

A Reference Framework for Teaching in Higher Education

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The NETTLE Meta or Reference Framework has been developed by a member of the NETTLE steering group working in conjunction with colleagues, and taken through a number of review and development cycles with NETTLE partners and workshop participants from around Europe.


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A Reference Framework for Teaching in Higher Education

Introduction and summary

A major aim of NETTLE has been to develop a European-wide academic reference framework within which to equip educators in higher education with the competencies and skills necessary to provide effective and validated support for learners. This paper describes and explores the reference framework produced by NETTLE.

This reference framework will contribute to the realisation of the Lisbon European Council's ambitions for education and training in Europe, by focusing on the objective of "improving education and training for teachers and trainers" at tertiary level. It will support Action Line 5 of the Bologna Declaration, "the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance" with respect to learning and teaching.

This paper is written for those responsible for making and implementing policy on teaching in higher education across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It offers guidance and suggestions for use at the national, regional and university level.

The paper recognizes the EHEA-wide intentions to increase the mobility of labour and to improve the quality of university graduates. It also recognizes the necessity to fully reflect national, regional and institutional autonomy in devising and implementing locally appropriate educational practice.

This intention and this necessity can of course come into conflict, especially in relation to standards. The approach taken here avoids this conflict, whilst still offering a firm basis for national standards. This reference framework provides a structure within which locally appropriate *standards frameworks* can be developed by nations, regions and institutions and courses on teaching in higher education can be designed, run, assessed and evaluated within Universities. It may also be used as a basis for measuring, assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching.

This document also includes one possible outline description of standards for teaching in higher education, but other implementations of the reference framework are of course possible.

The reference framework has several functions. Its use will:

- Ensure that all of the major issues which a standards framework should address are in fact addressed in the development of particular standards frameworks.
- Enable the sharing of good practice in the development and implementation of standards.
- Enable the sharing of good practice also in the planning, operation, assessment and evaluation of courses in teaching in higher education across the EHEA.
- Enable the comparison of national, regional and institutional standards developed with the use of the reference framework, to enable judgements to be made about the equivalence of teaching qualifications.
- Facilitate the production and use of materials across the EHEA to support the development and qualification of University teachers.
- Facilitate the emergence of 'teaching in higher education' as a recognised and valued academic and professional discipline.
- Similarly facilitate the further emergence of staff and educational development in higher education as a recognized and valued academic and professional discipline, members of which can share and extend their practice across the EHEA more effectively than at present, to the longer term benefit of the quality of teaching in higher education.
- Provide some common terminology which will facilitate conversations about teaching in higher education among academics from different nations, regions, institutions and also disciplines.

The Reference Framework

The basic reference framework comprises six questions:

1. What particular teaching and other related roles do the tertiary teachers undertake and plan to undertake?
2. What are the main contexts – disciplines, programmes, professions, perhaps institution – in which the tertiary teachers will work?
3. What are or should be the goals and purposes of their teaching?
4. What competences do tertiary teachers need to work effectively and appropriately?
5. What values, virtues and principles should demonstrably underpin their teaching?
6. What knowledge should inform their work?

Any well constructed standards framework, we suggest, comprises a coherent and reasoned set of answers to these questions.

Alongside each question below, some comments are offered, variously on why this question is considered important to the development and implementation of a standards framework and on some possible approaches to answering the question.

Question 1

What particular teaching and other related roles do the tertiary teachers undertake and plan to undertake?

Comments

A standards framework needs to be demonstrably appropriate, clearly comprehensible, and preferably also attractive, to the teachers for whom it will form the basis of a professional qualification.

The more that is known about the teachers, the easier it is to ensure that the teaching standard, and then the courses and qualifications developed on the basis of this teaching standard, are appropriate to them, comprehensible by

them and attractive to them. It is important to know both what they have in common and about their differences. In particular about the teaching roles they undertake.

Of course it is impossible to write a single standard that precisely matches to each individual to whom it is to apply. However, a good standards framework developed within the reference framework will be capable of further adaptation by each individual teacher to match their particular circumstances. It will still be a standard, because it still has some common features with the standards which other teachers are using.

The adaptations by individual teachers should not be a matter of whim. They should be made on the basis of evidence and theory.

Question 2

What are the main contexts – disciplines, programmes, professions, perhaps institution – in which the tertiary teachers will work?

Comments

Teaching in higher education may be one of the most highly differentiated professions there is. Each of the contexts listed above, and possibly others besides, have a substantial effect on what it means to be competent tertiary teacher.

A standards framework has to acknowledge these various contexts. For example, national or regional priorities may quite properly influence the account of what it means to be a competent University teacher in that country or region. The same is true for the University's mission.

The discipline or profession being taught certainly has an effect on how teaching is properly conducted, although not all current disciplinary differences in approaches to teaching are well grounded in theory and research.

Question 3

What are or should be the goals and purposes of their teaching?

Comments

Teaching in higher education is surely a purposeful activity. The more clearly the goals and purposes of teaching are articulated, the more likely teachers are to select, create and use appropriate teaching and learning approaches, and hence the more likely students are to succeed in their learning.

The goals of higher education teaching are not always as clearly articulated as they might usefully be. This question, about the goals and purposes of teaching, probably needs to be addressed at a number of levels, from national, regional, institutional and disciplinary and then at the level of individual programmes, courses, lessons and assignments.

Question 4

What competences do tertiary teachers need to work effectively and appropriately?

Comments

Many professions – including medicine, to an increasing extent law, and many of the applied professions including business, engineering and languages – are comfortable to speak about competences, capabilities, abilities or some other such term to describe what members of that profession are able to do well in their professional work, alongside of course what they know.

It is possible and useful to describe a list of the competences of the teacher in terms of what the teacher does – for example, planning, designing and running classes, assessing student work and the like. It may also be found productive to define the competences of the teacher in terms of what their teaching achieves, considering both how they teach and of how this leads to learning.

Question 5

What values, virtues and principles should demonstrably underpin their teaching?

Comments

Many professions describe the necessary competences or capabilities of their members. Similarly, many professions describe the values, virtues or principles which are a requirement of membership of that profession. Teaching in higher education, if it is to be considered as a profession, needs an explicit base in values, virtues and principles.

In speaking of an explicit values base of teaching in higher education, we are not suggesting that countries, regions, institutions or disciplines should specify what a teacher believes. This would be highly intrusive and inappropriate. But it is legitimate to say that, for example, teachers should be teach in a scholarly way; should show respect to their students; and should not discriminate unfairly against individual students or members of particular groups.

Values, virtues and principles belong in professional standards in so far as they affect the way that members of the profession behave.

Question 6

What knowledge should inform their work?

Comments

Professional standards, any professional standards, should make reference to the necessary knowledge of members of the profession.

Those who teach in higher education may be seen as having two professions; the profession or discipline being taught, and the teaching of that profession or discipline. Each of these two professions may be felt to have its own necessary knowledge base.

An alternative view is that members of any profession also have some responsibility to ensure the future of their profession, by handing on knowledge and expertise.

Whichever view we take, some specification of required knowledge forms an integral part of a standard.

An implementation of the reference framework

1. People

Each tertiary teacher is an individual. What factors concerned with the individual may affect and inform a good framework for standards for those who teach in tertiary education? We suggest:

1. Their educational role or roles – for example, lecturer, programme leader, subject leader, on-line tutor, personal tutor, learning technologist, instructional designer, graduate teaching assistant, seminar leader, laboratory demonstrator, workshop technician, technician, librarian, educational administrator....
2. Their other professional roles – for example, research, management, consultancy...
3. Their training and qualifications, in their discipline or profession, and in teaching in tertiary education
4. Their particular current capabilities, enthusiasms, and development wishes as a tertiary teacher

It will clearly be very difficult for a framework for standards, a standard or a particular course to address each of these items for each participant. We do not advocate this. However, we do advocate that each participant on a course in tertiary teaching is strongly encouraged to identify these factors in themselves, and then to adjust their own learning and their own particular definition of what it means to be a good teacher in light of these, and particularly in light of the first two.

2. Contexts

Context has a huge effect on what comprises appropriate teaching and support for learning. What are the most important elements of the context in which teaching happens? We would suggest:

1. The discipline which the teacher is teaching, including the ways of thinking and working that characterise that discipline;

2. If different from the first item, the profession for which the students are being prepared;
3. The University in which the teacher works, its culture, beliefs about education, norms and aspirations; and
4. International, national and regional laws, norms and priorities for tertiary education.

As they address these contextual factors, designers of standards frameworks, standards, courses and qualifications for tertiary teachers can ensure that the competences, the underpinning values & etc, the underpinning knowledge and the goals of teaching are all locally appropriate. Until this adaptation to local context is undertaken, then frameworks for standards, standards themselves, and therefore courses and qualifications for tertiary teachers, may be less effective.

‘Adaptation to local context’ does not mean ‘going along uncritically with every current opinion and practice about teaching’. Unless current local practice is already exemplary, then challenge and negotiation and scholarly, theory-informed debate will be required to identify what good teaching, in that context, should mean.

3. Goals and purposes

What might be the goals of teaching (beyond, of course, that students should achieve the intended learning outcomes of the course)? Expressed in terms of student learning; which of course is the ultimate purpose of teaching; you may feel that the main goals of teaching are that students should:

1. Understand, accept and value the learning goals for their studies
2. Also understand, accept and value the learning and teaching methods whereby they will work towards and achieve these learning goals;

3. Be supported, prompted and indeed sometimes challenged in their learning, by teaching and by any other appropriate means and resources;
4. Receive truthful, constructive and usable feedback on their work and learning;
5. Receive fair and appropriate marks and grades;
6. Review the effectiveness of their learning;
7. Also review the effectiveness of the support they received for their learning; and
8. Develop such modified or new approaches to their learning as are appropriate.

The teacher who demonstrably helped their students to achieve each of these goals of teaching would surely be widely recognized as a very capable teacher.

4. Competences

We may feel that the core competence of a teacher is the ability to design and implement effective programmes of study. In more detail, but without undue prescription, perhaps a teacher should be able to:

1. Specify, explain and sometimes negotiate the intentions, the intended outcomes, for learning on the course or programme
2. Similarly specify the learning and teaching methods to be used.
3. Teach and otherwise support, guide, prompt, provoke etc. students to achieve these outcomes or negotiated variants thereof.
4. Ensure that students receive feedback on their work, including though not wholly by providing this feedback.
5. Help students to review the effectiveness of their learning;

6. Mark and grade student work;
7. Review the effectiveness of their teaching; and
8. Change their teaching as necessary to make it more effective.

This account of the competences or capabilities of a tertiary teacher is deliberately very similar to the earlier account of the goals of teaching.

We might have confidence in a teacher who could do; and indeed as a matter of course did do; these various things.

Other theories or models of learning, of course, would lead to a different set of competences. But it is surely scholarly to ground an account of the competences of a teacher in a model of the process of learning.

5. Values, virtues and principles

Many professions are characterized by such values, virtues and principles. (The Hippocratic Oath for doctors is a famous example – Wikipedia, current, also has links to more recent versions). Whatever we call them, what matters is that these values, virtues and principles drive, inform and underpin the practice of teaching. They are a matter of action. They describe how teachers behave, what teachers do. Belief, we suggest, is properly a private matter; action, a professional matter.

So; what values, virtues or principles might inform the work of the teacher? These need to be discussed; and as far as possible agreed; very widely. From current practice, values, virtues and principles may be felt to include:

1. The virtues of: respectfulness, sensitivity, pride, courage, fairness, openness, restraint, collegiality (MacFarlane 2003: 128)
2. The principles or values of: Commitment to student development and learning; avoiding dual relationships (that is both professional and personal/sexual relationships) with students; confidentiality; valid assessment of students; appropriate respect, for the institution, for scholarship, for the professions and for

professionalism; working with diversity and promoting inclusivity; and continued reflection on professional practice. Sources for these, and alternate and sometimes extended versions thereof, include STLHE (Murray et al 1996), SEDA (SEDA values, current) and Higher Education Academy (current).

Values, virtues and principles provide guidance on how to teach – not on particular teaching methods, but on particular orientations to teaching, to students, to learning. Examples: An assessment task may be valid and reliable – but is it also fair? A lecture may be thorough and well-prepared – but is it really the best way to develop students’ learning, scholarship, professionalism?

Also, values, virtues and principles continue to inform and drive action when the teacher finds themselves in new situations, situations not explicitly covered by the competences. Example: You may only be having an informal conversation with a student – but are you showing appropriate respect for the institution and colleagues? In a class – are you helping the student to reflect on their approach to learning rather than simply telling them the answer?

6. Knowledge

What kinds of knowledge might inform the practice of teaching in tertiary education? Perhaps knowledge of:

1. The subject being taught;
2. Theory and practice related to at least the particular learning and teaching, and hopefully more broadly about learning and teaching;
3. The capabilities and goals of the students; and
4. Relevant national, institutional, disciplinary and professional codes etc.

To emphasise; it is not enough for the lecturer simply to know these things. To increase and ensure the quality of teaching, it is essential that the teacher uses this knowledge to plan and undertaking their teaching.

A framework for standards that takes seriously competences; values, virtues and principles; and knowledge used in practice; can already be very effective. It can be used to plan good courses in teaching in tertiary education, and can be used by an individual teacher to review their current teaching and to plan the further development of their teaching.

Conclusion

The reference framework offers a sound basis for planning and implementation of standard, programmes and qualifications for tertiary teaching. The example of implementation included shows how this reference framework can be used in practice.

The aims of this work on teaching frameworks and standards are to improve and further professionalise tertiary teaching, and thereby to improve student's learning, the quality of graduates across the European Higher Education Area, and hence the both the economic effectiveness and quality of both individual life and society as a whole.

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SEDA Values – http://www.seda.ac.uk/about_seda.htm

Wikipedia (current) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocratic_Oath

Related NETTLE documents available online

NETTLE Reference Framework Mapping document

NETTLE has been researching what it means to be a teacher in Higher / Tertiary education, across the diversity and richness of cultures and institutions which it's partners represent. This information is being used to inform the development of guidelines for the development of a teacher's skills, and in context examples of how this might be done.

NETTLE has 38 partners from 29 countries within Europe. Mainly from higher education institutions the partners are a mix of educational development professionals, subject specialist and professional trainers.

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