Research integration essential for recovery

NAIRTL’s annual conference held on 11 and 12 November highlighted issues surrounding how research funding can shape teaching and learning, and the importance of integrating research into third and fourth level education.

John Bowman chaired a panel of leaders of research funding organisations, and a lively debate took place in response to audience questions. Dr Eucharia Meehan of the HEA said: “Since the mid- to late-90s, the HEA has endorsed the notion that research and teaching are intrinsically linked and are part of the education continuum”. Professor Frank Gannon (Science Foundation Ireland) said: “The need to have an educational system working optimally so that it can link into SFI is self-evident”, and pointed to the UREKA programme which previously funded undergraduate students to take on summer research projects, as an example of good practice in integration.

The debate was sparked by a recent communique from 46 European Ministers responsible for higher education in countries involved in the Bologna Process stating that integration between education and research was required “to bring about sustainable integration between education and research”. The need to have an educational system working optimally so that it can link into SFI is self-evident, said: “Since the mid- to late-90s, the HEA has endorsed the notion that research and teaching are intrinsically linked and are part of the education continuum”. Professor Frank Gannon (Science Foundation Ireland) said: “The need to have an educational system working optimally so that it can link into SFI is self-evident”, and pointed to the UREKA programme which previously funded undergraduate students to take on summer research projects, as an example of good practice in integration.

The conference was held at Trinity College Dublin and attracted 180 delegates. Keynote speakers included Dr Anne Lee (University of Surrey), Brad Wuetherick (University of Alberta) and Professor Caroline Kreber (University of Edinburgh). Video clips are on www.nairtl.ie.

 Dublin Castle hosted the National Excellence in Teaching Awards on 18th November, where the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, presented five awards on behalf of the National Academy. All thirty-eight higher education institutions were invited to participate in the awards scheme this year.

More than one hundred guests attended the ceremony, including senior representatives of many institutions, staff from the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Science, as well as friends and family of the award winners.

President McAleese said: “These awards are such an important fit right at this moment with our ambition to develop Ireland as a smart economy”. She also felt the Awards had potential “to really enhance teaching policy and teaching practice in Ireland right across every discipline”, an effect that would reveal itself over time as others strove to reach similar levels of excellence to the current award winners. Michael Kelly, Chairman of the Higher Education Authority, closed the ceremony by saying: “this morning, I was inspired, and inspiration runs through the approaches adopted by the award winners, which make for attention-grabbing teaching”.

The 2010 Awards programme will be launched in January, with all higher education institutions invited to nominate outstanding teachers for consideration.

President honours outstanding teachers

Symposium on generic competences

Generic competences are the skills, attitudes and knowledge that students acquire over the course of their studies, which can be applied in a variety of job and life situations.

Emphasising generic and transferable skill training in higher education helps to ensure that graduates have wider career and employment options. These competences form an important part of building a more cohesive European higher education sector.

However, integrating generic competences into the curriculum is a challenge for many teaching professionals, and it is not clear how this can best be achieved or how best these competences can be assessed.

Speaking at the launch of the National Academy’s fourth Bologna Symposium, held at UCC on 30th September, Minister for Lifelong Learning Seán Haughey highlighted the need for competence development saying: “At the heart of any ‘smart’ economy are people – educated, skilled, adaptable and innovative people”. The symposium was introduced by Dr Norma Ryan, one of Ireland’s Bologna experts.

The level of interest in the symposium topic was apparent from the attendance, which filled UCC’s Aula Maxima hall, and in the 2,700 replies to a survey of employers, higher education staff and students that the National Academy carried out in 2009. The survey results indicated general agreement on the top competences that graduate students need. Successful development of these competences will be important to Ireland’s future prosperity, competitiveness and social cohesion.
Supporting supervisors of research students

The National Academy is now half way through a major project to develop strategies to support supervisors of postgraduate students. Elements of the project include induction sessions for new or inexperienced staff, and tailored workshops for experienced staff members.

In Spring 2009, the project steering group, made up of representatives of the NAIRTL partner institutes CIT, NUI Galway, TCD, UCC and WIT, carried out a national survey of academics, students and employers to ascertain key priorities. The survey results showed broad agreement with, and support for, initiatives to provide training and support for supervisors.

Drawing on the survey results, and best practice from international institutions in the US, Europe and Australia, the group has designed a training framework of four workshops which will be piloted in the NAIRTL partner institutions in Spring 2010.

Assessment: the big questions, some answers

UCC’s School of Medicine is convening an Education for Health Symposium entitled “Assessment: the big questions, some answers”. The event will take place on 22nd January 2010 at the Brookfield Health Sciences Campus. International speakers include Professor John Senser, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and Dr John Patterson, Queen Mary University of London. Irish speakers include Professor Peter Cantillon, NUI Galway, winner of a 2008 NAIRTL Excellence in Teaching Award. UCC colleagues will focus on assessment strategies and on assessment in problem-based learning.

The event has been approved by the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland for 6 credits of Continuing Medical Education (CME). Registration is web-based at www.nairtl.ie/events. The symposium has been supported through a NAIRTL grant, and attendance is free of charge.

About NAIRTL

NAIRTL is funded by the HEA Strategic Innovation Fund. For details regarding any of our events or activities, please look at our website. Alternatively, you are always welcome to give us a call.

If you would like to highlight a relevant research project or initiative in the National Academy newsletter or make any suggestions for future content, please email nairtl@ucc.ie

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