

Spanning Third-level Institutions and Boundaries: The Higher Education Institutions Further Education and Training (HEI FET) Forum

HEI FET FORUM – ANNE WALSH, JANE O’KELLY, MICHAEL KENNY

Abstract

The HEI FET Forum was established in 2012 for the eight Higher Education Institutions who provide initial teacher education qualifications for those wishing to work as accredited teachers in the Further Education and Training (FET) Sector. Its remit is to advance teaching, learning and research in the FET sector and to widen the Forum’s engagement with stakeholders across FET. The article describes the origin and purpose of the Forum and its aims amongst others to promote and strengthen the professional development of practitioners, and design and conduct relevant and useful research for the sector.¹

Keywords: Further Education and Training, Engagement, Initial Teacher Education, Teaching, Collaboration, Research

Introduction

This article provides the background canvas to the founding and development of the Forum of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who deliver initial teacher education programmes that are recognised by the Teaching Council of Ireland for Further Education and Training (HEI FET) student teachers. During 2012, a number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with Teaching Council approved teacher education programmes for FET came together to form the Higher Education Institutions: Further Education and Training Forum (HEI

1 The HEI FET Forum acknowledges the expertise and professionalism of the FET sector and aims to foster and progress a partnership approach and dialogue between educators, learners, providers and policymakers. The content of this article draws heavily on a presentation by Dr Anne Walsh titled ‘Developing Professional Practice in FET Teaching – HEI FET Forum Evolution’ at a HEI FET Forum conference at Maynooth University, 2018.

FET Forum). Since then the eight HEIs have worked together, drawing on their own resources, to coordinate delivery and to build capacity among their respective programmes and within the FET sector to enhance programme quality. The Forum is unique in that it brings together a range of HEIs that do not normally cooperate across programmes. The unifying ethos of these universities, institutes, and colleges is a commitment to adult and community education. Each HEI has a history and/or legacy in this area and an allegiance to the people who work and learn in this space. Part of this connection is a shared participative, liberal approach to redressing social exclusion and an appreciation of the importance of adult and community education as a social good.

The Forum is a national network focused on the continued enhancement of teaching and learning in the Further Education and Training sector. It aims to support the sector through collaborative working approaches and the development of communities of practice. In particular, the HEI FET Forum aims to share knowledge and practice in the further education and training sector with regard to qualifications for teachers, tutors and other facilitators of learning in Further Education and Training and promote awareness about initial and continued professional development for practitioners and new entrants to the sector.

Forum membership comprises eight Higher Education providers: NUI Galway (NUIG); Marino Institute of Education (MIE); Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MI); Maynooth University (MU); Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT); Dublin City University (DCU); National College of Ireland (NCI); National College of Art and Design (NCAD).

Its vision is to enhance and contribute to the quality of teaching and learning, engagement, pedagogy and research in Further Education and Training and contribute to the continual improvement of the quality of teaching and learning by drawing on the combined expertise of its members.

The Backdrop to the HEI FET Forum

The need for teacher qualification education for FET was driven by Section 38 of the Teaching Council Act, 2001, and Regulation Five (Further Education) of the Teaching Council Registration Regulations, 2009. Regulation Five, relating to Further Education is the requirement that from 1 April 2013, applicants for registration must have attained, inter alia, a Council approved further education teacher education qualification (The Teaching Council, 2011). Aside from local

legislation, the need for the professionalisation of educators continues to gain prominence globally with teacher education as a profession that is monitored by external accreditation bodies in many countries. The teaching profession demands responsibility and accountability. Having pedagogical competence and its practices are seen as vital, not only to facilitating learning, but equally to the quality of wider teaching, learning and educational activities.

For providers, not only was this a call to respond with appropriate programme offerings, but it was a responsibility to offer prospective trainee teachers the opportunity to acquire the mandated qualification, a qualification underpinned by quality and teaching competence. The Teaching Council (2011) issued guidelines around general programme requirements and learning outcomes that were seen as important to a teacher education qualification (TEQ). This included learning outcomes related to professional conduct, communication, teaching, learning and assessment, subject knowledge, curriculum design, group management, lifelong learning and a knowledge of the education system. Broadly the aims of the teacher education programmes were to provide student teachers with the theoretical knowledge, pedagogical skills and professional competencies required to successfully teach and facilitate learning in the further education sector; to develop competent teachers whose teaching practice is underpinned by ongoing reflective learning and by the core values of the teaching profession; and to engender a sense of collegiality and relationship building within the further education sector.

Participation in TEQ programmes encompasses certain learning expectations around pedagogy, psychology of learning, curriculum design and development, assessment, quality assurance and lifelong learning. In turn, it suggests certain assumptions around the application of learning to the professional development of the teacher and teaching practice. Across the FET landscape other noteworthy and influential changes were emerging: legislation resulted in the establishment of SOLAS and dissolution of FÁS and VEC giving rise to Education and Training Boards; a FET strategy was published, articulating commitment to creating a responsive, innovative, flexible and relevant sector; and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was also established.

The Evolution of the HEI FET Forum

The inception of the HEI FET Forum has its roots in a casual conversation in NUI Galway in 2012. NUI Galway hosted the first Forum meeting, followed by Mary Immaculate, Waterford Institute of Technology, National College of Ireland, Maynooth University and currently DCU. The first major development

to emerge from the Forum was the initiation of an annual colloquium or conference that provides a platform where trainee teachers, graduate teachers, practitioners and key stakeholders come together to discuss a broad range of related matters. The inaugural colloquium was successfully held in WIT in 2015 and laid the foundation for a useful space in which providers and practitioners share experiences and concerns, and where the resultant networking provides a solid basis for collaboration.

Such events are important. Loughran (2010), for example, draws on research to highlight the importance of practitioners, such as trainee teachers and graduate teachers, sharing experiences with others to ensure that the 'tacit becomes explicit' and that insights into knowledge of teacher practice, which underpins professional identity, become visible (Northfield and Loughran, 1996, cited in Loughran, 2010, p.210).

A key feature of the work of the HEI FET Forum is its spirit of collaboration amongst the providers of teacher education qualification (TEQ) programmes for FET. The HEI FET Forum sees this as enhancing and contributing to the quality of the programmes, and ultimately to the quality of teaching in FET; a way of attempting to get under the skin of sticky points that all providers experience. By sharing experiences of provision, by comparing challenges and issues, and by continuously probing the relevance of curricula, providers are constantly seeking to improve their offerings, making teacher education relevant to practitioners and learners in the FET environment. Additionally, collaboration has resulted in joint research proposals (under the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning) and participation in EU projects.

HEI FET Forum Objectives

The five core HEI FET Forum objectives (HEI FET Forum, 2017) are a series of signposts that drive the Forum's commitment to professional development, research, policy and advocacy, engagement with practitioners, and pedagogy in FET. The Forum connects with SOLAS, the Teaching Council of Ireland and Education Training Boards of Ireland (ETBI) through regular meetings, research and collaboration. The Forum is committed to the delivery of high-quality practitioner orientated professional development initiatives and programmes that prepare practitioners for working in the sector and that support responses to societal, economic and industry challenges as well as research that develops and contributes to an emergent field of enquiry in FET. The Forum is engaged in policy and advocacy activities that are underpinned by relationships with

key national and international stakeholders and advisory bodies with a view to contributing to national policy. These activities are informed by engagement with practitioners through advocating interaction with practitioners in FET and through collaboration at a national and regional level with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Further Education Network (FEN), Further Education Support Services (FESS) and other relevant FET practitioner bodies and networks. Finally, the Forum members are dedicated to recognising existing excellence in teaching practice in FET and promoting models of adult learning theory, philosophy and pedagogies in FET teaching and learning activities.

These objectives were articulated further in the Forum's strategic plan for 2017-2019 and frame its journey for purposeful projects. Gathering information, assembling a repository of research data and outputs, building relationships with key stakeholders, involving practitioners, and promoting effective pedagogies for FET learners are all undertaken through collaboration with stakeholders. For providers, their responsibility in the professionalisation of FET teachers is complex and multi-layered. Overall, the Forum is focused on enhancing the learner experience through enabling teacher competence within an increasingly diverse and widening participation agenda.

Tensions for FET TEQ Providers

However, despite the provision of teacher education programmes for further education teachers, persistent tensions remain. Criteria for entry to the diploma, degree and postgraduate programmes offered by HEI providers can preclude entry to those without the mandated entry requirements. Tensions arise when individuals who have been teaching for many years are not eligible for enrolment because of a lack of these requirements. Members of the Forum are committed to capturing experiential learning through a recognition of prior learning (RPL) process and working with national stakeholders to streamline this process.

Carrying out research into the area of professional development for FET teachers allows the Forum to gain insights that provide a basis for a deeper understanding of the experiences of qualified and trainee teachers. Recently conducted research by the HEI FET Forum members in 2018, explores how graduates and current participants of FET teacher education programmes experience their complex working lives and how their careers as trainee and qualified teachers are progressing after graduation. Findings from the research focused on graduate employment in the FET sector demonstrated that 72% are

working in the sector: 33% in full time employment, 42% in part-time, 10% on a panel and 15% in precarious or irregular employment. Graduates felt that there was a perceived disparity between the value of qualifications for second level teachers as opposed to recognised qualifications for teachers in Further Education and Training.

These findings – contrasted with the explicit and implicit value of the professionalisation of teachers, the value of excellent teacher competence and the realisation of the centrality of worthwhile outcomes of learning and achievements for learners in the FET sector – challenge all of us to give voice to the role of practitioners in the sector. Given the spectrum of educational contexts across the FET landscape, effective pedagogies advocate alignment with the pedagogy of the adult learner where relevance to the learner is central, where principles such as a learner-centred approach takes precedence, where embedding a collaborative and a co-operative approach to learning is espoused, where self-directed learning practices are fostered, where enquiry-based learning is promoted, and where modelling best practice continues to be interrogated. Again, Loughran draws on research to identify a range of themes around which professional practice is developed (Berry, 2004, cited in Loughran, 2010, pp.209-216).

These themes include understanding teaching beyond the technical by interrogating the problematic within teaching to reveal teaching as educative rather than training; self-understanding and awareness by probing who we are as teachers and how we teach; and collaboration by planning teaching and reviewing practice with colleagues to avoid professional isolation.

Central to one's identity as a teacher is the idea of reflection. Only the teacher can digest, as it were, the pedagogical content presented to create meanings that shape his or her actions and identity as a teacher. Coupled with learning from their practical placement experiences and the collegiality of communities of practice, self-awareness through deep reflection allows teachers to gain agency in framing and reframing their identities as teachers.

However, as Karl Popper (Popper, 1979 cited in Swann, 2012, p.25) warns us, 'we become conscious of many of our expectations only when they are disappointed, owing to their being unfulfilled'. Research lends detail to the complexity, layers and oftentimes unpredictability of the knowledge, skills and competence that teachers are expected to possess. It gives voice to qualified and emerging FET

practitioners in articulating how effective teaching in FET can be realised and how teaching careers in FET may be consolidated and professionalised.

The problem is that much of the work of FET practitioners is invisible to outsiders. Hidden from others in an educators' responsibility to facilitate learning is the ability to manage the diverse needs of learners, communicate with learners and relevant others, and reflect on their practice to ensure ongoing strengthening of their teaching competence. A triad of professional competencies comprising knowledge of teaching methodologies, knowledge of learners and their development, and knowledge of curriculum and subject, makes teaching a complex job (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Integrated throughout these competencies are the ethical values of professional conduct such as respect, care, integrity and trust.

Accordingly, in order to gain an understanding of and insights into the assumptions of professional development, it is necessary to understand how student teachers and graduate practitioners experience their learning, how they use their learning and how they engage with their learning as they become professional educators. Research seeks to explore those aspects of participation with a view to gaining insights into how teachers nurture and develop their professionalism. For example, as articulated in 'Key Competences for Adult Learning Professionals' (Buiskool et al., 2010) and 'The Future of Education and Skills 2030' (OECD, 2018), competence identification, competence assessment, competence modelling, learners' needs, sectoral diversity and employment conditions underpin the principles of development that are needed to meet future challenges that are, today, unknown. Pressing these points home to relevant stakeholders unlocks potential new ways of doing and learning and continues the journey towards the achievement of excellence in teacher education; it supports both providers and FET practitioners.

Conclusion

Teaching will always be a dynamic and complex role with diverse and competing demands. Along with a changing FET landscape, drivers of global change such as rapid technology advancements, individual empowerment, work uncertainty, jobs that haven't yet been invented, diverse sources of knowledge production, shifting demographics and changing societal and economic environments, impact on the needs of individuals, teachers and learners alike. These needs include adapting, developing, maintaining, transferring and even transforming their knowledge and know-how; it is paramount for developing

global competence and shaping agency in a rapidly changing world. Equally the standards for continuous learning are higher than ever; knowing what, knowing why, knowing how and knowing who, continue to challenge educators and learners. Giroux (2019, p.17) points out that 'Democracy and politics itself are impoverished in the absence of those vital public spheres such as public and higher education that provide the conditions for students and others to recognize how to use the knowledge they gain, both to critique the world in which they live and, when necessary, to intervene in socially responsible ways in order to change it'.

Enabling the development of skilled educators for the FET sector continues to be predominant for the members of the Forum. Forum members advocate for excellence in teacher education to ensure that opportunities for teachers and learners alike are optimised. The Forum provides a space for discussion that promotes innovation, that informs policy, that collates the voice of trainee teachers and practitioners and that seeks to enhance the role of FET teachers as they continue to develop their professional skills. One of the many ways in which this will be accomplished is through a commitment to dialogue and critical pedagogy in teacher education and supporting learner needs, as well as intentional and cooperative research such as that undertaken collaboratively by the HEI FET Forum in partnership with stakeholders.

Coolahan (2007) quotes Feerick in terms of teacher education

'as a process of lifelong learning and career development for the individual teacher. At a more structured level there is a need for a continuity of purpose between initial training, induction and ongoing professional development. Of central importance in this context is the creative and reciprocated collaboration between the university, the school and other stakeholders in the education process. New types of working are necessary which prepare new teachers to respond flexibly to new teaching scenarios and which support the teacher to be a key actor in his/her own professional development' (p.33).

The teaching profession across a continuum of education and training is continually evolving and encompassing new research findings, changing demographics, real and existential threats to our societies including political upheaval and climate change, emerging theory and the requirements of individuals who engage in lifelong learning to meet a wide range of desires,

needs and ambitions. The strong relationship between FET stakeholders and their partners in tertiary education and training is built, in part, on a shared understanding of Freire's concept of teacher-student interaction: 'through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become responsible for a process in which all grow' (1970, p.80).

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