Leadership and Practice in the Technological HE sector

Report of the 2 Day N-TUTORR Workshop, March 2024

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Introduction

On March 6th and 7th at TU Dublin's Grangegorman campus members of the N-TUTORR Steering Group met to share ideas and connect their ongoing work.

Throughout the two days robust discussions on project management, collaborative practices, and change management took place, all designed to aid the attendees with the ideas to drive meaningful and sustainable changes in their respective institutions. The intentions of this group are clear: to make systemic changes in the Technological HE sector by embracing digital transformation and enhancing the learning environment.

The participants identified a range of opportunities during the workshops from improving operational efficiencies and learning from each other's transformation projects through to more academic areas including, educational equity, sustainability in the curriculum, and the professional development of staff and students. There was an overarching theme of leveraging the momentum of changes sparked by the pandemic emergency (and especially emergency remote teaching practices), as well as opportunities arising from the formation of the new Technological Universities, and in turn the Technological HE sector.

In this report, we summarise the content and structure of the workshop, draw out the resulting themes, and then offer analysis and recommendations within the wider context of Irish HE, and the Technological HE sector in particular.

Workshop context and content

The workshop agenda was structured to foster deep engagement and conversation among participants through sessions focused on leadership narrative, digital transformation, and strategic institutional changes. There were two participants from each partner HEI, to include all members of the N-TUTORR PSB, and three participants from the N-TUTORR PMO. The workshop served as a confluence for deliberation on projects and practices across the participating institutions.

Throughout the workshop there were general discussions around:

- General enhancement of the HE Sector, with a recurring theme being improving the student experience, and educational environment.
- A strong focus on digital transformation and harnessing digital tools to improve efficiency and learning outcomes.
- Professional and Personal Development opportunities for staff and students
- There was an emphasis on multi-channel communication strategies to promote digital transformation, including social media, emails, and physical channels like events, and specifically festivals to celebrate achievements.
- There is a focus on integrating digital tools and literacy, and there is a recognised opportunity to keep the curriculum relevant and cutting-edge, preparing students for a modern workforce.
- Emphasis on the use of digital tools for efficiency suggests the opportunity to streamline administrative and academic processes, thereby improving the overall functionality of the Technological HE sector.
- Post-Covid learning practices are geared towards building resilience, suggesting opportunities for developing strategies that prepare students and staff for future challenges.

Mapping and Building Opportunities

One exercise was the creation and sharing of action plans. We started by having each institutional group draw a visual representation of their work. The entire group worked collectively to connect these drawings across the themes of: student empowerment, staff capabilities, and digital ecosystems. The emphasis was on individual delegates and institutional teams identifying the similarities across projects and institutions.

Based on the conversations that emerged from that exercise, individuals then generated their own action plans, with the intent to create opportunities to share their practices across the N-TUTORR network in a way that benefits the group as a whole, and furthers the key aims of their projects.

Something's Changing

This part of the workshop looked at how leadership must both adapt to, and drive change within the TU sector. The sessions aimed to encourage the participants to think about how traditional project management approaches need to shift to more dynamic change management practices. The narrative of these sessions emphasised the complexities of leadership in a rapidly evolving educational landscape using examples from the N-TUTORR project.

Recognising and Engaging in Effective Change Management

The workshop highlighted the necessity of moving from conventional project management to contemporary change management, acknowledging the unique challenges posed by this transition. Delegates initiated a broad discussion by focusing on the requisite skills, approaches, and tools that are essential for effective leadership amidst constant change. It was also acknowledged that the planning and managing of new systems and processes, whilst fraught with problems, could also be used as a springboard to change.

Drivers of Change

Participants then explored the various drivers of change, distinguishing between changes in practice and changes in policy, and examining how sometimes new practices are introduced without altering existing policies. This session aimed to clarify the 'why' behind changes, addressing common concerns and resistance that arise during the transition process.

Change Management: A People-Centred Approach

As the workshop progressed, emphasis was placed on the people-centred nature of change management. The discussions underscored that successful change initiatives hinge on understanding and managing human responses to change. This includes recognising and addressing anxiety, fear of the unknown, and the impact of organisational history on employee perceptions and behaviours.

Leading Change

Leadership's role in change management was examined through the lens of communication, sponsorship, coaching, mentoring, and resistance management. Effective leaders were portrayed as those who actively communicate, engage with resistance constructively, and foster a supportive environment for change. Participants were encouraged to think about leadership in terms of fostering commitment over mere compliance, highlighting the difference between being action-oriented and results-oriented.

Practical Tools and Techniques

The workshop then looked at practical tools and techniques to map out change strategies and assess their potential impacts. This included looking back at the exercises in

visualisation and strategic alignment, where participants had already applied the concepts discussed to their own institutional contexts.

Sustaining Change

Finally, the focus shifted to sustaining the changes implemented. Discussions revolved around embedding new practices into the institutions and leveraging these changes to enhance strategic aims across different parts of the organisation. The final segments of this part stressed the importance of continuous engagement and the development of cultures that support innovation and change.

Analysis and Discussion

Several of the themes we describe in this section are emerging, as expected, directly from the N-TUTORR project plan and themes. Other themes are new developments that emerge from the work done under N-TUTORR as well as the lived experiences of people working within and across the new, merged institutions in the Technological HE sector.

Strategic Alignment

- There is effort to align action plans with broader strategic themes and objectives, though the specific strategic themes are not always detailed in the plans we have.
- The outputs and outcomes of the plans include practical tools like handbooks, designed to embed and articulate the collaborative efforts and educational innovations.

The conversations in the workshop demonstrated a broad agreement that action plans for each individual project they were doing had to align with the themes of the wider N-TUTORR project. But specifics were frequently lacking. There needs to be a more deliberate effort within institutional projects, to articulate some of the overarching N-TUTORR themes in specific operational terms.

Collaboration and Partnership

- Sector wide collaboration is coming through as a strong focus, including individual partnerships as a primary concern. Partnering with others for specific projects is also a priority.
- Community building through festivals and other recognition events–the week previous to the workshop had been "N-TUTORR week", and delegates shared stories of that series of events being very successful in building and making visible the various Technological HE sector communities across the sector.

Discussions around collaborating, and the written plans collected during the workshop, demonstrate that a significant section of the Technological HE sector have recognised the importance of partnerships. Conversations around "festivals" and N-TUTORR week, as well

as seeking other opportunities to work together, indicate that there is a genuine effort to build and sustain a community across institutions, beyond the boundaries of the N-TUTORR project.

Accessibility

- Accessibility was a recognised requirement across projects, and present in many elements of the other themes, especially around any projects that included digital learning.
- There was some discussion about the limits of accessibility, where the participants had articulated moving beyond simple accessibility definitions and had already wrapped accessibility into the inclusion agenda.
- The working definition of accessibility in the room incorporated widening the participation of disenfranchised people into higher education, and the unique positioning of the Technological HE sector to be able to facilitate that.

There were general discussions around ensuring accessibility for staff and students around the digital systems that were being implemented, along with ensuring that the innovative practices being developed under the N-TUTORR program also remained inclusive. It is also clear that there are specific needs of students with disabilities that require additional and careful attention, to make accessibility truly embedded in sector practices, and approaches to digital and physical spaces.

Hybrid

- Experiences from the Technological HE sector already highlight the effectiveness and necessity of hybrid models in sustaining the desired educational practices within institutions.
- The Technological HE sector is well positioned to lead in the development of hybrid approaches across Ireland, building on the lessons learned from emergency remote teaching in the pandemic, and the current projects around digital transformation.

Given the nature of the Technological HE sector, there is an opportunity for leadership in this space. Hybrid has been approached as a way of expanding and sustaining access for students, and for teaching staff to expand their reach as instructors as well as researchers and communicators outside of their institutions.

There is an expressed intent to produce a white paper on hybrid spaces post-covid. There is much to share about member institutions' experiences with using already present digital infrastructure to maintain access during an emergency. This paper can inform strategy for expanding and sustaining widening access and participation, via digital tools and places embedded in and around the physical places of the Technological HE sector.

The specific experiences of the N-TUTORR project team has led to important insights about the value of hybrid working, and also about what is necessary, in terms of digital and physical infrastructure, to make access to that mode of working feasible and comfortable.

Hybridity is a key tool in reaching and maintaining sustainability, and widening access goals, as it can reduce unnecessary travel, especially for students.

There is a recognized need for more instructional and event space post-covid, and there is great potential in hybrid modes to help achieve more and different places where teaching, learning, and connecting can take place.

Infrastructure and Funding

- Lots of discussion on the self-sustaining nature of projects, with future structural/hard funding and support considered essential by most participants.
- The involvement of Learning and Teaching units to ensure initiatives become part of the core of the institutional operations is essential. Such involvement is not always clear across the sector, with some locations having stronger relationships than others, and some smaller institutions lacking a strong centre for teaching and learning, and/or digital learning team.
- Upgrades in digital infrastructure (to facilitate learning and operational efficiency) are also a key focus
- Upgrades and additions to the physical plant of institutions, not just in classroom spaces but in shared curricular spaces such as labs, libraries, and event spaces.

It was clear in the room that some of the work engaged under N-TUTORR cannot be self-sustaining, and that institutions need to be part of the conversation (and support) to continue the work that the N-TUTORR project has started. Some initiatives will not be financially viable in the long-term, unless they are seen as part of the core operations of institutions. Some work cannot be sustained, in the absence of outside funding, unless they are folded into institutional budgets.

Increasing the number of students in the Technological HE sector requires attention to physical classrooms, labs, and other practical learning spaces. There is a continuing imperative to improve and expand the setups of rooms for lectures, as has recently happened with some institutions reconfiguring existing spaces to meet changing student needs. Lecture halls and smaller classrooms require careful consideration of not just the physical layout, raising questions of fixed seating or movable, types of desks, and active learning configurations, but also what technology needs to be embedded in the physical spaces to allow for maximum flexibility around hybrid delivery, as well as access to digital tools and places for on-site students and staff.

Digital Transformation

- Many institutional plans emphasise making better use of digital tools and platforms, like Virtual Learning Environments, and also Generative Artificial Intelligence
- The Technological HE sector would benefit from greater standardisation, and group procurement for edtech.
- Mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of transformation programmes should be embedded so that lessons can be learned from success and failures.

The emphasis on leveraging digital tools, was accompanied by discussions about campus infrastructure (both digital and physical). Digital tools include the virtual learning environments, as well as experiments with emerging technology such as generative AI. Explicit in the discussion of tools were also concerns about the accessibility of these tools and the benefits to widening participation. Individual campus infrastructures demonstrate a significant transformation maturity, suggesting that the Technological HE sector is developing resilience and flexibility in integrating technology and pedagogy.

There are multiple VLE solutions in the Technological HE sector, and member institutions that merged are still reconciling different solutions. Some attachment to edtech systems have less to do with what would be most useful or technically practical, and more to do with sunk costs, and reluctance to change out of fear of losing historically distinct identities within merged institutions.

Decisions around digital infrastructure and transformation need to be taken in terms of what requirements are for the sector as it is now, and the vision for its future. Central procurement and support might be one option. Institutions need to not be limited by "how things have been done" but motivated by the opportunities for and needs of the Technological HE sector.

Innovative Pedagogy

- There is interest in innovative teaching approaches, such as gamification, and the incorporation of micro-credentials into both learning and teaching, and CPD
- A focus on authentic assessment across disciplines to enhance the learning experience.

Gamification, micro credentials, authentic assessment and other pedagogical innovations were a key topic amongst the project leads. In addition there was a willingness to discuss and share practical experiences of these innovations. These pedagogical transformations are indicative of a scholarly and evidence-led approach to change, and also point to the need for a community around staff development, so that these innovations can be embedded as sustained change.

Hybrid and digital places in instructional contexts also require careful thinking about assessment practices. There is existing work in the sector around ensuring consistency in assessment practices, and enacting standards such as minimal and consistent information in the VLE.

Authentic assessment was discussed as an antidote to moral panics around academic misconduct of students, and generative AI tools. Liaising with PSRBs is also an existing practice in the Technological HE sector, and is a path to configuring assessment in authentic and grounded ways.

Sustainable Education, Employability, and Student Engagement

- The action plans indicated a strong drive towards incorporating sustainability, and employability into education, with a focus on creating a graduate profile that reflects these values.
- There was also an emphasis on promoting and integrating sustainable practices within the curriculum and assessment.
- The Student champions project, and the way it is involved in design and delivery indicates a strong student-centred approach to education.
- There was a mention of the implementation of e-portfolios across the TU sector for all in a specific sector as a way of personalising learning experiences.

Both sustainable education and employability were topics of discussion and appeared to be discrete activities as well as appearing in the wider themes. The workshop discussions, and mapping activities demonstrated that the project members were thinking about the links between these discrete themes and the wider outcomes of N-TUTORR. As well as reflecting the goals of the N-TUTORR project, these discussions should also be seen as evidence of holistic, and strategic thinking about transformation emerging in the Technological HE sector, and could be a template for future educational priorities to be developed.

The discussions around student engagement ranged from specific use of technologies such as e-portfolios through to more student-led initiatives such as the student champions projects. The mapping exercises in the workshop linked the student engagement exercises across many of the N-TUTORR themes. In the reporting in that session it became clear that, unsurprisingly, all of the participants had student centred practice at the heart of their strategies and projects, and were seeking more opportunities, both institutionally and across the sector, to expand and develop these approaches.

Staff Professional Development and Support Structures:

- There was mention of a staff development portal and Fellowship project
- There was mention of support structures that can persist beyond the life of current programmes.
- A recurring theme is the forming communities of practice (CoP) to share knowledge, develop professionally, and foster a culture of collaboration.
- Current approaches to enhancing the Technological HE sector's research capability and capacity will need a structural review of how staff can manage their current institutional time and commitments (for example, teaching), as well as developing their research portfolio.

During the workshop the development of academics and support staff came up at different times, ranging from specific training programmes for defined technologies, such as lecture capture or generative AI, through to more developmental activities such as applying for and receiving fellowships. All partners agreed on the need for staff development initiatives to

persist beyond the N-TUTORR project, and suggestions such as regular events, formation and support of CoPs, and a portal for sustained support were discussed.

There was a specific mention of the need for researcher development, whereby N-TUTORR was seen as a potential funding source to enhance the training and learning experience of PhD students and early careers researchers–this does not mean that N-TUTORR should be funding this work, but that a need for centralised institutional funding has been identified.

.A need was identified for a training programme to cover both academic specific activities (e.g. writing successful grant applications, managing research projects) and CPD opportunities. This is in response to the needs of different research hubs (who are normally somewhat insular), given the increased expectations for research activities and outputs in the new Technological HE sector. Carefully planned and well funded infrastructure would provide better people-related visibility & presence for those sort of research communities.

Recommendations

Given the analysis above, we recommend:

- **It would be of benefit to the N-TUTORR project and strategy if all of the institutionally based projects ensured that there was explicit and expressed strategic alignment with N-TUTORR goals.** There is a great deal of activity occurring across the N-TUTORR project, some of the activities are centrally coordinated and clearly linked, however, smaller scale activities are also happening in institutions, and these potentially reach a large number of staff and students beyond the larger projects.
- There is a genuine effort to build and sustain a community across institutions, beyond the boundaries of the N-TUTORR project. **Plans should be in place to strengthen and sustain the existing community building activities as well as developing further opportunities.**
- The working definition of accessibility in the room incorporated widening the participation of disenfranchised people into higher education, and the unique positioning of the Technological HE sector to be able to facilitate that. **Initiatives around Universal Design for Learning, widening participation, and inclusion might usefully be included in a single vision for a more inclusive use of technology to transform the student experience.**
- Hybrid has been approached as a way of expanding and sustaining access for students, and for teaching staff to expand their reach as instructors as well as researchers and communicators outside of their institutions. **There is an opportunity for the Technological HE sector to lead on the development of hybrid approaches and establish best practice, through the writing of a white paper.**
- Some infrastructure initiatives will not be financially viable in the long-term, unless they are seen as part of the core operations of institutions. Some work cannot be

sustained, in the absence of outside funding, unless they are folded into institutional budgets. **The N-TUTORR project is well placed to research and report on these sector-wide infrastructure issues and develop a high-level risk register for strategic leaders to consider.**

- **Decisions around digital infrastructure and transformation need to be taken in terms of what requirements are for the sector as it is now, and the vision for its future.** Central procurement and support might be one option. Institutions need to not be limited by "how things have been done" but motivated by the opportunities for and needs of the Technological HE sector.
- All of the N-TUTORR leads had student-centred practice at the heart of their strategies and projects, and were seeking more opportunities, both institutionally and across the sector, to expand and develop these approaches. Additionally, all partners agreed on the need for staff development initiatives to persist beyond the N-TUTORR project. **Suggestions such as regular events, formation and support of CoPs, and a portal for sustained support are options that the current leads all seem to support and might be opportunities for sustained impact of the N-TUTORR project.**
- **A need was identified for a training programme to cover both academic specific activities** (e.g. writing successful grant applications, managing research projects) **and CPD opportunities.** This is in response to the needs of different research hubs (who are normally somewhat insular), given the increased expectations for research activities and outputs in the new Technological HE sector.

In addition to the recommendations above, and in follow-up conversations with TU colleagues at the OER2024 conference, and online, several other recommendations emerged that might be classified as "leadership" or in particular, "leading the Technological HE sector". These recommendations are identified separately below as fuel for discussion in setting up a leadership network.

Transforming Learning and teaching

- Establish a shared digital innovation hub for the Technological and Higher Education sector to enable collaboration on digital tool development, integration and training
- Develop a series of open CPD training materials covering common and emerging digital technologies, and how they can impact on teaching methods.
- Implement a balanced scorecard for monitoring the strategic performance of new learning and teaching projects.
- Establish an "Infrastructure Readiness" tool to assess the digital infrastructure of a Campus, building or room in order to assess the digital capability of the space in order to keep pace with pedagogical and technological advancements.

Sector Aligned Change Management

- Develop a common change management program for staff leading change within the sector.
- Create a toolkit of resources for managing change, including case studies, best practices, and templates.
- Implement regular change management workshops to share practice and identify common themes.

Collaboration, Partnership and Network Sustainability

- Create sharing opportunities across the Technological HE sector, to share digital innovations, exchange ideas, and celebrate achievements, in either new or existing events.
- Establish a sector-wide partnership framework, with templates for project working, that includes shared resources and facilities.
- Develop a shared repository of innovative teaching resources and case studies. Establish a peer-review system for these resources to encourage feedback and continuous improvement.
- Identify common sustainability modules that can be offered across the sector.
- Instigate a Sector (environmental) Sustainability Challenge, with specific activities and outcomes linked to curricular content and the mission of the sector.
- Develop collaborative research projects, and researcher development opportunities.
- Build on the Student Champions programme to establish student advisory panels to regularly contribute to curriculum development and sector policy.