

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DATA HUB: INNOVATING AND PROMOTING STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES IN IRELAND

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## Abstract

The research office in one large professional School/ Department in one higher education institution in Ireland is a multidisciplinary team, focused on the areas of support including pre-award, post-award and finance administration. A data Hub has been created as a result of the new plan, and a Share point software implementation, enabling additional research development opportunities surrounding advancing academic staff in the area of research funding applications and research development in the areas of health services research. The context for this research builds on a decade of work in the area of staff professional development and particular on the need for the digital innovations in the area of staff professional development - the last 8 years in the area of funding and pre-award support and the 5 years preceding that - on a survey work following a detailed analysis of the questionnaire data on professional development needs collected from lecturing staff across eight member institutions of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA), the study that has been conducted on behalf of the Dublin Centre for Academic Development (DCAD) that had its principal aim to identify the professional development interests of lecturing staff across DRHEA member institutions. The aim and objective of this paper is to present the work in progress on the innovation that it a co-designing, creating and implementing a Data Hub at a one school/department in a large higher education institution in Ireland to improve engagement and outcomes among academic and professional staff in research development. The data Hub serves as access point for specialist services capture tools and apply them to professionally develop expertise, further existing knowledge and skills, promote reliable support and analysis and evidence-based innovations in staff professional development. One large professional school in a HEI in Ireland has developed a SharePoint communications site Hub to strengthen and expand research skills and research expertise in supporting the development and submission of funding applications in the area of health and health services. The Hub core areas include ideas development, variations of avenues for submission of funding proposals, tools and toolkits for drafting research ideas and applications, and grant management. Through the implementation of the Hub and establishment of the useful resources, templates and tools, data accuracy, the work efficiency and accessibility have significantly improved. Centralised information and data collection has enabled a broader engagement and reach with research development supports for academic staff, has led to an increased number of funding applications, a clearer guideline on the processes, supported new projects, and created additional educational opportunities in research professional development for health science professionals.

**Keywords:** *Professional development, digital innovation, inclusion, staff questionnaire data, research funding, teaching and learning.*

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## 1. Introduction

A comprehensive review prepared for UNIESCO put in focus the ‘discouraging environment’ for the academic profession worldwide against the backdrop of the increasing student numbers, decreased educational budgets together with greater bureaucratization and demands for accountability (Altbach et.al, 2009). For the professionals in higher education, the projects such as CAP and EURAC then provided a rich comparative data on the perceptions of academic staff in relations to their roles and working positions in universities. Globally there appeared significant shifts in the status and levels of autonomy for many professions, while it is difficult to assess how the quality of teaching and learning was affected in higher education, one approach would be to investigate the views of academic staff towards their professional development opportunities aimed at supporting further and enhancing their teaching and their research roles

in the universities. The context for suggesting and implementing the innovations in professional development for academic staff in relation to their research roles, was set by the results of the large survey, from a large-scale empirical study of the professional development experiences and interests of academic staff from eight higher education institutions in Ireland. This survey provided an insight into the lowest and the highest rankings areas of interest for professional development and insights into the changing nature of staff approaches to learning as perceived by respondents of the Voices of Irish Academics survey (Kozina, Slowey, 2011; 2013). The Voices of Irish Academic staff survey was supported by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under the Enhancement of Learning Strand of the DRHEA (Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance) and funded by the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF).

## 2. Design

The survey “The voice of Irish academics: towards a professional development strategy” was launched and collected data in 2011 that explored the views of academic staff across eight higher education institutions in the greater Dublin region on a number of aspects of academics’ work. These were professional development interests, aspects of daily work and level of satisfaction of professional development to date to mention a few (Slowey, Kozina, 2015). The questionnaire that was distributed consisted of 20 items, which in total included 55 questions distributed across five parts: 1) role within the academic institution, 2) issues around changing nature of teaching, 3) the extent of participation in recent professional development activities, 4) perceptions of professional development activities which could be provided by DCAD and, 5) views and experiences in relation to support within the higher education institutions for professional development.

The intention was to primarily cover a broad range of issues and to have the scope to capture most of the aspects of teaching relevant to day-to-day experiences of academic staff, the questions in the survey required Likert type scale responses from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe all responses, but rather to set a context, the author only intends to present a small selection of the responses. The data which is discussed below is from a self-selected sample. The distribution can be seen in Table 1 below.

*Table 1. The level of respondents’ current position.*

|                            | N   | %    |
|----------------------------|-----|------|
| Professor                  | 37  | 5.4  |
| Associate Professor        | 31  | 4.5  |
| Senior lecturer            | 116 | 16.8 |
| Lecturer                   | 363 | 52.5 |
| Junior/ Associate Lecturer | 48  | 6.9  |
| Researcher                 | 53  | 7.7  |
| Other                      | 43  | 6.2  |
| Total                      | 691 | 100  |

Overall, there were 655 responses to Q10.8 “My research informs my teaching” with 69.9% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Overall, less than one fifth of the respondents from the 8 higher education institutions in the Dublin region expressed some form of agreement that they struggle to keep up with the use of technology, which displayed a high level of confidence in the use of technology. Respondents’ attitudes towards professional development activities focusing on the ways to improve teaching and research practices were investigated through, for example, statement stating the “interest in Use of new technology” – with 76.9% of the respondents to this statement expressing moderate and great interest in use of new technologies.

## 3. Methods: Description of innovation

The results from the Voices of Irish Academic staff survey (Kozina, Slowey, 2014, 2015) set the context for presenting and implementing the innovative approaches to academic staff professional development in relation to upskilling and developing in their research roles. In 2023 the SharePoint site has been created and launched for the academic staff in one university and in one department in one higher education institution in the Dublin region (that was among the respondents to the Voices of Irish academics survey). The newly launched SharePoint site was filled with all the training resources for the areas including research page, with the useful templates and guides on how to apply for research funding, the human resources page, with how to proceed to employ the research personnel, A-Z policies, a finance page, and to mention a few.

The document libraries became a central feature to SharePoint team sites because the staff can all go on to the document libraries and upload, download the working documents. And they're also a central feature of hub sites because when the access is given to a SharePoint Hub site, there are various documents that are uploaded on the Hub site and the staff who are Principals investigators on research funding applications, and who are preparing the research proposals can go into them and usually these documents are available in a read format. To add this would be a **staff Internet site** that was created as a resource. Importantly, to mention that the main distinction between a staff Internet hub and a Teams site is the Internet site (which is also called Hub) makes information available to the people to read and have access to as opposed to presenting them with a virtual space for collaborating or development of documents or materials, where people go to upload, download and work together on the documents. On the Hub the academic staff only have access to information, and the purposes of designing a Hub is to push out the information to a large number of people. To add, this information is largely already in the open access, but the Hub site serves as a suit with collating the information in one place. The standard SharePoint Hub feature in that information is being pushed out to people. So how would the department staff access the Internet Hub with the resources? As a first step they would go to the Microsoft365 landing page, or microsoft365office.com and will include their college /higher institution credentials for the purposes of login, they would also see a copilot and a number of other Apps to the left-hand side corner of that page. There would be for example a OneDrive, the Teams and other Apps including SharePoint app. On the SharePoint Hub the academic would just consume the information, they could look at it, there could also be an option to download the documents and templates, but they would not be uploading or editing it.

With this purpose the space called research hub, with more links to documents and templates on how to complete for funding, was also designed withing then main SharePoint Hub site. So as the name suggests, it gives the academic staff most up to date information on, for example, how to apply for funding, they could click on various links and they can see the details about how to apply for funding. The various quick links are also embedded and there's various sources of information you could click in and gather the required information and find out what the requirements are. The research hub is essentially became a SharePoint document library, and would also have options to create new folders where new file could be uploaded with any additional folders as required. One of the central purposes within a SharePoint Hub site is that the administrator can take away that step of emailing someone or emailing research projects officer or a finance person and it is centrally located.

In summary, the SharePoint is a platform that can do various things within a web-based context. The SharePoint is the technology or the platform that we're using for developing the SharePoint Hub. For example it could be considered that the OneDrive is a variation on SharePoint too, and also the App called Teams. And once you go into SharePoint Hub, you would see a SharePoint document library that's embedded. In brief, the SharePoint is Microsoft's technology that allows collaboration on documents and also the ability to send links to these documents. So once someone sends an individual a link to a document, the SharePoint would be the underlying technology to the SharePoint Hub making it a communications site, which is designed to make information available to large number of staff or an audience and they just have access to read the information or download it. Once the SharePoint is being used within App called Teams, it would be designed in contrast for a smaller group of people who then be able to collaboration on editing document in App Teams, rather than only viewing it. The SharePoint Hub would be quite visual and would have an editing tool also, where the administrator could go in and change the site would look like, unlike the App Teams that won't have the home page that you would look at and interact with, and it is purely functional. To add also that the SharePoint, the App Teams, and OneDrive would be three completely different systems. Once the academic staff sends a link or shares anything with other staff on the Microsoft 365 platform, the SharePoint would be the technology that underlies the process of sharing the documents. The SharePoint is also to be understood as the technology behind the OneDrive. The App Teams is then a platform that would have various Microsoft app embedded in, it has the function of making calls, and has the option to see the email calendar. It is helpful that the App Teams would also have the SharePoint document library embedded within it to enable working and co-authoring the documents among a group of people. To conclude, App Teams is very good for collaboration among colleagues, but the SharePoint Hub in opposite would only displays the final finished documents, that need to be available to a wider audience that is bigger than an individual team of colleagues. The SharePoint Hub would always have a much larger audience who has access to it. The academic staff are equipped with more time and are more flexible to access the information on the SharePoint Hub, in their own time, to log go and to have a look around it. The main idea from a SharePoint Hub perspective, it is possible to design it to be more like a website as we have done in one Department in one Higher Education Institution, where the academic staff have now access to various template and guidance on how to prepare applications and research proposals for funding.

#### 4. Discussion

It is evident that the respondents' attitudes towards professional development activities focusing on the ways to improve teaching and research practices were investigated with a particularly strong interest expressed a strong interest for research and access to research fundings. The findings were compelling in relation to the interest expressed for the opportunities to use the new technology and professional development opportunities in research, applying for research funding. Additionally, professional development activities on the use of new technology received high rating by survey participants. The responses also shown that promoting a culture of sustainable engagement for academic staff to take ownership of their professional and personal development is key in enabling sustained innovations. Internationally, there long been a recognition that the enhancement of teaching, learning and research for academic staff requires structured professional development opportunities (OECD, 2010) and could also be made available through a range of offerings both accredited and non-accredited professional development opportunities (National Forum, 2015). Any innovation to be sustainable, required an inherent inclusivity and flexibility that enables all staff who are engaged in conducting research and support them in their applications for funding, regardless of their professional roles from Assistant Professor to full Professor titles, to engage with it to support their professional development throughout their career (Donnelly, Maguire, 2018). It can be argued that the digital innovation SharePoint Hub site provides a framework guidance for the professional development of individuals and gives direction for planning, developing and engaging in professional development activities in relation to research funding applications. The key feature of this SharePoint Hub is flexibility. To be sustainable, the professional development needed to be enabling for staff at different stages of their career, flexible enough to be used by staff at different levels of proficiency in applying for funding, and reflective of all learning needs of staff.

#### 5. Conclusion

Through the implementation of the SharePoint Hub site and establishment of the useful resources, templates and tools, data accuracy, efficiency and accessibility have significantly improved. The centralised resources and templates collection, enabling professional in research role for academics, enabled a broader and more sustained engagement and reach with research development supports. It has led to an increased number of funding applications among the academic staff, more clearer guidelines on the processes, a greater ability to support new research projects, and created further educational opportunities in research professional development in health science professionals.

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