the Bologna process is based on a model which is about 50 years behind the times. Equally, the pressure to make lecture notes (power point slides, etc.) available on servers for students to access as if they were consuming a product fails to understand what good lectures are about: they are events, not commodities. The best way to promote good teaching is to return to basic principles: to engage students with the critical pursuit of knowledge. (Respondent) Where good teaching comes from**

Responses within this sub-theme revealed academics’ varying opinions on whether or not teaching is an innate ability or a learned skill. The first two responses below exemplify the view that teaching is something that cannot be taught or developed: it is common sense and it is connected to one’s enthusiasm for one’s subject. This runs contrary to the position articulated in the National Strategy for Higher Education, i.e. that lecturers should not only be experts in their discipline, but also experts in the teaching of their discipline (DES, 2011). The belief that teaching ability is innate is problematic for those who work in educational development, as it suggests that those who hold this belief will be precluded from obtaining of support in terms of the development of their teaching. The third response below demonstrates the other end of the spectrum – that not only is teaching a learned skill, but training should be compulsory. The respondent says that, when only some colleagues participate in educational development, there is an uneven understanding of teaching within a department. This might suggest that programmatic approaches to professional development of teaching would be a welcome initiative.

**Good teaching is a product of basic teaching skills, common sense and a mastery of one’s field. (Respondent)**

**Some people are just good at teaching because they like it, care about it and are good communicators. (Respondent)**

**Make teaching courses compulsory for all new entrants or for anyone seeking promotion.**

**When only a minority of staff in a department have done such courses and make proposals at staff meetings based on what they have learned there is generally misunderstanding on the part of other colleagues who feel that an attempt is being made to ‘dumb down’ the approach to teaching. (Respondent)**

## **Institutional status of teaching**

### **Institutional recognition of good teaching**

Respondents were perhaps clearest on the issue of linking good teaching to promotion criteria, as evidenced in these responses below. The respondents not only want to be rewarded with promotion for good teaching, but also want to see repercussions for those who are ineffective teachers. This notion of negative repercussions becomes problematic given that there is no clear-cut definition of, or standard for, good teaching in higher education. While there are student evaluations of teaching, it has been found that students’ conceptions of quality teaching varies over time and with experience (Gibbs, 2010). The second and third response both seek a clear institutional policy on how teaching impacts their career progression. This suggests that academics are strategic in how they invest their time; in similar ways to students, they invest their time and resources in activities that they know will yield concrete results.

**Give it serious importance for promotion and give bad teaching the same importance in denying promotion. (Respondent)**

**Incentives are very important. Good teaching should be championed and should be more explicitly part of the career progression of an academic in a teaching institution. (Respondent)**

**I would like the college to have a clear policy on how it links teaching with promotion. I feel if I am a good teacher it is not as well recognised as being a good researcher. (Respondent)**

### **Teaching award system**

There were very few responses that mentioned teaching award systems (3 in total). However, all references criticized the validity of such systems and did not seem to see these award systems as being useful indicators of good teaching.

**My institution offers teaching awards ON APPLICATION and criteria used are a great mystery. This is the most ridiculous way to recognise one’s efforts and achievements, in particular since no feedback is provided to unsuccessful applicants. (Respondent)**

**Abandon the current [teaching award system in my institution]. This is based on a form-filling exercise, remote from classroom practice. Reward for good teaching comes in feedback from students. (Respondent)**

### Time

Time was one of the themes that was expected to come through quite strongly, and respondents affirmed that expectation. However, the responses discussed 'time' in more complex ways than 'I need more time'. The first response makes reference to a perceived larger workload and greater diversity of work than counterparts in other countries. The second response demonstrates the type of strategic time management that we saw previously in relation to institutional status of teaching. The final response speaks of time in a different manner and advocates more time to pursue educational research related to teaching. The respondents who wrote about time seemed to be seeking protected time to pursue their teaching interests while simultaneously seeking recognition of the fact that the diversity of their workload is unsustainable.

**If staff are expected to publish up a storm, bring in funding, supervise a handful research students plus a dozen final year/M.Phil. theses, take on more administrative and pastoral**

**duties than in most other countries and teach over 200 hrs/year, don't expect them to have time to attend teaching courses, seminars, etc. (Respondent)**

**Teaching only forms a third of my work at most so can only give a related amount of time to it. (Respondent)**

**Provide time for small-scale research which can be particularly informative around teaching issues. (Respondent)**

### Student ability

To a lesser extent than time, the quality of students coming in from second level education was cited as the main and sole cause of ineffective teaching. It has been shown that the quality of incoming students is the best predictor of educational outcomes such as degrees awarded (Gibbs, 2010). However, Gibbs (2010) also found that educational processes (teaching and learning) are the most valid indicator of quality in education and teaching. In this way, even if the respondents' perception of the quality of incoming students is correct, effective teaching is still necessary and can have an impact on educational outcomes. The beliefs exemplified in the responses below run parallel to the findings in the previous chapter about the perceived changing nature of higher education. Whether or not these perceptions are correct, the suggestion is that professional development around teaching should take into account the diversity of student ability.

**One of the main problem in higher-education teaching is the comparably low-quality of pre-third-level education. Students in third level show on average a high degree of consumer-attitude. Development of self-initiative and independence in learning in second-level education seem not to be sufficiently supported. (Respondent)**

**The problem with poor teaching standards lies with the student population whose abilities are disintegrating and the fact that we have been forced to inflate grades etc much are our great dismay, not with academics' competence. (Respondent)**

### Class size; physical resources; administrative duties

These three sub-themes are inter-related and deal with physical resources and duties other than teaching. It is interesting that only one respondent named 'improvement of physical space' as a means to improve good teaching. The second response echoes previous statements on the effectiveness of teaching strategies in large classes as well as the respondents' frustration with training that does not take into account the realities of teaching.

**Ensure that the learning environment is conducive to learning - it sounds daft but the reality is that much of the teaching I do takes place in rooms that are totally unsuited to the task, uncomfortable and uninspiring. Finding space to encourage students to work collaboratively and comfortably in informal groups is almost impossible. Investment by the university in the learning environments we work in would be welcome. (Respondent)**

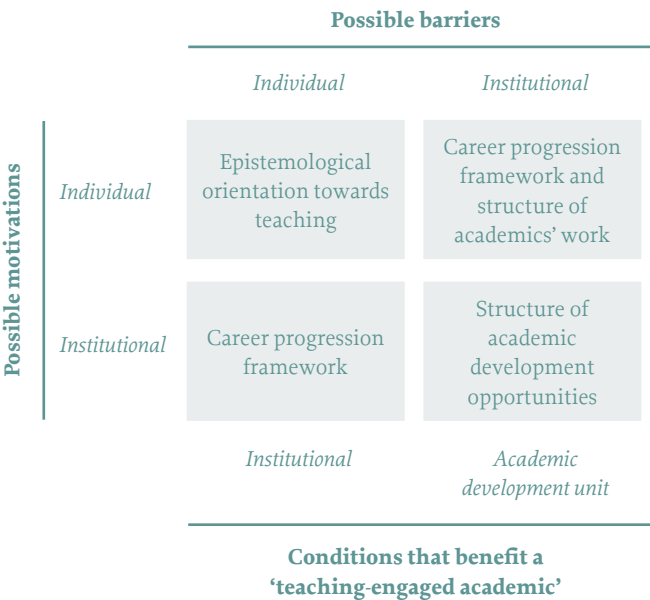
**As group sizes become ever larger (for some) there is a need to refocus much of the teaching/development agenda towards this. Most of the events, seminars etc. seem to assume that class sizes are small. When you have to teach 5/6 groups per week with 60+ students in each group, I'm afraid valuable approaches such as problem based learning and student-centric feedback become really hard to achieve. (Respondent)**

**Reduced admin load would increase the quality of both teaching and research without additional inputs. (Respondent)**

Implications

The figure below (Fig 1.) attempts to make sense of the diversity of responses to the question ‘How would you suggest promoting good teaching in higher education’. The model depicts individual and institutional factors that can act either as motivations or barriers in the decision to become engaged in teaching development in higher education. This conceptual model suggests that while some academics might be either predisposed or ill-disposed to teaching development on the basis of their epistemological beliefs about where good teaching comes from, institutional factors such as career progression framework and the structure of academic development opportunities may have the potential to influence attitudes. This model should not be construed as a recipe for increasing engagement by academics in professional development around teaching; rather, its usefulness lies in the fact that it brings together the complex factors academics negotiate when deciding how they might best support their teaching.

Conceptual model of a ‘teaching-engaged academic’



Summary

Using qualitative thematic analysis, four themes were created through a combined process of theory- and data-driven codes in response to the open-ended question ‘How would you promote good teaching in higher education?’. These four themes are:

- Academics’ working conditions;
- Institutional status of teaching;
- Academic development provision;
- Attitudes towards teaching.

Stakeholders in teaching quality in higher education may want to consider how these four factors interrelate to foster a climate where investment in the improvement of teaching is seen as a worthwhile activity from the academic’s perspective. Within the chapter, excerpts from respondents statements illustrate how individuals negotiate these factors in their decision to engage with/disengage from attempts to improve their teaching. It is beyond the scope of this research to ascertain whether or not these factors are equally important in an academic’s decision to engage in improving their teaching.

# **Part III:**

## **Contributing towards an evidence base**



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## **Afterword: Some implications for policy practice and research**

The objectives of the Voices survey were relatively modest: it was designed as a practical instrument to obtain views and experiences of academic staff in eight institutions of higher education on a range of matters relating to academic development. The primary intention was that results would be fed in a formative way into relevant planning processes of individual institutions and of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance.



## Afterword: Some implications for policy practice and research

The online survey allowed for rapid delivery of interim results, which were presented to relevant committees, working groups, seminars and the like with a view to informing programme planning. A thorough review of relevant literature shaped the design of the questionnaire, and the distribution method was as comprehensive as participating institutions were in a position to accommodate. The study, however, was not resourced to follow up important lines of enquiry in more depth – in particular, through interviews – thereby limiting any wider claims that might be made.

Notwithstanding these constraints, the survey remains the largest of its kind to date in Ireland focusing on academic development issues – issues which, as a result of the emphasis placed on them in National Strategy for Higher Education, have come to feature somewhat more prominently than heretofore on institutional and national policy agendas. The most notable development, in this context, is the recent (2013) establishment of the National Forum for Teaching and Learning which has the aim of drawing “...on the examples of great practice here in Ireland and internationally in order to help shape the delivery of an outstanding teaching and learning experience at third level in Ireland” (National Forum 2013).

Given these developments, we regard it as important to draw attention to a number of matters which seem to us to have potentially wide implications for policy, practice and research in Ireland. Four of these are enumerated below:

### (1) How much engagement is ‘enough’?

As discussed in previous chapters, the study had an explicit focus on relatively formal structured academic development activities aimed at supporting teaching and learning. Beyond this definition lies a range of activities which might be equally important – possibly, for some academics, even more important. These include, for example, non-structured, non-formal, work-based and self-directed professional learning, or engagement in research which academics regard as having direct implications for their teaching approaches.

With this specific focus, responses to the question about levels of engagement with structured academic development over the three years prior to the study are interesting to consider. Around three-quarters of respondents defined themselves as having engaged with such activities either ‘regularly’ (27%) or ‘occasionally’ (49%) (**Table 13**, Chapter 4).

This raises the question, what level might reasonably be expected to be ‘enough’ for a professional academic with teaching responsibilities in higher education? Is it helpful to try to identify such a level?

On the one hand, given the diverse range of other responsibilities for academic staff, as enumerated in Chapter 1, our findings could be seen to be encouraging about the value which respondents place on enhancing teaching through participation in academic development.

On the other hand, given that participation in continuing professional development is mandatory in some other professions, what are we to make of the fact that one quarter of respondents said they had not participated in structured academic development activities in the three years prior to the study? At one committee meeting where these results were presented, it was suggested that any profession worthy of its name would expect almost 100% engagement in professional development on a regular basis.

Therefore, it seems to us that important areas for future investigation relate to three factors, individually and in relation to each other:

- First, an exploration of the relative impacts on their teaching of academics’ engagement in: (a) formal, structured academic development activities; and (b) non-formal, work-based or experiential learning of different kinds.
- Second, the impact, if any, on teaching of engagement by academics in different kinds of research (for example, pure, applied or translational) across different disciplines.
- Third, more in-depth exploration of the barriers to participation highlighted by respondents in this report.

### (2) Perspectives on the changing nature of the student body

A good deal of contemporary debate in Ireland and internationally focuses on perceived teaching challenges arising from issues of access for ‘non-traditional’ learners of different kinds, and levels of preparedness of school leavers for higher education study.

Responses to the survey highlight the complexity of the issues involved and suggest that more detailed investigation of academics’ perceptions of their current teaching context is needed. For example, on the question of whether levels of student engagement were increasing or decreasing, respondents were equally balanced with just over one third (37%) indicating they thought the level of engagement had improved while the same proportion took the contrary view (**Table 17**, Chapter 5). There was more agreement in relation to the issue of student attendance, with half the respondents believing that student attendance levels are declining. A majority of respondents also said they were teaching increasingly large class sizes (59%). But most striking was the strength of view on how well students were prepared for studying at a higher education level: almost three-quarters (71%) were of the view that students were not well prepared for this.

More encouragingly, a majority (58%) of respondents felt that the greater diversity of the student body had a positive impact on the classroom learning environment. However, this issue attracted the largest proportion of neutral responses (32%) of any of the 10 items in **Table 17**.

This finding points to important areas for further investigation including, for example, the possibility of ascertaining whether this neutrality reflects the fact that respondents did not perceive the student body they were teaching as more diverse or whether respondents experienced both advantages and disadvantages to a diverse classroom which more or less balanced each other out.

Overall, a range of interesting issues have been highlighted in the Voices study concerning how academics perceive changes in the student body with regard to factors such as composition, motivation and preparedness. Another important topic for further investigation would be to understand more about the ways in which these perceptions impact, or not, on actual teaching in higher education.

### **(3) Fostering a supportive climate for teaching in higher education**

Analysis of open-ended responses (Chapter 6) on respondents' views of what they thought would promote 'good teaching' in higher education generated four themes: the working conditions of academics; the institutional status of teaching; the level and forms of provision of academic development opportunities; the attitudes of academics towards teaching.

A number of issues are raised here which those concerned with enhancing teaching quality in higher education might find interesting to follow up. In particular, it would be of both practical and conceptual interest to understand how these four factors interrelate, with a view to fostering a climate where (beyond an individual's personal commitment to teaching) investing in further enhancement may be seen as a valued activity. Chapter 6 draws directly on respondents' own words to illustrate how individuals negotiate these factors in their decision to engage with/disengage from formal, structured academic development activities.

We believe important areas for future research would be to ascertain the relative weight of the four factors identified above in relation to actual teaching practice, as well as decision-making by academics in terms of in structured academic development programmes and/or non-formal self-directed approaches to enhancement of teaching.

### **(4) Working with the grain**

In Chapter 1 we drew on Trow's analysis of teaching not as an action, but as a human transaction. We suggest that a more contemporary perspective might point to higher education teaching as an interaction, reflecting a more dynamic engagement between teacher and learner, and the learning which teachers also derive from their students.

Respondents showed high levels of interest in a wide range of potential academic development topics (Table 9, Chapter 3), such as being interested in finding new ways of both assessing students (80%) and obtaining feedback from them (80%). Most of the respondents report being interested in learning more about innovative delivery methods (84%) and making use of new technology (77%).

And there is strong evidence of interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning and in gaining access to research on teaching and learning in higher education in general (74%) and, in particular, in respondents' own disciplines (84%) – themes which might reinforce priorities for the work programme of the recently-established National Forum.

The high degree of interest expressed by respondents in these topics – across disciplines, types of institutions and academic level – suggests to us the importance of national, regional and institutional policies working with the grain. In other words, approaches to academic development that build upon – rather than undermine – academic autonomy and the professional interest and commitment of academic staff in supporting student learning might be more likely to be the successful in achieving desired outcomes.

## **A final word**

In times of financial austerity it is vital that national policies and institutions do not neglect investment in the professional development of their people (in Altbach's terms, the 'software' of higher education (2009)) on which the success of higher education teaching ultimately depends.

We trust that *Voices of Academics in Irish Higher Education: Perspectives on Professional Development* makes a contribution towards strengthening the evidence base in Ireland for policy and practice. In particular, we hope that a number of the key matters raised in this report may be subject to in-depth, qualitative investigation which might generate more nuanced interpretations in the not-too-distant future.



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Appendices & Bios**



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# Appendices

## I

Covering letter sent to participants

## II

Questionnaire

## III

Methodological and statistical notes

### 1. Invitation to participate in the survey sent from the relevant contact point in each institution.

Dear Colleagues

Our institution is surveying the professional development interests and needs of its staff in relation to teaching and learning.

The survey is primarily aimed at academic staff, but all colleagues engaged in teaching are welcome to participate.

We encourage you to take the short time (c10 minutes) required to complete the linked on-line questionnaire.

### 2. Cover letter attached in email

Dear Colleagues

The Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance was established in 2007 by the eight higher education institutions in Dublin and the broader city-region. It comprises four universities and their linked colleges (TCD, UCD, DCU and NUIM) DIT and three institutes of technology (IADT, ITB and ITT Dublin).

With support from the Higher Education Authority Strategic Innovation Fund Cycle II (SIF II) the eight institutions have agreed an extensive collaborative programme of work around four major strands: Enhancement of Learning (EoL), Graduate Education, Internationalisation and Widening Access.

A virtual centre, the Dublin Centre for Academic Development (DCAD) links activities across the EoL strand. By working together, the aim is see tangible enhancement of existing support systems and services, expanding the capacity and range of professional development opportunities in teaching and learning for the 4,500 academic staff working across the DRHEA.

We want to hear *your views* on the services and activities which you would like to see prioritised by the DCAD.

A link to the survey can be found here:

<http://gs-survey.com/s.asp?s=13915>

We would be grateful if you could complete the attached questionnaire within two weeks of receiving this circulation. All responses will remain anonymous- neither individuals nor individual institutions will be identified. A summary of the findings will be available on the DCAD web site.

If you have any queries or comments on the survey, we would be delighted to hear from you at [herc@dcu.ie](mailto:herc@dcu.ie) (Higher Education Research Centre).

Thank you for your engagement

Professor Maria Slowey  
Director, Higher Education Research and Development,  
Office of the Vice-President for Learning Innovation  
Dublin City University

## Appendix II: Hard copy of online questionnaire

This is a hard copy version of on-line questionnaire distributed to academic staff across 4 universities and 4 institutes of technology in the Dublin City Region (December 2010/February 2011).

The study was approved through the DCU research Ethics Committee.

We welcome collaborative and comparative research but please do NOT use without prior agreement with Professor Maria Slowey, Dublin City University  
maria.slowey@dcu.ie

The link to the on-line questionnaire was accompanied by an explanatory letter. When people clicked on the link they were then invited to agree/or not agree to participate in the survey

### Introduction to questionnaire

(1) I agree to participate. I am aware that the results will be used for research purposes only, that my responses will be anonymous ☐

(2) I decline the invitation to participate at this time ☐

The following questions relate to understanding your role within your academic institution:

**Q2** Please indicate the type of higher education institution in which you are currently employed: (drop-down list of 8 institutions participating in the survey)

Other ☐

**Q3** Please state your sex: F ☐ M ☐

**Q4** Please indicate the level of your current position:

☐ Junior/Associate Lecturer

☐ Lecturer

☐ Senior lecturer

☐ Associate Professor

☐ Professor

☐ Researcher

☐ Other

**Q5** Please indicate (to the nearest year) how long you have been employed at your current institution

**Q6** Please indicate (to the nearest year) how long you have worked in higher education

**Q7** Please indicate which of the following best reflects your primary academic discipline:

☐ Education/Teacher Training

☐ Humanities/Arts

☐ Social and Behavioural sciences

☐ Business and Administration, Economics

☐ Law

☐ Life Sciences

☐ Physical Sciences

☐ Computer Sciences

☐ Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction, Architecture

☐ Agriculture

☐ Medical Sciences, Health Sciences

**Q8** Please indicate your main area of teaching

Undergraduate; Taught post-graduate; Research supervision; Combination of undergraduate and postgraduate; Continuing education

**Q9** How would you describe your current work interests from the following list?

Primarily in teaching; Primarily in research; Teaching and research with a focus on teaching; Research and teaching with a focus on research

The following statements are aimed at eliciting your views on aspects of teaching in higher education.

**Q10** To what extent to you agree or disagree with the following statements? (1 indicates strong agreement with the statement, 7 indicates strong disagreement with the statement):

- 1 – Strongly Agree
- 2 – Agree
- 3 – Somewhat Agree
- 4 – Neutral
- 5 – Somewhat Disagree
- 6 – Disagree
- 7 – Strongly Disagree

The level of classroom engagement by students has improved in recent years ☐

Student attendance levels are declining ☐

Increased diversity of the student population has had a positive impact on the classroom learning environment ☐

Students are increasingly well prepared for third level learning ☐

I am teaching increasingly larger group sizes ☐

I struggle to keep up with the use of technology demanded by students ☐

Teaching is more demanding than any other aspect of my academic activities ☐

My research informs my teaching ☐

Teaching is a source of job satisfaction for me ☐

Student evaluation of my teaching provides me with useful feedback ☐

The following questions relate to your participation in recent professional development opportunities within your institution, or elsewhere.

**Q11** Over the last three years have you participated in structured professional development relating to your teaching?

- ☐ Yes, I participate in these regularly
- ☐ Yes, I participate in these occasionally
- ☐ Yes, but only in sessions relevant specifically to my academic discipline
- ☐ No

**Q12** Could you please provide information on a structured professional development course or exercise which you found particularly useful for your teaching practice? (Open Ended)

The following are a list of activities which could be provided through the Dublin Centre for Academic Development (DCAD). Please rate your level of interest in the following:

**Q13** (Selecting 1 indicates great interest, selecting 5 indicates no interest)

- 1 – Great interest
- 2 – Moderate interest
- 3 – Neutral
- 4 – Little interest
- 5 – No interest

#### Planning and design

- ☐ Curriculum design
- ☐ Writing learning outcomes
- ☐ Aligning assessment and learning outcomes
- ☐ Integrating research into the undergraduate curriculum

#### Q14 Delivery and practice

- ☐ Innovative delivery methods
- ☐ Inquiry and problem based learning
- ☐ Alternative assessment methods
- ☐ Small group teaching methods
- ☐ Large group teaching methods
- ☐ Use of new technology
- ☐ Managing teaching in a laboratory

#### Q15 Feedback on teaching

- ☐ Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students
- ☐ Expert assistance on interpreting student feedback

**Q16 Peer to peer opportunities**

- ☐ Peer feedback on my teaching
- ☐ Microteaching to peer group
- ☐ Peer exchange on good practice
- ☐ Connecting with others within my discipline

**Q17 Scholarship and research**

- ☐ Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general
- ☐ Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline
- ☐ Postgraduate qualification in teaching and learning
- ☐ Fellowship opportunities

**Q18 Personal professional development and leadership**

- ☐ Preparation of teaching portfolio
- ☐ Administrative requirements around teaching
- ☐ Legal issues around teaching (health and safety, equality etc)
- ☐ Training on accessibility for learners with various disabilities

Finally, the following questions relate to your experience of support within your institution for professional development opportunities

**Q19** Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements by ticking the box which is closest to your view (1 indicates strongly agree, and 7 indicates strongly disagree)

1 – Strongly Agree

2 – Agree

3 – Somewhat Agree

4 – Neutral

5 – Somewhat Disagree

6 – Disagree

7 – Strongly Disagree

- ☐ My institution provides formal recognition for engagement in professional development of my teaching
- ☐ My institution provides time and resources for engagement in professional development of my teaching
- ☐ My workload often hinders my ability to participate in professional development opportunities
- ☐ Professional development opportunities are not generally relevant to my own discipline
- ☐ I can easily access information on professional development opportunities within my institution
- ☐ I can easily access information on professional development in other institutions in the Dublin region

Thank you for taking part in this DCAD survey. The formal part of the survey questionnaire is now over. A summary of results will be available on the DCAD website. However, if you have time, we would be pleased to hear your thoughts and views on the following question:

**Q20** Do you have any suggestions on more effective ways to value and promote good teaching in higher education? (Open Ended)

## Appendix III: Methodological and statistical note

### 1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire items were developed from an analysis of relevant literature and the input of an Advisory Group. It was distributed on-line and consisted of 20 items, which in total included 55 questions distributed across five parts: 1) role within the academic institution, 2) issues around changing nature of teaching, 3) the extent of participation in recent professional development activities, 4) perceptions of professional development activities which could be provided; and, 5) views and experiences in relation to support within the higher education institutions for professional development. Several open ended questions were also included.

### 2. Estimating response rates

Each institution was responsible for distributing the survey to colleagues. A standard covering letter was provided (Appendix I) which institutions were free to modify. Most institutions invited academic staff to participate by email, but their distribution lists varied (e.g., some issued an 'all-staff' invitation which might then reach contract and/or part-time staff, while others used more targeted mailing lists. This means firm baseline figures are not available on which to calculate response rates.

Eight hundred and six people engaged with the survey to the extent of answering several questions. Of these 680 completed all or most questions and the main analysis is based on this data. Based on HEA statistics for full-time academic staff employed in surveyed institutions at the time the response rate can only be approximately estimated at being between 25% to 33%.

### 3. Relative size of DRHEA institutions based on full-time student numbers

**Full-time enrolments in universities and institutes of technology in the academic year 2011/2012 (across 8 member institutions of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance)**

Universities	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total by Sector	%
DCU	7,060	1,292	49,782	72%
	Total 8,352			
NUIM	5,999	1,413		
	Total 7,412			
TCD	11,191	3,291		
	Total 14,482			
UCD	14,996	4,540		
	Total 19,536			
<i>Total Universities</i>				
<b>Institutes of Technology</b>			19,536	28%
DIT	11,196	1,133		
	Total 12,329			
IADT	2,045	59		
	Total 2,104			
IT Blanchardstown	2,154	30		
	Total 2,184			
IT Tallaght, Dublin	2,902	17		
	Total 2,919			
<i>Total Institutes of Technology</i>				

Source: HEA 2011/2012 Enrolments Statistics (enrolments by institution) [accessible online at <http://www.heai.ie/>]

## 4. Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the baseline data on respondents' current position in the higher education institution, the length of employment in higher education institution, number of years spend working in higher education in general, primary academic discipline and main area of teaching. The findings were reported according to their stated frequencies - as overall percentage attitude towards particular area. In questions which used the Likert scale response format, the percentages of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with each statement were calculated.

Cross-tabulations were used to display information among the variables which showed observed cell frequencies. In some analyses a Kruskal-Wallis procedure was used to find if there was a difference across the bands in how participants responded to the statement. The Kruskal-Wallis procedure tests the null hypothesis that there is no difference across three or more groups and is specifically suited for non-parametric data.

In other analyses, to establish whether the responses of two bands differ a Mann-Whitney U test was used. This test is used for the data which are not normally distributed as instead of comparing means of two independent groups, the medians are compared.

Qualitative thematic analysis (QTA) is used in Chapter 6 for the analysis of open-ended survey responses. QTA analysis differs from quantitative content analysis as it does not seek to enumerate the data through word frequency counts, co-occurrence of terms or comparative keyword analysis (Silverman, 2011). Rather QTA is a "search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon" (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p.82). Within QTA, codes can be generated by theory, prior data/ prior research, or the raw data (Boyatzis, 1998). The analysis of open ended questions in the Voices survey adopted a hybrid approach of theory-driven and data-driven coding. A limitation of this analysis is that member-checks could not be performed to validate the codes and their respective definitions because the survey was carried out anonymously.

Percentages given in Tables are rounded to the nearest whole number.



## **Authors**

**Maria Slowey  
Ekaterina Kozina  
with Eloise Tan**



## Maria Slowey

Maria Slowey is Professor and Director of HERC (Higher Education Research Centre) Dublin City University. Formerly she was Registrar and Vice-President for Learning Innovation in DCU, Professor of Adult and Continuing Education and Vice-Dean Research, Glasgow University, and Director of the Centre for Continuing Education, Northumbria University.



## Ekaterina Kozina

Dr Ekaterina Kozina, Vice-President of the All Ireland Society for Higher Education, was previously a Postdoctoral Researcher in HERC and a Senior Administrative Research Officer in the Graduate Studies Office, Dublin City University. She obtained her PhD from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin where she contributed to several research projects. She is an Associated Researcher at Research Laboratory of the International Institute of Public Administration and Management, RANEP, Moscow, RF.



## **Eloise Tan**

Dr Eloise Tan is Educational Development Officer in the Learning Innovation Unit, Dublin City University. She obtained her PhD from the School of Education, McGill University. Since the time of writing she has joined the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning as Educational Developer. She co-edited “The Dynamic Curriculum: Shared experiences of ongoing curriculum change” with Dr. Jean Hughes.









