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NATIONAL FORUM PANEL DISCUSSION

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Question
Developing a shared vision and goals for digital learning nationally - is this a realistic aspiration/how might it be approached?

Introduction
Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to today's panel discussion. In many respects this is precisely the type of initiative required to help build a stronger sense of shared vision for Digital Learning in Irish Higher Education. In the short time available I would like to contribute three main points to this panel discussion.

However, before introducing these points, it is useful to anchor this discussion in a couple of key observations from Jim Devine's (2015) recently published report on *Strategic and Leadership Perspectives on Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education*. Firstly, based on the analysis of Compact Agreements, the report concludes that:

> 'The overall pattern is something of a patchwork that does not present a picture of a higher education sector with a shared understanding or cohesive vision for [digital] capacity' (Devine, 2015, p.8).

Following on from this observation, the report goes on to conclude from the sector interviews:

> 'There is wide agreement that clarity is urgently needed about the vision and goals for digital learning in higher education nationally. Current initiatives are regarded as fragmented, piecemeal and unsustainable' (Devine, 2015, p.18).

In many respects neither conclusion is particularly surprising. The report also makes the point there is confusion around terminology. Developing a shared vision is always going to be problematic when there is no agreed definition or understanding in policy or practice of what we mean by Digital Learning. In the interests of vision building there are some advantages of leaving this definition open for local interpretation and supporting a more organic approach, but this needs to be a conscience decision and the lack of common agreement is problematic when it comes to reporting on and monitoring of progress.

1. Focus on Digital Learning

My first key point follows on from this as to what extent should the focus be on digital learning? Is digital learning the end game or merely a key vehicle to achieving a much bigger vision? I think we should still leave open to further debate whether the benefits of singling out *digital* from a focus on learning and teaching *per se* outweigh the disadvantages. Some would argue our visions and strategies for the future need to be thinking post-digital rather than digital, as the latter is already the new normal. Perhaps we would benefit from shifting our current focus away from the language of 'Digital Learning' to an emphasis on our preferred learning or education futures? The guiding question could be restated:

> How do we develop a shared vision and goals for the future of learning and teaching nationally?

Although a relative newcomer to Ireland, I would argue that a future-focused vision for Higher Education, which subsumes learning and teaching, already exists. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (2011), more commonly known as The Hunt Report, states:

> 'In the decades ahead, higher education will play a central role in making Ireland a country recognised for innovation, competitive enterprise and continuing academic excellence, and an attractive place to live and work with a high quality of life, cultural vibrancy and inclusive social structures' (Report of the Strategy Group, 2011, p.17).

In my view, this statement meets the definition of a vision as it grew out of a consultation process engaging a wide range of stakeholders and sets out our aspirations for the future. The National Strategy gives a sense of where we want to go in the future, with a moral purpose, and the smart thing for any emerging vision for digital learning (or Education Futures) is to ensure that it aligns with and can be mapped against this wider vision.

2. Education for Change

In my view the current discourse around visions needs to shift from the reactive language of Higher Education being in change to more proactive debate about education *for* change. This is my second key point. Adopting a wider perspective anchored in the language of societal inclusion, and the changes we are seeking to achieve, may help to overcome the problem that visions can be blinding, overly narrow and potentially hide competing change forces.

History is littered over the ages with people and groups who at times have had quite dangerous and morally corrupt visions. Hitler is usually cited as the most extreme example of this point. As the *Digital Roadmap – Phase 1* (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2014) rightly notes, digital learning is not

benign. Some of the visions for the future being presented to us are infused with the language of globalisation, neo-liberal polices, and the increasing commercialization of Higher Education.

This point recognises the debate in the educational change literature about the role that visions should play in successfully implementing complex change. Conventional change models advocated by people like John Kotter usually promote 'vision building' as the first step in successfully implementing large-scale organisational change. In contrast, Professor Michael Fullan (2007) argues in his seminal work on educational change that vision and strategic planning come later. Vision is what you end with rather than something you start with, and arises out of extensive consultation over a long period of time where resistance is valued as a source of insight. Put simply, you cannot mandate what matters!

To quote Professor Geoff Scott (2003), who with Fullan co-authored an excellent book on *Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education*, 'Change is learning and learning is change' (p.70). The lesson is that change is complex; change is a process; change is a journey not a blue print.

3. Situating Visions

My third key point is that there is an important difference between defining our vision and stating our respective missions. Arguably, at a macro-level vision is a process of identifying what matters most to people, making our choices explicit, and stating our preferred future(s). Mission is about how we get there and staying on track. In a complex and diverse sector each third level institution is likely to have a quite different mission. Your mission is inextricably linked to your institutional culture and the strategic goals you set for serving your students, stakeholders and wider community.

As noted in the *Digital Roadmap – Phase 1* (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2014), the 'Innovative use of digital technology will vary in different contexts' (p.16). At the meso-level what this point reinforces for me is that each institution must be given the opportunity to define its own path in this new and emerging context. That said, how you define and implement your institutional mission it is really important. In order for the mission to live in your institutional culture we need to recognise and understand the creative tensions between bottom up, middle out and top down approaches. Neither centralization nor decentralization works as individual learning and organisational learning are inextricably linked.

Moreover, at the micro-level every person is a change agent, a micro leader and they must be encouraged to become vision builders. It follows that we must not underestimate the importance of articulating, cultivating and influencing person visions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the report on *Strategic and Leadership Perspectives on Digital Capacity in Irish Higher Education* (Devine, 2015) talks about adopting the metaphor of an Atlas rather than Roadmap. In many respects, I see the challenges and opportunities facing us more akin to steering a pathway through difficult and continually shifting terrain where there is no atlas or complete road map of the digital and post-digital frontier. What we need is a **compass** and a set of **strategic tools** to help guide us and explore beyond current practices and possibilities. Getting lost along the way may be a valuable part of the process, which contributes to the evidence base and new knowledge. With this point in mind, envisioning our Education Futures will always be a work in progress, as no one can predict the future and you can never reach the horizon. There is no end point to the conversation and this needs to be understood in the policy landscape and timeframes we create.

Suggested Actions

Finally, I want to conclude with three practical suggestions of what we could do to build a more future-focused digitally enabled Higher Education sector. These suggestions are offered in the spirit that the goals we set and initiatives we undertake should not be framed to manage digital innovations but rather to foster more digitally creative and innovative institutions, teachers and learners. To this end there would be value in sectoral collaboration to develop:

  i)   *A set of National Guidelines for Digital Learning.*

       - An inclusive sector wide process
       - Articulate the types of questions we need to consider
       - A common language for discussion and decision-making

  ii) *A National Benching Marking Toolkit* **for Digital Learning**

       - Whole of system approach
       - Strong focus on quality enhancement
       - Build on existing toolkits recognising multiple stakeholders

  (iii) *An Education Futures Scenario Planning Toolkit*

       - A tool for planning in uncertain times
       - Help articulate the options available to us
       - Mature our thinking about our preferred futures

References

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