AISHE

All Ireland Society
for Higher Education

"The dissemination of good practice through national networks for teaching and learning, and the recognition of excellence in teaching should underpin strategy for the ongoing development of higher education."

Hunt (2011: p.59).

Response to the Consultation Document for the establishment in 2012 of the National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.

1. The HEA Consultation Document provides a comprehensive overview of the investment in the enhancement of teaching and learning over the past decade or so. It evidences the value for money provided by the handful of national networks (including AISHE, EDIN, FACiLiTATE and ILTA) that the HEA has supported through the investment of approximately €1 million over the past ten years, as well as the investment of over €30 million in institutional alliances, the NDLR and regional initiatives over a similar period.

   The desire by the HEA to build on the strength of existing networks is to be applauded, as is the intention to promote the status of teaching in academic life and improve the quality of the learning experience in higher education.

2. There is some agreement with the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG) finding that there is a "considerable level of duplication and similarity in objectives of SIF projects". However, it could be argued that the promotion of regionally focused initiatives under SIF 1 & 2 did in itself to some degree lead to duplication of effort. The promotion of mathematics initiatives by the Shannon Consortium (2008), AISHE (2009) and NAIRTIL (2011) is but one of many examples of this. However, this also identifies the broad-based need for the support of certain initiatives, in this instance mathematics education, in all levels of education. AISHE welcomes the fact that the National Academy has identified as an immediate priority the need to improve proficiency in mathematics and science, as indeed so too does the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030.

   AISHE also concurs with the finding of the C&AG's Special Report (2010) that "the full impact of collaboration in terms of improved efficiencies and shared resources has yet to materialize." Whether or not the establishment of a National Academy through the merger of all existing national networks, regional alliances and projects is the best way of achieving improved efficiencies and the sharing of resources is questionable. It is necessary to fully consider the possible fallout of this 'big bang' approach, especially given the limited timeframe involved, one year, and, almost more importantly, the uncertainty regarding the funding for such a grand initiative beyond 2012. Given the financial climate, it is extremely ambitious to make the assumption that existing HE institutions might consider making a financial contribution to fund the National Academy as a new independent entity. Realistically, one would need to see the full business plan for this venture before commenting in greater detail.

3. Indeed, there are some critical arguments against the consolidation of the entire sector, including national networks, regional networks and institutional alliances. Some of the biggest worries surrounding such a 'big bang' approach include the possible extermination of organic innovative initiatives, such as AISHE, in favour of the top-down approach of institution-led agendas and the disengagement of dedicated teaching staff through the perceived 'tick-the-box' approach to educational development initiatives. While few would argue with the principles of improving efficiencies and encouraging the sharing of educational resources, it is also necessary to have a strategic approach to funding initiatives, so as to harness the potential for synergies, avoid repetition of effort and allow space to nurture creativity and difference.

4. National Academy Immediate Priorities include:

(i) the expansion and enhancement of flexible learning;
(ii) the improved proficiency in mathematics and science;
(iii) postgraduate capacity development; and
(iv) the enhancement of the first-year student experience.

It is unclear how these priorities are to be financed. Are institutions expected to identify percentages of their existing teaching and learning budgets to each one and reduce funding to other institutional priorities, such as increasing access or promoting creativity?

4.1 National Academy Functions:
The eleven proposed functions of the National Academy seem very achievable and most are indeed already being carried out by some of the existing networks and initiatives to a greater or lesser extent, for example, the advancement of the implementation of the Student Survey, facilitating the sharing of effective practice, etc. Therefore it is reasonable to assume these functions can be implemented almost immediately with very modest resources.

However, it is much more difficult to envisage how the HEA proposes to establish a "*creative inclusive space within which teaching and learning will be advanced in a spirit of collegiality*". Moreover, it is difficult to see how the National Academy proposes to "*foster a culture of innovation and experimentation in teaching and learning informed by systemic enquiry and open dialogue*", while at the same time ceasing to fund all the existing successful teaching and learning initiatives. Furthermore, imposing what appears to be another bureaucratic structure that can only further distance the 'ordinary' grassroots academic community from the innovation and decision-making process would appear to be counterproductive.

4.2 Governance:
The HEA acknowledges that the National Academy may need its own identity in order to operate effectively and efficiently. However, to date much of the money spent on HE initiatives was targeted at additional resources, with HE staff giving freely of their time to work on implementing new initiatives. It appears that with the proposed new National Academy, full-time staff will be employed to coordinate inter-institutional activities and assess the effectiveness of national networks. This raises a number of questions including:

(i) Where is the additional funding going to come from to support these increased costs?
(ii) How is the role of the HEA going to be modified to take account of this new body and decision-making processes going forward?
(iii) How much of a time commitment will be required of the voluntary board to ensure effective oversight of the National Academy?

4.3 Funding:

The review of the NDLR is to be welcomed. The inability of the HEA to continue funding teaching and learning networks is disappointing, but given the current economic climate, somewhat understandable. It is hoped that when the economic situation improves this matter will be revisited.

However, it is somewhat alarming that the HEA does not have a clear idea how this massive consolidation initiative of over a dozen activity streams, which have been in existence for over a decade, will be funded beyond next year. Perhaps it would be wiser to delay this proposed restructuring of the sector until 2013 when the funding streams available have been identified and are clearly in place and operational. The suggestion that seriously financially constrained institutions would contribute funds to run the National Academy is highly unlikely, given their current funding situation. In a worst-case scenario this could result in all inter-institutional initiatives and national networks that are not self-financing being aborted.

The proposed organizational and administrative structures to facilitate the workings of the proposed National Academy do not appear to be fully developed as yet. How exactly does the HEA propose to engage institutions in this vast programme for change when abandoning generally accepted representational models of operation and replacing them with an annual assembly and a three- year rotating board of governance?

The idea of engaging suitably experienced retired academics is to be commended, but it would also be valuable to engage younger members of the academic community and society more generally, including students, to serve as online moderators and events conveners, so as to ensure a balanced approach and a variety of opinions and constituent input.

5. Questions and Feedback:

Comments and feedback on the questions posed by the HEA in the Consultation Document.

1) *Do you agree that the time is opportune for the creation of a National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning?*

Unfortunately, given the lack of clarity in relation to the funding of the proposed National Academy beyond 2012, this may not be an appropriate time to proceed with such an ambitious project. There is some concern that this proposal may be a knee-jerk reaction to a crisis in funding for teaching and learning initiatives and may not be the most holistic approach nor be in the best interests of the sector in the medium to long term.

Furthermore, there are some very ambitious assumptions made in relation to how the HEA proposes to get institutional and individual buy-in to this proposed merger of existing networks and alliances. It would be worth hosting a forum to facilitate an in-depth discussion on this process.

While the consolidation of the sector could provide additional opportunities for some disparate groups and provide continuation of funding in 2012, a more concrete rationale and review of the various constituents would need to take place before any mergers by consensus could be facilitated.

2) *How can the National Academy best complement each institution's own work to enhance the quality of teaching and learning?*

Under the auspices of the National Academy, expertise and support for teaching and learning projects could be provided by consultants (as with the Higher Education Academy in the UK). Also, the National Academy could offer small grants to institutions for running events, and for teaching and learning research and development projects (to individual academics and developers), as well as offering support for teaching and learning in the disciplines.

The proposed National Student Survey could bring to light key strengths or areas of weakness, but it could also be used as a stick within institutions and it could become an end in itself to raise ranking, etc., rather than to help improve the student experience.

It is important to recognize non-institutional input also. Top-down dictates do little to empower teaching staff in their day-to-day activities. Bottom-up support from member-based networks, such as AISHE, is an essential element in any progressive and sustainable educational system.

3) *How can the National Academy support the continuing professional development of academics in Irish higher education?*

Continuing professional development (CPD) can be supported through accreditation of PG Certificates and Diplomas in teaching and learning for new lecturers, which would provide an incentive for institutions to run such courses.

Also, a Fellowship scheme could be developed to support CPD, accredited on the basis of a professional standards framework (PSF), similar to the PSF in the UK. Such a framework needs to be open for consultation and accepted by the higher education community as a whole in advance of being adopted.

4) *How can the National Academy assist in closing the loop between the identification of good practice and the mainstreaming of this practice across the broader higher education community?*

The National Academy could develop a structured Fellowship Scheme, and fund national dissemination events, conferences, teaching research symposia and other such events to facilitate the dissemination and mainstreaming of good practice.

The National Teaching Fellows Awards would generate a community of award recipients who could be proactive in disseminating research into best practice within and across

institutions, as well as raising the profile and increasing the value of teaching within institutions.

5) *How can the National Academy further the existing linkages and partnerships with international practitioners in this field, and facilitate new partnerships with equivalent entities in neighbouring and other jurisdictions, to contribute to and benefit from the development of a "global interdisciplinary perspective on teaching and learning"?*

The Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association (http://hetl.org) is an interesting initiative that could provide valuable information and insights. Other relevant organisations include the International Consortium for Educational Development (http://icedonline.net), the OCED IMHE (www.oecd.org/edu/imhe), the UK Higher Education Academy (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk), and the Staff and Educational Development Association (http://www.seda.ac.uk).

The National Academy could collaborate productively with international organisations, such as those mentioned above, through joint publications, events, projects and conferences, as AISHE has successfully done in the past.

6) *Should the National Academy continue all activities of the existing teaching and learning networks and projects, funding permitted, or should it review all existing activities and start afresh following the review?*

Given the time and financial constraints it would make more sense to continue with current projects, activities and networks. Reports on activities are submitted to the HEA annually, and these could be reviewed when submitted and recommendation for improvement made on a case by case basis.

A professional standards framework (PSF) for CPD would need to be developed for consultation modeled on some of the existing successful schemes, such as the '*UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education*.' A National Teaching Fellows Awards similar to the UK model could also be established.

7) *Should the National Academy be a virtual platform with a physical base in and existing HEI, or does it need a physical presence of its own that is independent of any individual institution?*

The National Academy needs a physical presence of its own, not just to be a part of an existing HEI, as there needs to be genuine and perceived neutrality.

About AISHE

AISHE (www.aishe.org) is a professional society whose primary aim is to provide a platform for critical dialogue and sustainable engagement in relation to core concepts underpinning the very fabric of the Higher Education Community throughout the island of Ireland.

AISHE is a unique organisation in a number of ways. Firstly, AISHE is the only network that invites membership from the broad base of actors underpinning the delivery of higher education services and serves members interests across disciplines and communities of practice. Whether you are a lecturer in mathematics, a demonstrator in science, a subject librarian, educational technologist or academic developer, North or South of the Border, AISHE is open to serving your needs. In other words, AISHE represents the grassroots academic community who deal with students on a daily basis and AISHE actively lobbies for a two-way communication approach to enhancing the student learning experience, rather than a top-down approach to technically improve teaching skills.

The North South Alliance has also enabled AISHE to create strategic partnerships with sister organisations such the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) in the UK, which is also a professional association for staff and educational developers, promoting innovation and good practice in higher education. AISHE and SEDA hosted a Joint Conference entitled '*Inspiring Learning: Diversity and Excellence*' in Belfast in 2005 and have remained in close contact ever since.

On the broader international platform, AISHE is affiliated with the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED – http://icedonline.net) and has hosted a joint seminar '*Nested Creativity*' exploring Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework in 2009, as well as hosting the ICED International Council Meeting in TCD the same year. AISHE aspires to bid to host the extremely successful ICED Bi-annual International Conference in Ireland in 2016 when the event will again be held in Europe.

The alliance with ICED is indeed important, given its partnership with the OECD Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education. This partnership will facilitate strategic international initiatives that address global educational issues going forward. AISHE will participate in the IMHE General Conference '*Attaining and Sustaining Mass Higher Education*' in the OECD Headquarters in Paris in September 2012.

AISHE Membership Benefits include:
- access to educational experts through our Fellowship Programme
- access to experienced educational developers
- access to our Professional Member Panel
- access to young researchers to our Postgraduate Member Track
- access to AISHE Open Source Online Resources
- access to the latest research topics through 'AISHE-Talk' discussion forum
- access to subject specific regional collaborative seminars
- access to creative incubation sponsorship of special interest groups
- access to teaching support materials and peer support and advice

- access to AISHE peer reviewed publications, conference proceedings, book reviews and open letters
- access to and opportunity to publish current research into teaching and learning in our flagship peer referred online journal **'The All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' (AISHE-J)** (http://www.aishe.org/publications.html)
- access to and opportunity to publish in the ICED Journal, the International Journal of Academic Development (http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/routledge/1360144X.html.)
- opportunity to present action research into teaching and learning and share practitioner experience at the AISHE International Conference and other joint regional events.

Moreover, members of AISHE have the opportunity to sit on the Executive Committee, become Executive Officers and thereby have the opportunity to influence decision making in relation to the future directions of higher education nationally, internationally and in the developing world through our links with ICED and the OECD IMHE.

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