



DIGITAL LEARNING IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION: INTEGRATING STRATEGIC AND LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES INTO A ROADMAP FOR DIGITAL CAPACITY

Jim Devine, DEVINE Policy | Projects | Innovation, Terry Maguire, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Ireland

Introduction

Digital learning finds its way, as if by stealth, into the mainstream of higher education. As educators, however, we are aware of a persistence of traditional teaching and assessment practices. Taking innovative and potentially transformative pedagogical practices to scale is a well known but poorly addressed challenge. Innovation in digital learning spins out further innovation as devices, learning platforms, digital tools and resources proliferate and are selectively adopted or promoted by a cadre of enthusiastic, curious and committed academic practitioners, well versed in technology enhanced learning. Bottom up approaches to digital learning, however, often give rise to an unsustainable multiplicity of practices across disciplines and faculties, usually layered on top of existing practices rather than replacing them. On the other hand, top down institutional initiatives, intended for mainstream adoption, are often seen by pedagogical innovators as driving conservative or constraining decisions about technologies, platforms and learning spaces. Addressing this bottom-up, top-down dilemma is today's key challenge for innovation and modernisation of higher education. This paper looks at one facet of this challenge, and how the perceptions of those in academic leadership roles are informing discourse and strategy development for digital learning in Irish higher education.

Digital Capacity and Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Irish Higher Education

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education (Forum) was established in 2012 with a remit to “enhance the quality of the learning experience for all students... be they full-time, part-time or flexible learners”¹. The Forum fulfils both an advisory role to the Education Minister and the Higher Education Authority (HEA, the funding body for higher education) and an implementation role in relation to a range of activities for which it has devolved responsibility. In its work, digital learning and staff professional development in digital pedagogy are contextually centred in a wider

¹ See <http://teachingandlearning.ie> and the work plan for the T&L Forum <http://teachingandlearning.ie/priority-themes/work-plan-201314>

pedagogical discourse, and developing ‘Digital Capacity’, defined to be “the skills, competences and attitudes that enable people to work, live and learn in a complex world that is increasingly digital” (National Forum, 2014, p.5) is one of five integrated thematic action areas, all of which have an overriding goal of delivering outcomes of scale and sustainability. A 360° perspective has been adopted in further work leading to the development of a ‘Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-2017’ (National Forum, forthcoming), a blueprint for the integration of digital learning and digital pedagogy consistently and at scale across the higher education sector as a whole, informed equally by students, academics as teachers, learning support staff and academics in senior/strategic roles.

Strategic and Leadership Context

If academics as teachers provide a bottom-up perspective from the frontline of engagement with students, the counterbalance can be found among their peers who have moved from the frontline into cross-institutional roles aligned with faculty leadership, academic management, academic quality assurance, learning innovation and strategic planning. Academics in these roles can provide unique insights into the challenges of scale and sustainability of digital learning innovation. On the one hand, with their influence over strategic direction, budgets and the seed funding of innovative pilots, they can create an enabling environment. On the other hand, the imperative to manage scarce resources and to ensure that institutional reputation and quality remain demonstrably on a sound footing makes it difficult to choose between competing demands for up-scaling, mainstreaming or simply sustaining successful pilots. Staff in these roles embody the bottom-up, top-down dilemma and the development of the Digital Capacity Roadmap provided an opportunity to discuss this with them on a one-to-one basis, using a semi-structured interview approach and the Chatham House rule, under which frank comments could be elicited and summarised without attribution. Interviews with a total of 24 academics in senior/strategic roles were conducted in May 2014.

Conducting the interviews at that time allowed for a comparison to be made with another source of insights into digital capacity building. In early 2014, in the context of the national strategy for higher education, HEA introduced performance-based funding for higher education institutions (HEIs). Underpinning this approach is a ‘Mission Based Performance Compact’ (Compact), instituted between HEA and individual HEIs, covering the full range of HEI activities, including the environment for teaching and learning². In all, 26 Compacts have been published, covering publically funded HEIs in Ireland (including 7 Universities, 14 Institutes of Technology and 4 Teacher Education Colleges discussed in this paper). Compacts can be regarded as statements of strategic positioning and intent, in response to the national strategy for higher education.

² See <http://hea.ie/en/policy/national-strategy/higher-education-system-performance-2014-16>

Framework for Analysis

The approach taken by Trowler, Ashwin and Saunders (2014) provided a conceptual framework to underpin the analysis of strategic positions and measurable targets documented in HEI Compacts and to relate these to the interviews with academics fulfilling senior/strategic roles. In their model, enhancement extends from incrementalism (reform agenda) to reinvention (transformational agenda), see Figure 1.

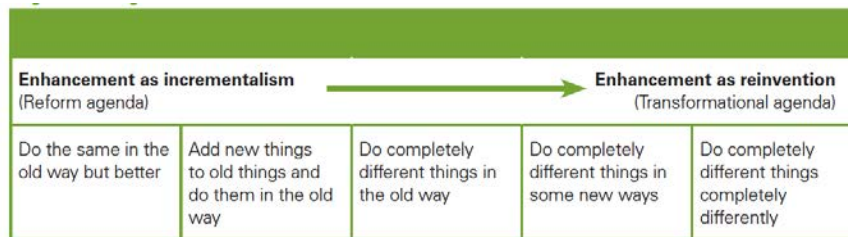


Figure 1. Enhancement (Trowler et al., 2014)

The framework offered a way to understand practices as they are experienced and understood by the senior academics interviewed. Questions underpinning the interviews with academics in senior/strategic roles were designed to elicit their perceptions of particular but open-ended issues. These issues are summarised in Table 1.






Table 1: Questions for Academics in Senior/Strategic Roles

Issues explored with Academics in Senior/Strategic Roles
<u>Concerns and aspirations</u> for the higher education sector when it comes to enhancing teaching and learning in an increasingly digital age.
<u>Opportunities</u> for developing a <u>sectoral approach</u> to building digital capacity in Irish higher education.
Examples of practice either nationally or internationally?
<u>Specific actions</u> in support of digital capacity building that are tangible/possible and that are realistically achievable within the current challenging operating environment at either INSTITUTIONAL or SECTOR levels.
<u>Challenges</u> : Specific digital capacity building actions that may be desirable/urgent but difficult to undertake at this time?

These questions relate closely to the categorisation of practices devised to analyse the HEI Compacts, but the outcome of this analysis was not known in advance by the participants in the interview process, thus maintaining the independence of both processes and the ability to draw comparisons from their respective findings.

Categories were organised around a spectrum of digital learning innovation activities of *potential scale* in Irish HEIs, see Table 2. Five categories were identified, reflecting what might be regarded as modest reform of traditional practices to activities that would represent new and more transformative territory for HEIs. Other categories were also identified, including more general supports for learning and student wellbeing, capacity issues, e.g., the extent of staff professional development activities, supports for Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) and the digital infrastructure itself. Finally, we identified emerging practice areas including Open Education Resources (OER) and Learning Analytics.

Table 2: Institutional Practices

	Category	Description
Reform 	Additionality	Additionality for campus-based students through Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)/digital platforms/digital resources
	'Blended'	Extending/modifying the campus-based paradigm: intentions to redesign programmes to incorporate hybrid or blended learning elements
	New Audiences	Reaching new audiences: extending access to existing or new accredited programmes through part-time/online/hybrid delivery
	Inter-institutional	Inter-institutional collaboration to design and deliver programmes
Transform	International	Online International Delivery of Programmes
Support	Non-academic supports	General supports for student learning and welfare (<i>explicitly digitally-supported</i>)
Capacity  	Staff to support TEL	Educational technologists and designers embedded within departments or operating through a centralised support unit
	Academic Staff CPD	All references to professionalisation of the teaching role of academics, including aspects pertaining to digital pedagogy
	TEL Infrastructure	Indications of proposed investment/development of facilities
Emerging  	Open Education Resources	Plans to develop and/or incorporate Open Education Resources (OER); policies for OER
	Learning Analytics	Indications of intentions to deploy learning analytics

While many innovative digital learning projects and initiatives are evident in Irish HEIs, it has not been easy to assess their overall impact or to place them in the wider context of institutional strategic and leadership positions. By juxtaposing the interview process and the analysis of Compacts, it has been possible to gain an initial insight into how a range of innovative practices are viewed top-down.

Insights from Interviews with Academic in Senior/Strategic Roles and HEI Compacts

Interviews with Academics in Senior/Strategic Roles

The interviews provided a rich and complementary picture of the day-to-day reality of fostering learning innovation in Irish HEIs. Dominant themes to emerge included strong support for academic staff CPD and for the professionalization of the teaching role and for collaborative HE sector level actions to deliver the required CPD. Much emphasis was placed on what was described as ‘appropriate’ integration of digital technologies, but there was agreement that current approaches are for the most part conservative (*‘doing the same in the old way but better’*). While learning innovation (digital) is taking place and bottom-up innovations are facilitated, there is little appetite as yet for strategic (top down) initiatives. There is broad agreement, however, that matters related to digital or online learning and digital capacity generally should be brought systematically into the mainstream of institutional quality assurance processes.

Digital Learning in Irish Higher Education: Integrating Strategic and Leadership Perspectives into a Roadmap for Digital Capacity

Jim Devine, Terry Maguire

Concerns were also voiced, particularly in the context of the severe budgetary, staffing and demographic pressures currently being experienced by all Irish HEIs. These include sustainability: the ability to fund on an ongoing basis the necessary expansion of ICT networks/services/platforms; managing the expectations of the ‘digital student’ (Beetham & White, 2014) and scalability: current staffing levels for essential support staff (e.g., educational technologists) are too low to allow for any step change in the level of digital learning integration or for the scaling up of already established pilots. Some concern was also expressed about students’ digital competence. Experience indicates that this cannot be assumed. It is insufficient just to be ‘digital’. Also noteworthy is a widespread perception of poor/limited use of VLEs (often used merely as repositories for very basic content). At the very least, it was acknowledged that the evidence base is poor when it comes to understanding the extent and depth of VLE usage. Questions of organisational culture and change were also referenced as challenging. For example, ensuring consistency of the student experience can be a problem in a *laissez-faire* context where some staff intensively develop digital approaches and others do not. Furthermore, the culture change at faculty level that is required to integrate the skills of educational technologists to support course design and development is seen as a significant obstacle.

Ultimately, the view from staff in senior/strategic roles is optimistic, but with wide agreement that clarity is urgently needed about the overarching vision and goals for digital learning in higher education nationally. Current initiatives, while valuable, are regarded as fragmented, piecemeal and for that reason often unsustainable. The current stage of development in Ireland, albeit with its particular national nuances, largely reflects a European pattern reported by Gaebel et al. (2014) in a survey of 237 HEIs, noting for example that 77% believe that digital learning “*changes the approach to learning and teaching, but also that it takes time to introduce*” (p.44).

Institutional Compacts

Based on the categorisation in Table 2, HEI Compacts were analysed, and references to aspirations or intended actions were noted as ‘mentions’. Where specific, measurable targets were identified, these were separately noted. The resulting analysis was tabulated and presents a snapshot of the relative importance of individual categories of digital learning innovation (as seen from an institutional strategic perspective). The gap between ‘mentions’ and ability to set corresponding ‘targets’ also becomes apparent. Figure 2 compares ‘mentions’ and ‘explicit targets’ for the 25 HEI Compacts analysed.

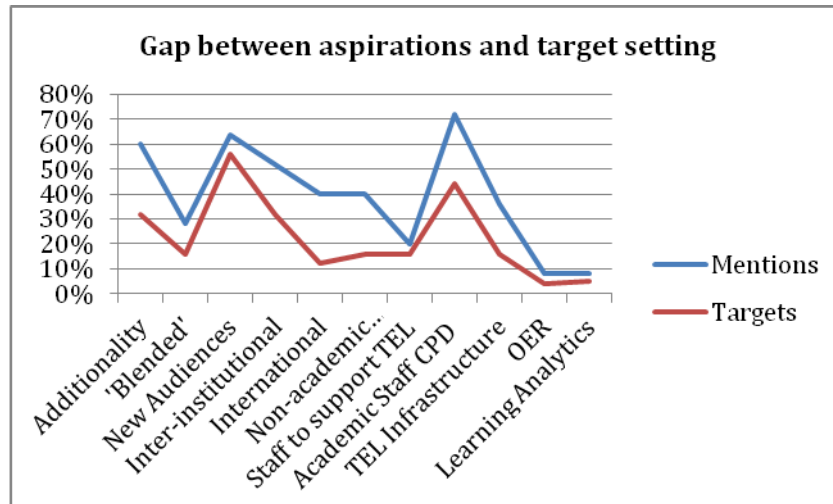


Figure 2. Gap between aspirations and target setting

What is evident is the gap that exists between intentions and the ability of HEIs to attach explicit targets to them for the period covered by the Compacts up to 2016. This may reflect uncertainties about resources in a higher education sector under severe financial and demographic pressure, or a lack of clarity about the specific actions that might be required to turn aspirations to reality. For example, where aspirations are high and targets align with aspirations, we can infer that HEIs agree on two things: the importance of the particular aspiration **and** that there is a clear understanding of the nature and feasibility of that aspiration. This is evident, for example, in the case of **New Audiences**. Mentions or aspirations are at a level of 60%, and more than 50% of HEIs attach explicit targets to these aspirations. For the most part, targets for new audiences relate to postgraduate and professional education. By far the greatest level of agreement, at 70% of HEIs, is on the importance of **Academic Staff CPD**; however only 40% of institutions have been explicit about their targets in relation to this. Conversely, where aspirations are low and targets are similarly aligned, we can assume that this category is not regarded *at this time* as a strategic priority, for example as can be seen in the case of **OER** and **Learning Analytics**. There is no doubt that academics in a number of Irish HEIs are active in international research and development in these fields, but the strategic question of mainstream integration along with the ethical and pedagogical ramifications do not yet appear to have been considered by HEIs. The category **International** is concerned with online delivery of programmes to an international audience. While moderate interest is evident, target setting is confined to just 3 HEIs. At face value, this seems surprising, but may reflect the relatively high barrier (competences, organisational structure and costs) associated with successful entry to the international online education market.

What is surprising is that **Staff to support TEL** appears to be a low strategic priority, given that a majority of HEIs are already providing some level of such support, up to and including 'Learning Innovation Centres' in the larger institutions. This raises a question as to the role of such supports, whether they are primarily geared towards enabling small bottom-up initiatives, or whether more strategic objectives (including actions of scale) are to be pursued.

Digital Learning in Irish Higher Education: Integrating Strategic and Leadership Perspectives into a Roadmap for Digital Capacity

Jim Devine, Terry Maguire

Their relative absence from the Compacts suggests the former. Categories covered by **Additionality** and **'Blended'** represent, respectively, moves towards development of platforms/VLEs to support campus-based students or a hybrid experience with some elements fully online ('doing the same in the old way but better' and 'adding new things to old things and doing them the old way' in Trowler's parlance). These receive relatively few mentions and target setting appears to be the exception rather than the norm. It is possible that HEIs regard such developments as evolving incrementally from the bottom-up and therefore not relevant to strategic dialogue. A more nuanced perspective is evident when findings for the higher education sector as a whole are disaggregated to show the profiles of component parts, Universities, Institutes of Technology and Teacher Education Colleges, see Figure 3.

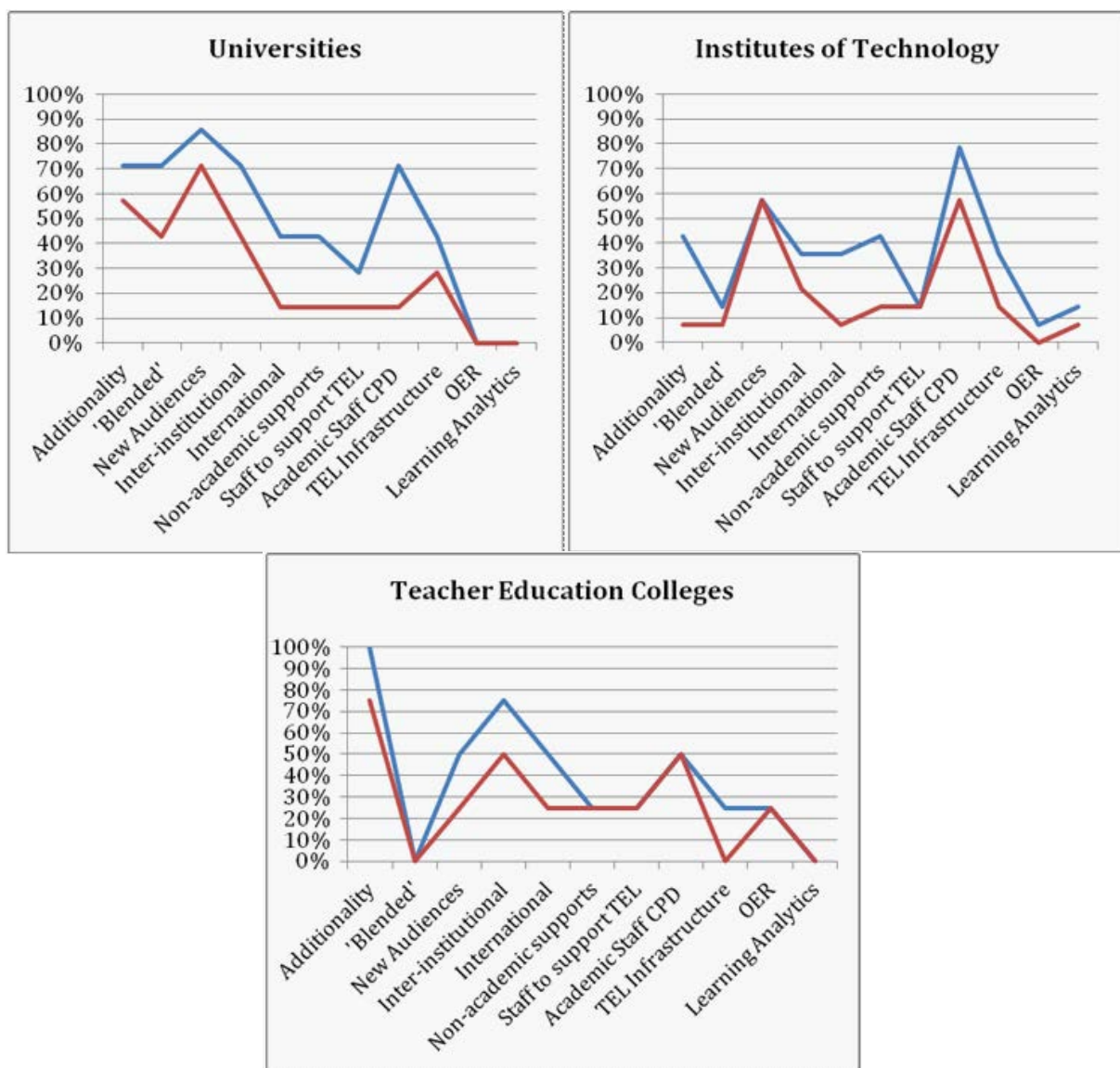


Figure 3. Profiles for different HEI types

We can see, for example, that universities show a high level of interest in reaching **New Audiences**, matched by a level of confidence in target setting. Institutes of Technology, on the other hand, appear to display particular strengths in **Academic Staff CPD** and in target

setting to achieve goals in this area. Teacher Education Colleges show a particularly strong interest in **Additionality** in terms of how they deliver their on-campus programmes, but this does not appear to extend to the next stage, i.e., **‘Blended’** approaches with inherently greater flexibility. Given the significant policy interest in modernising schools and the teaching profession, this initial finding points to a need for further investigation, if we are to expect future teachers to embrace flexibility in their own practice. Teacher Education Colleges also display a strong interest in Inter-Institutional collaboration.

Feed Forward to Developing the ‘Roadmap’

Insights from academics in senior/strategic roles together with those harvested from institutional strategic mission-based Compacts combined to provide one pillar of the stakeholder consultation required to underpin the multi-stakeholder ‘roadmap’ for building digital capacity. This roadmap is founded on four integrated recommendations, see Figure 4, requiring implementation in tandem and in balance.

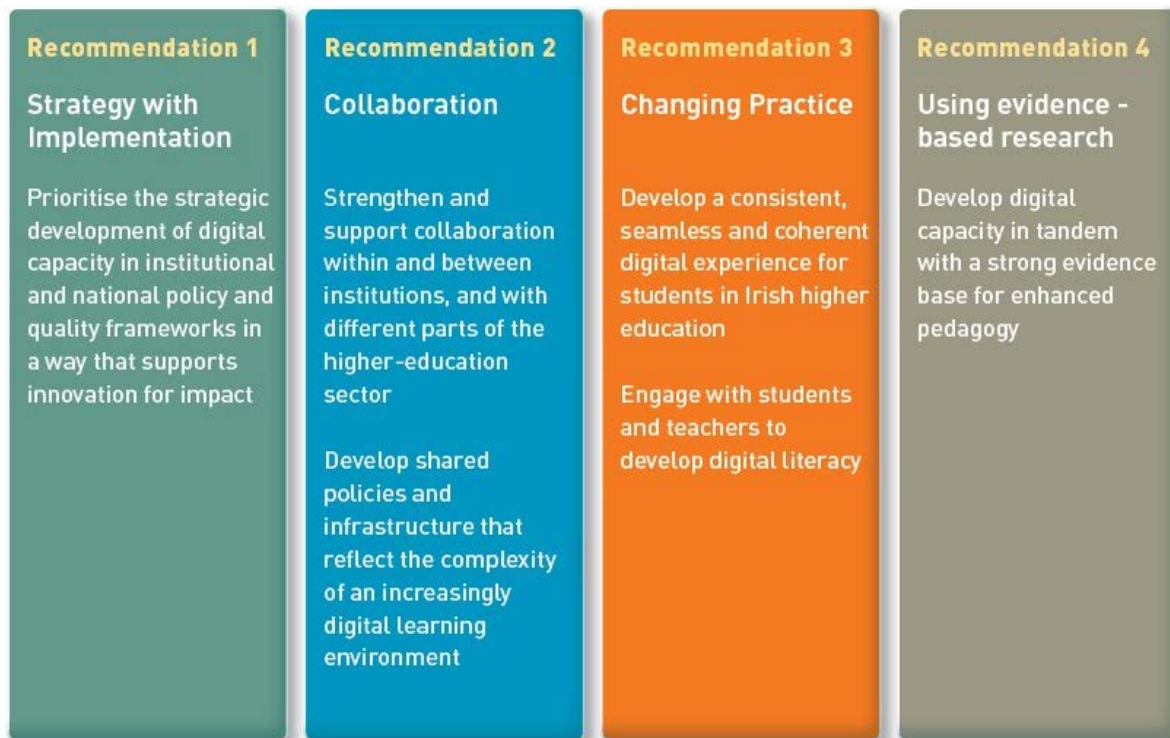


Figure 4. Integrated Recommendations for building Digital Capacity

Successful implementation implies an understanding of the interdependency of all stakeholders, including those in the national funding and quality agencies responsible for higher education. Recommendation 1 is critical to achieving scale and sustainability and responsibility for leadership rests firmly with academics in senior/strategic roles. Under this recommendation, priority actions include making explicit within institutional strategies the responsibility and structures to support the development and embedding of digital capacity; enhancing the national policy infrastructure to ensure that they are effective enablers of digital

Digital Learning in Irish Higher Education: Integrating Strategic and Leadership Perspectives into a Roadmap for Digital Capacity

Jim Devine, Terry Maguire

capacity building; and developing a co-ordinated, multi-level approach to fostering digital literacy, skills and confidence among students.

Conclusion – Implementation for Impact

Informed, concerted effort is required to embed quality assured digital learning consistently and at scale within Irish HEIs. An extensive consultation process delivered the first draft of the Digital Capacity roadmap in 2014 and this work has now been further developed, resulting in the extended ‘roadmap for enhancement in a digital world’, that is strategic in its vision and focus, but grounded in actionable implementation items and guidelines about how to address them. The voice of academics in senior/strategic roles is fully integrated in this plan, with their particular capacity to influence changes in scale, organisational culture, quality and assessment of impact.

References

1. Beetham, H. and White, D. (2014). *Students’ expectations and experiences of the digital environment literature review*. JISC.
http://repository.jisc.ac.uk/5573/1/JR0005_STUDENTS_EXPECTATIONS_LITERATURE_REVIEW_2.0.pdf
2. Gaebel, M.; Kupriyanova, V.; Morais, R. and Colucci, E. (2014). *E-Learning In European Higher Education Institutions: Results of a Mapping Survey Conducted In October-December 2013*. European University Association. http://eua.be/Libraries/Publication/e-learning_survey.sflb.ashx
3. National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2014). *Building Digital Capacity in Higher Education: Principles and First Insights from Sectoral Consultation*. <http://teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Digital-Roadmap-PHASE1MAY282014.pdf>
4. Trowler, P.; Ashwin, P. and Saunders, M. (2014). *The Role of HEFCE in Teaching and Learning Enhancement: A Review of Evaluative Evidence*. The Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/The_role_of_HEFCE_in_TL_Enhancement_final_report.pdf