

**Aligning Maynooth University's Accredited
Teaching and Learning Programmes with the
National Professional Development Framework:**

Reflections on our journey so far

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Abstract

In 2016, Ireland's National Forum for Teaching and Learning launched the National Professional Development Framework (PD Framework) for all staff who teach in Irish Higher Education. With this in mind, Maynooth University's Centre for Teaching and Learning (MU CTL) has recently undertaken a comprehensive review of its accredited professional development programmes in learning and teaching, the Professional Certificate in Teaching and Learning for Tutors and Demonstrators (PCTL) and the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGDHE), in order to fully align them with the PD Framework. In the current paper we outline the benchmarking and alignment process undertaken; discuss the role of stakeholder engagement in the process; reflect on lessons learned to date; and detail future plans for the development of a toolkit aimed at supporting institutions or programme teams who wish to align their accredited teaching and learning programmes with the PD Framework.

Keywords

National PD Framework, Continuous Professional Development, Accredited Teaching and Learning Programmes, Programme Review, Outcomes-based Evaluation

1. Introduction and Motivation

In 2016, the National Forum for Teaching and Learning (NFTL) launched the National Professional Development Framework (PD Framework) for all staff who teach in Irish Higher Education.¹ Accredited programmes are one way in which those who teach in Higher Education (HE) may develop competencies in line with the PD Framework (NFTL 2016a). With this in mind, Maynooth University's Centre for Teaching and Learning (MU CTL) has recently undertaken a comprehensive review and redesign of its accredited professional development programmes in learning and teaching — the Professional Certificate in Teaching and Learning for Tutors and Demonstrators (PCTL) and the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGDHE) — in order to: a) benchmark them against, and then fully align them with, the PD Framework; b) incorporate stakeholder feedback on the programmes; and c) ensure that each programmes' learning outcomes, assessment strategies, curriculum, and teaching methods are constructively aligned (Biggs 1999; Biggs & Tang 2011). By aligning our PCTL and PGDHE programmes with the PD Framework, it is anticipated that staff participating in these courses can leverage their participation as a means to build a professional portfolio that demonstrates their competencies in line with the framework.

This paper outlines the benchmarking and alignment process undertaken, discusses the role of stakeholder engagement with the process, reflects on lessons learned to date, and details future plans for the development of a toolkit aimed at supporting institutions or programme teams who wish to align their accredited teaching and learning programmes with the PD Framework.

2. Literature Review

Improving the quality of HE provision is of pivotal concern for Irish HE providers (Hunt Report 2011; QQI 2016). Accredited programmes are a key component of professional development (PD) activities in relation to learning and teaching in HE (NFTL 2016a), and engaging in such programmes has been shown to have positive impacts on participants' teaching practice, and hence on the quality of the student experience (European Commission 2013; HEA 2012; Simon & Pleschová 2012).

¹ <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PD-Framework-FINAL-1.pdf>
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Indeed, the recent *Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions* recommends that "All staff teaching in higher education institutions in 2020 should have received certified pedagogical training" (European Commission 2013, p. 60). Students also increasingly expect that those teaching them have received "Training in how to teach" (Neves & Hillman 2017, p. 44).

Nationally integrated approaches are essential to the successful implementation of PD for those teaching in HE (European Commission 2013; Hénard, 2010). A response from the National Forum for Teaching and Learning comes in the form of the National PD Framework for all staff who teach in Irish Higher Education (launched 2016). This framework (accommodating both accredited and non-accredited opportunities) encompasses a set of five overarching *Domains* and constituent *Elements* that provide "guidance for the PD of individuals and [give] direction to other stakeholders (e.g. institutions, higher education networks, educational/academic developers, policy makers and student body representatives) for planning, developing and engaging in PD activities" (NFTL 2016b, p. 1).

Outcomes-based assessment has become a key mechanism for measuring student learning in HE, as a recent OECD report (Tremblay, Lalancette, & Roseveare 2012) confirms:

Learning outcomes are indeed key to a meaningful education, and focusing on learning outcomes is essential to inform diagnosis and improve teaching processes and student learning. While there is a long tradition of learning outcomes' assessment within institutions' courses and programmes, emphasis on learning outcomes has become more important in recent years. (p. 9)

The outcomes-based approach links directly with Biggs's 'Constructive Alignment' Model for aligning learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities, and assessment (Biggs 1999; Biggs & Tang 2011). Our evaluative method draws on this in order to both benchmark and align our accredited programmes with the PD Framework, while ensuring that our programmes remain constructively aligned.

Chen (2015) highlights the crucial role of stakeholder voice in programme evaluation:

[Programme evaluation] must respond to the stakeholders' views, needs, and practices so as to be useful ... [It] has little reason to exist unless it is able to adequately serve stakeholders' needs. (p. 26)

The integration of stakeholder voices was therefore integral to our approach. Feedback was obtained from quantitative and qualitative data derived from consultations with senior management; past and prospective participant surveys; and a focus group with student representatives from our institution's undergraduate and postgraduate population.

3. Methodology

MU CTL currently offers two accredited PD programmes in teaching and learning in HE. Our PCTL is aimed at Postgraduate students/graduates employed as tutors, demonstrators or teaching assistants. It runs over one semester and comprises 5 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. The course forms part of MU's Structured Masters and PhD programmes. The PGDHE is aimed at both new and experienced teaching staff. It is a part-time programme running over twelve months, and comprises 60 ECTS credits. Our ongoing review involves:

1. A benchmarking process, whereby our current offerings have now been evaluated against the PD Framework;
2. Gathering and analysing feedback from various stakeholders before and after benchmarking;
3. Redesigning the programmes to align with the PD Framework and incorporate stakeholder feedback.

Benchmarking process

We employed a rigorous process in evaluating not only the PCTL and PGDHE Programme Learning Outcomes (PLOs), but also the individual Module Learning Outcomes (MLOs) for both programmes, by benchmarking them against each Framework Domain. As a secondary output of this process, we are currently developing a comprehensive toolkit aimed at supporting other institutions or programme teams who are either benchmarking an existing programme against the PD Framework, or developing a new programme that needs to align with the framework. It was therefore imperative that whatever approach we chose would (i) be sustainable, balanced, and allow for an exhaustive evaluation across all our programmes (effectiveness was a priority); and (ii) that it would allow for a complete and accurate mapping of such programmes to the PD Framework in its entirety, i.e., its integral Domains and Elements, thereby maintaining the appropriateness of the complete process as set out in our project goals.

At the outset, it was determined that the most effective approach was to rephrase all thirty PD Framework Element statements across the five key Framework Domains, converting them into evaluative questions that were subsequently put to each PLO and MLO. In so doing, we repurposed the PD Framework as an outcomes-based evaluative tool, but without refocussing or recontextualising it. All thirty questions were fed into an Excel spreadsheet that has formed the basis of our benchmarking tool. As Figure 1.1 illustrates, in order to situate these newly-phrased questions within our evaluation, a contextualising statement was drafted (in italics below), utilising salient PD Framework terms and language.

Figure 1.1 – Evaluative question example

<p>Domain 1, Element 1.1 currently reads as:</p> <p>Identification of and reflection on the key personal characteristics (values, perspectives and emotions) that motivate and challenge teaching, and their impact on student learning and the scholarship of teaching and learning. (NFTL 2016b, p. 4)</p> <p>Rephrased as an evaluative question (with contextualising statement), it becomes:</p> <p><i>Do your PLOs/MLOs provide scope for (assessable) evidence-based activities and opportunities for individual participants (across all levels of experience and current work contexts) to:</i></p> <p>Identify and reflect on their key personal characteristics, including values, perspectives and emotions, and how these (i) motivate and challenge teaching, and (ii) impact on student learning and broader teaching and learning scholarship?</p>
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Although this strengthened our outcomes-based focus on learner-centred pedagogy and programme design, posing this question alone furnished — for the most part — a ‘polarised’ answer (positive or negative) and in itself, provided insufficient evaluative data for a thorough benchmarking exercise. To address this issue, each initial question was supplemented with two supporting questions, one seeking further clarification on PLO/MLO association with the current Element, and the other requesting evidence-based detail (activity, assessment, feedback):

- (a) Which PLOs/MLOs directly or indirectly refer to this Element?
- (b) Are there examples of evidence-based activity or assessment on the programme that provide support for this?

So as to reinforce the outcomes-based concept, we subsequently introduced a 'Proposed Action' field for the inclusion of suggested changes and improvements to PLOs/MLOs, activities, assessments, etc. going forward and a 'Comment' field for the programme team to insert questions or clarifying statements around the PD Framework and programme detail supplied. Finally, an 'Overall Alignment Weighting' field was added. This benchmarking process was replicated for all PGDHE and PCTL PLOs and MLOs in turn, thereby garnering not only valuable information about the constructive alignment of our programmes, but also an overall qualitative rating of their current level of alignment against the PD Framework. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the benchmarking process. Our findings were then assessed in conjunction with consultation data in order to construct a full picture of our PD programmes, from which we drafted key recommendations including proposed adjustments and/or areas to be focussed on during the redesign of programmes. .

Stakeholder consultations

Our benchmarking process was supplemented with stakeholder consultations, including structured conversations with senior management, heads of academic departments, and previous teaching contributors to the PGDHE programme; online surveys completed by both past and future programme participants on the PCTL and PGDHE programmes; and a focus group with undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives focused around questions derived from a preliminary analysis of our institutional Student Evaluation of Learning Experience Surveys and MU student responses to the National Student Survey. Consultations sought feedback on the importance of staff engagement in teaching and learning PD; levels of awareness around the PD Framework; the value and usefulness of the PD Framework; enablers and barriers to participation in PD; and the existing programme format and structures. Feedback returned was analysed in conjunction with the alignment data to provide a comprehensive picture of where MU's accredited PD offerings are currently positioned in relation to the Framework, and to identify where these can be reinforced or adjusted for stronger overall alignment with the Framework in addition to meeting the needs of our MU stakeholders.

Evaluation of [Programme Name] PLOs							
Domain / Elements	PLO Qs: Y/N	PLO(s) Directly Referencing Element	PLO(s) Indirectly Referencing Element	Evidence-based activity or assessment?	Proposed Action?	Comments?	Overall Alignment Weighting
Do your PLOs provide scope for (assessable) evidence-based activities and opportunities for individual participants (across all levels of experience and current work contexts) to:							
DOMAIN 1: Personal Development - The 'Self' in Teaching and Learning							
Element 1.2							
Identify and reflect on their key personal characteristics, including values, perspectives and emotions, and how these (i) motivate and challenge teaching, and (ii) impact on student learning and the scholarship of teaching and learning?	Select 'Yes', 'No' or 'Other' from drop down menu. If 'Other', double-click the cell and type response	Select the Programme Learning Outcomes that directly reference this element from the drop down list.	Select the Programme Learning Outcomes that indirectly reference this element from the drop down list.	***Insert evidence-based activities or assessments that support and provide clarification for two previous PLO referencing choices (direct and indirect). Example: Reflective Teaching Portfolio; cohort-based discussion; reflection on individual participation in group work project; etc.	***Insert recommendations and/or proposed actions to strengthen alignment with the current element, or address shortcomings in PLOs and/or associated activities or assessments.	***Insert additional comments or queries here.	Select the overall alignment weighting that best describes how well your PLOs, Activities and Assessments map to the current PD Framework element from the drop down list.

Table 1.1 – Overview of the benchmarking process

4. Findings and Discussion

The benchmarking process was deemed effective as a mechanism for interrogating programmes against the PD Framework. Where overlap and cross-referencing occurred between PLOs and MLOs, or between MLOs and activities across respective modules, we could clearly see where our programmes and modules were excelling, and equally, where improvements were required. Our approach yielded results on both macro and micro levels, for example: while we provide good supports and learning opportunities in the area of digital technologies on our PGDHE programme, we do not communicate these well, so we are now placing a stronger focus on Domain 5 (Personal and Professional Digital Capacity in Teaching and Learning) throughout our programmes, including improving assessment strategies and referencing outcomes-based learning in this area in our PLOs and MLOs. On the other hand, our current PLOs, MLOs and constituent activities and assessments have performed quite well across the five Elements of Domain 1 (Personal Development: The 'Self' in Teaching and Learning) with respect to supporting the individual characteristics and philosophies of participants on our programmes, and recognising and providing opportunities for them to articulate their prior learning and experiences and contextualise them within their current working contexts.

Aside from the importance of involving key stakeholders in our programme review, the consultation process proved extremely informative, highlighting areas where our programmes have worked well, those where modifications to the existing programme curriculum, format and structures need to be made, and providing evidentiary support for key recommendations presented post-evaluation. Stakeholders unanimously concurred that staff engagement in teaching and learning PD is essential. Discourse revealed that levels of awareness around the PD Framework varied across stakeholder groups. Notwithstanding this fact, most past participants on the PGDHE, UG student representatives and heads of departments had some awareness of the Framework, with all perceiving the PD Framework as a positive development overall. Significantly, the majority of surveyed past and prospective students on the PCTL and PGDHE reported that they would strongly consider aligning their future PD activities with the Framework. Enablers and barriers to participation in PD referred to included: balancing

PD in teaching and learning with research and teaching priorities, and administrative responsibilities; the need for flexibility around workload models; and the relationship between PD and promotion criteria. In terms of the existing programme curriculum, format and structures, our stakeholders indicated a preference for some increased flexibility in programme structure and participation, including a more modular approach, a Masters pathway, and incorporation of online learning. In line with institutional priorities, stakeholders also highlighted the need to include additional focus on diversity and internationalisation, and on digital technologies.

5. Conclusions and Future Work

The benchmarking process proved labour intensive but was deemed necessary in order to facilitate the robust and exhaustive analysis of our two PD programmes. Now that the process is complete, we possess a substantial amount of mapped data from which we are updating our programmes and further analysis has been carried out to condense consultation and evaluation data into key recommendations for programme coordinators. The findings from the benchmarking and stakeholder consultation processes are informing the design of our toolkit. While robustness was our main priority when conducting our evaluation, we are now concerned with ensuring that our suite of tools and resources aimed at supporting those who wish to align their accredited PD offerings with the PD Framework makes the process as efficient and flexible as possible. In terms of institutional impact, our benchmarking and alignment process has been an effective mechanism by which to identify where we need to make improvements in/adjustments to our PGDHE and PCTL programmes in order to ensure that they align with the PD Framework, meet the requirements of our stakeholders, and remain constructively aligned. The process also served as a means to raise awareness of the PD Framework within our institution.

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