STAFF DEV IN LEARNING & TEACHING

Co-funded by the European Union

Staff development in learning and teaching at European universities

Results from the STAFF-DEV focus groups

Catherine O'Mahony, Sinead Gallivan and Katy Dineen

March 2025

This publication is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial CC BY-NC

This information may be freely used and copied for non-commercial purposes, provided that the source is acknowledged (University College Cork).

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

STAFF DEV IN LEARNING & TEACHING

UCC University College Cork, Ireland Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

How to cite this report:

O'Mahony, C., Gallivan, S., Dineen, K. (2025). Staff development in learning and teaching at European universities: Results from the STAFF-DEV focus groups. Cork, University College Cork.

University College Cork / Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

College Road

Cork T12 K8AF

Cork, Ireland

+353 (0)21 490 3000

www.ucc.ie

Table of contents

Acknowledgements 4

Key findings 5

Chapter 1 - STAFF-DEV project and focus group approach 6

1.1. Background: the increasing importance of staff development 6
1.2. Research questions 7
1.3. Methodology 8
1.4. Researcher positionality 9

Chapter 2 - Results and discussion 10

2.1. Institutionalisation of staff development 10
2.2. From a 'tick-box' climate to a culture of teaching and learning 13
2.3. Relationships matter, but they are not the only thing that matters 14
2.4. Acknowledging barriers while digging deeper 15
2.5. Limitations of the study 17

Chapter 3 - Conclusions and recommendations 18

References 20

Appendix A: Composition of focus group 24

Appendix B: Focus group schedules 26

Appendix C: Detailed participant quotes per theme 29

Acknowledgements

This report is based on the results of qualitative research carried out in autumn 2024, drawing on insights from staff in higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This study is part of the EU-funded project "Staff development in learning and teaching at European universities" (STAFF-DEV), which is coordinated by the European University Association (EUA) in partnership with University College Cork in Ireland, Utrecht University in the Netherlands, Ruhr University Bochum in Germany, and the University of Oslo in Norway.

This research was conducted under ethical approval of the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College Cork. Sincere thanks to the project partners for their expert advice and feedback on the design of the focus groups and the reporting of the results. These include Nicoline Frølich (University of Oslo), Manon Kluijtmans (Utrecht University), Jonas Leschke (Ruhr University Bochum), and Bjørn Stensaker (University of Oslo). Thank you also to the European Commission for co-funding this project. Special thanks to Thérèse Zhang and Gohar Hovhannisyan for their constant support and encouragement throughout this study and their thoughtful input and guidance as we finalised this report.

This work was led by Catherine O'Mahony, Sinead Gallivan and Katy Dineen at University College Cork.

Key findings

This report is based on qualitative research conducted between October and November 2024 under the Erasmus+-funded project “Staff development in teaching at European universities” (STAFF-DEV). Four focus groups were organised involving 16 higher education staff representing 16 different Higher education Institutions and 10 different countries in the European Higher Education Area. This work is complementary to a European study conducted by the EUA in April and May of 2024 (Zhang, 2025) and provides a deeper dive into the lived experiences of those responsible for staff development in teaching and learning. It considers institutional leadership perspectives, those of staff leading teaching and learning centres, and of staff implementing staff development initiatives.

Four main themes emerged from the data. The first theme considers the institutionalisation of staff development, i.e. the systemic integration of incentives for engaging in staff development in a Higher Education institution. The second theme considers how to encourage staff engagement to move from a tick the box climate to a culture of teaching and learning. The third theme focusses on relationships and connection during the staff development initiatives. The final theme considers the barriers to engagement in staff development and how these need to be more thoughtfully examined.

The overarching finding of this study is that there is great similarity in the implementation of staff development in teaching and learning across the European higher education sector. The participants in the focus groups reported institutionalisation of staff development in terms of the systematic integration of supports and incentives, and situating staff development within a broader strategy or vision. However, tensions exist within the organisation and incentivisation of staff development that lessen engagement of staff and potentially impede the impact of staff development initiatives. These tensions are explored here, and recommendations are provided for institutional leadership and staff tasked with implementing staff development initiatives.

Chapter 1

STAFF-DEV project and focus group approach

1.1. BACKGROUND: THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Since the Bologna Process was first launched in 1999, European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been involved in the reform of issues including quality assurance, degree structures, the establishment of a system of credits, etc. (Witte et al., 2009). More recent ministerial events aiming at advancing the Bologna Process (e.g., 2015 Yerevan Communiqué, 2018 Paris Communiqué) have recognised the importance of teaching and learning, as well as the ongoing need for transformation and reform of teaching and learning (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018).

At European and national policy-level, teaching and learning has become a central topic of discussion. The European Union's European Strategy for Universities as well as the Rome Communiqué of the Bologna Process emphasise the importance of enhancing teaching, notably through the provision of adequate mechanisms for supporting teachers and recognising teaching in their careers. The policy level prioritisation of teaching and learning is reflected in institutional approaches to the topic, with the 2018 EUA Trends report showing that teaching and learning strategies are in place at the majority of European HEIs (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018). European HEIs also increasingly see teaching performance evaluations as an important element influencing the careers of higher education teaching staff (Eurydice, 2024, p. 184).

The aim of these discussions and reforms is to enhance the quality and relevance of teaching and learning within European HEIs (European Commission, 2022). As such, various changes have occurred at an institutional level to support and incentivise 'excellence in teaching' (Fitzmaurice, 2010). The majority of European HEIs already offer some form of staff development in teaching (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018). The EUA reports on national initiatives relating to teaching and learning highlighted that the organisation of staff development commonly falls to the individual institutions (EFFECT, 2018; LOTUS, 2022).

While there is quite a lot of research on the effectiveness of staff development efforts (Stes et al. 2010; Steinert et al., 2016; Vreekamp et al., 2023; Hoffman et al., 2024; Wright, 2024) and numerous institutional case studies on how staff development is organised (Aškerc and Kočar, 2015; Kobayashi et al, 2017) and valued (Graham, 2025), there is a gap in research at a sectoral level to understand how staff development is conducted across European higher education and the rationale that guides the particular approach taken in staff development.

As part of the STAFF-DEV project, this report draws together insights from qualitative research undertaken with a cross-section of institutional leadership, directors of teaching and learning centres and staff with responsibility for delivering staff development in teaching and learning.

This study builds on the previous Trends reports, LOTUS project and other initiatives undertaken by the EUA. It also provides a qualitative insight that is complementary to the European-wide survey undertaken by the EUA (Zhang, 2025) as part of the STAFF-DEV project. The STAFF-DEV survey mapped approaches to staff development at European HEIs and analysed how they work in their respective environments.

The STAFF-DEV project aims to explore how staff development and academic assessment are conducted in European HEIs and to strengthen institutional capacity and strategies in this regard. The STAFF-DEV project recognises that staff development is offered in a myriad of ways and can have varied meanings. To provide definitional clarity, the following is the working definition used for staff development:

> *Opportunities wherein staff (personnel that are involved in student learning) can grow their professional competences and reflect on their professional role, conceptions, and needs.*

1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The STAFF-DEV project asks the following overarching questions:

1. How do institutions tackle staff development in teaching? How is it organised, what are the priorities and challenges? How to know how effective it is? What is the connection with staff recruitment and retention? What are national level initiatives and policies?

2. What does staff development target and address?

3. How do inter-institutional collaborations and supports external to HEIs work? Are there trends in terms of training offers from other providers? How do HEIs collaborate in an alliance or partnership setting (for collaborative forms of staff training)?

4. How does staff development connect with recognition for teaching, academic assessment, and careers? How to address the growing need for a more shared definition of academic careers - in light of international staff mobility, and Europe-wide interuniversity cooperation in education and research?

These questions provided inspiration for the STAFF-DEV survey which was carried out between April-July 2024. The STAFF-DEV survey explored the national contexts in which staff development takes place, the approaches and activities that comprise staff development, and how staff development connects with academic assessment and career progression (Zhang, 2025). The qualitative research being shared in this report enables a deeper dive into these questions and begins to unpack the rationale driving some of the choices made in terms of the organisation of staff development. It also allows for horizontal conversations to surface differing perspectives and priorities, and the context and conditions that shape these.

1.3. METHODOLOGY

Four online, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted between October and November 2024 by a research team at University College Cork (UCC). The UCC research team conducted an inductive reflexive thematic analysis with a constructionist orientation, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). 554 codes were identified from the anonymised focus group transcripts, and these were aggregated into four overarching themes, which will be described in the results section.

The participants (N=16) in the focus groups were recruited through purposive sampling. The research team provided the EUA with an email requesting participation which was forwarded to an existing EUA mailing list of strategic leaders and implementers of staff-development. Recipients were invited to complete an online form which requested their gender, institutional affiliation, position and email. Participants were then allocated to focus groups according to institutional role, with the research team aiming to ensure, within the limits of application, gender and regional representation. The resulting focus groups involved 16 higher education staff representing 16 different higher education Institutions and 10 different countries in the European Higher Education Area (see Table 1).

The focus groups differed according to institutional role with one focus group comprising of members of institutional leadership, one of directors of teaching and learning centres, or equivalent, one of staff responsible for the delivery of staff development initiatives, and a horizontal group with a variety of profiles representing all three groups (see Table 2 and Appendix A). Each focus group included three to five participants, and all participation was voluntary.

Appendix A provides an overview of the focus group participants. Appendix B details the questions asked of each of the focus groups.

TABLE 1 Number of focus group participants per country.

1 participant	2 participants	3 participants
Albania	France	Poland
Cyprus	Portugal	
Romania	Sweden	
Spain	The Netherlands	
United Kingdom		

TABLE 2 Structure of focus groups: gender and country breakdown.

Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
Institutional leadership	**Directors of teaching and learning centres**	**Faculty responsible for delivery of staff development initiatives**	**Horizontal group** ***(2x leadership, 1x Director, 1x faculty responsible for delivery)***
5 participants: All male	3 participants: All female	4 participants: 3 female, 1 male	4 participants: 3 female, 1 male
2 x Portugal 1 x Albania, Cyprus and Romania	UK, Sweden and Poland	2 x The Netherlands 1 x France, Poland	Sweden, Poland, France, Spain

1.4. RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

Two of the researchers involved in this study are based in a research-intensive university with a long-established teaching and learning centre. They are integral to the planning and delivery of credit bearing courses for staff to professionalise teaching and learning, co-ordinated by the centre. The third researcher does not work in the centre and has a background in psychology. The third researcher led the initial phases of the analysis, and all three researchers collaborated in refining codes and developing themes. This approach allowed our analysis to explore the research questions from varied perspectives. The third researcher's relative distance from the centre's activities ensured that our analysis was balanced and thorough, preventing the over or under emphasis of a finding. Conversely, the extensive knowledge of two of the researchers of the subject area provided valuable understanding which enhanced the depth and relevance of the analysis.

Chapter 2

Results and discussion

The findings from the focus group research falls into four main themes which will be addressed in turn.

- Institutionalisation of staff development
- From a 'tick-box' climate to a culture of teaching and learning
- Relationships matter, but they are not the only thing that matters
- Acknowledging barriers while digging deeper

2.1. INSTITUTIONALISATION OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT

A key theme identified during the research is the institutionalisation of staff development. This refers to the systemic integration of supports and incentives for engaging in staff development in a higher education institution. It may include providing funding for teaching and learning, allocating time to engage in staff development, encouraging engagement during staff onboarding, strategic prioritisation by institutional leadership, recognition in promotion criteria, and encouraging/valuing research into teaching and learning. Institutionalisation of staff development can also refer to situating staff development initiatives within a broader strategy or vision for teaching and learning within an institution.

The focus group participants outlined a range of incentives that are now embedded within their institutions to promote engagement in staff development, recognising the need for such engagement to have tangible value to staff. Institutional leadership all spoke of having staff development in teaching and learning reflected in institutional strategy. The teaching and learning centre directors also spoke of alignment between strategy and staff development offer. The STAFF-DEV survey showed while some staff development content is common in HEIs (van Dijk et al., 2020), other content reflects institution's current priorities or strategic goals (Zhang, 2025). This suggests that the focus group participants' experiences reflect a degree of institutionalisation of staff development.

However, three main tensions were evident within this theme and provide an interpretative lens for exploring this tendency towards institutionalisation. The tensions are as follows and will be dealt with in sequence:

- Balancing voluntary and mandatory staff development
- Responding to expressed staff need or alignment with standards
- Balancing demands on teaching and learning centres and equivalent units

2.1.1. Balancing voluntary and mandatory staff development

It was common practice among the examples shared for staff development to be a compulsory part of the onboarding process for new academic staff. However, beyond this, most staff development initiatives were voluntary in nature, and participants emphasised the importance of staff development being voluntary. This aligns with findings from the STAFF-DEV survey (Zhang, 2025) which showed that formal staff development tends to be mandatory mostly for newly hired staff.

Some participants delivered compulsory staff development for new staff in fulfilment of external national requirements, and others did so in line with institutional policies. One participant shared:

> *"We have a legal obligation for staff development for our early career academics. They must have a certain number of staff development courses."*

2.1.2. Responding to expressed needs or alignment with standards

Exploring voluntary staff development initiatives further, two ideological approaches were observed. Some voluntary staff development initiatives were delivered on a bottom-up basis, requiring either individual staff members or department heads to request initiatives based on their specific needs. One participant shared:

> *"We stopped going out with offers... ...we have a menu, and we need the Head of Department to come to us and say that 'I want my staff to work with this'".*

The sentiment that staff development should be informed by staff needs was salient across the entire dataset and participants. This related to both the content and delivery of staff development initiatives. However, one participant who regularly organises staff development, flagged the importance of cooperation of department managers in this process as otherwise the staff development providers lack information on individual needs.

The second ideological approach was providing staff development aligned with established standards or core competences. Such alignment can ensure engagement in staff development initiatives is recognised at national or even international level and is potentially of value to staff in terms of career progression and mobility. Participants recognised the challenges of evidencing the quality of teaching and several participants, largely those directing teaching and learning centres, encouraged alignment with standards.

One participant suggested that a European framework for staff development in teaching and learning could be developed, mirroring the European Competence Framework for Research Managers. The EUA STAFF-DEV survey showed that only 31% of HEIs use a professional development framework as a reference for staff development, with most of these being tailor-made to their institution's needs (Zhang, 2025). One participant from senior leadership spoke of an existing institutional model they had for staff development, but which they felt was:

> *"so theoretical that you don't know how to apply (it)".*

Another participation recommended enabling European recognition for staff development, similar to other recognition schemes. The argued that this would enable engagement in staff development initiatives to be recognised at a European level and provide meaningful value to staff in terms of their career progression. They argued:

> *".. it could stimulate also other countries to recognize the importance of professional development in teaching and learning, and also share experiences..."*

It is not clear whether this relates to recognition of qualifications or standards, or rather the valuing of teaching in academic careers.

This study shows a perceived lack of recognition for the importance of staff development in teaching and learning which mirrors other studies (Coate, 2001). The request for equal valuing of teaching and research in academic careers has been regularly repeated (Fung et al, 2017) and is reiterated in the recent Council of the European Union Recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education (2024).

2.1.3 Balancing demands on teaching and learning centres and equivalent units

The tension in aligning with institutional or national requirements versus expressed staff need was also evident when we explored the role of teaching and learning centres and equivalent units. One participant said their centre is dedicated purely to staff needs, arguing they were "not a tool for management", while another shared that their centre was re-established to accomplish various institutional goals:

> *"Everything we do is in response to institutional strategy, and we reconfigured as a teaching and learning centre with a specific remit of delivering the strategy"*

Fremstad and Ewins (2023) talk about the tension between 'emancipatory aims' of staff development, i.e. to empower staff to critique their practices and question broader strategies, policies, organisational culture etc, and more 'domesticating' aims, i.e. development to align with institutional standards. Teaching and learning centres have to balance these competing demands.

Blackmore and Blackwell (2006, p. 376) describe how teaching and learning centres *"often play a mediating role between the 'realities of institutional life' and the traditional beliefs and values of academic staff"*. National drivers and institutional priorities can collide with academics' views and understanding of their disciplines and the role of departments in affecting change.

These two positions do not need to sit in opposition as strategy can also emerge from staff needs and staff development can align with need and strategy. Such alignment can *"mutually support and potentially propel each other's development"* (Costa and Peterbauer, 2024, p. 7) and, arguably, increases the effectiveness of centres for teaching and learning (Mihai et al., 2025). Those tasked with organising staff development have to walk a line between being responsive to leadership and maintaining some objective distance. The former can strengthen the impact of staff development and influence of the organising unit, while the latter can weaken legitimacy and ultimately its autonomy (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2016) and even result in such units becoming entangled in power struggles (Stensaker, 2018).

While not all focus group participants had a dedicated teaching and learning centres, all had units or dedicated staff coordinating staff development. Some of these units were based in quality offices, others in Human Resources. Teaching and learning centres and equivalent units provide an important function in translating strategy into practice, and help *"colleges and universities function effectively as teaching and learning communities"* (Felten et al., 2007, p. 93). This mediating role is evident in the perspectives shared in this study.

2.2. FROM A 'TICK-BOX' CLIMATE TO A CULTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Although staff development initiatives must be relevant to career progression to ensure that participation offers staff concrete benefits, incentives can also undermine the benefits associated with voluntary staff development. The incentivisation model has the potential to undermine the benefits associated with voluntary staff development as it lessens staff autonomy. Universities are faced with the challenge of encouraging teachers to see pedagogical aptitude not as a threshold to be reached, but as a process of continuous educational development (Graham, 2025).

One participant discussed how meaningful engagement can be eluded where staff development is required for career progression:

> *"...there are a few teachers who we understand are just collecting the certificates of the completion of training in order to achieve the necessary points in their evaluation."*

The notion of staff development being seen as a 'tick-box' exercise to ensure promotion was mentioned by a few participants. In contrast, other participants spoke of a culture of teaching and learning and highlighted the importance of continued support after the staff development initiative ends. They spoke about the development of emergent networks, which Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) call 'significant networks', as a consequence of engaging in staff development, and asserted that these networks can help build towards a teaching and learning culture.

Some factors for encouraging engagement in staff-development included it being valued within career promotional criteria thus enabling career progression. Other forms of recognition can include teaching and learning awards, small grants etc, all of which contribute to motivating staff engagement.

2.2.1 Intersection of staff development and research into teaching and learning

One unexpected outcome of engagement in staff development, as expressed by focus group participants, was an increased interest in pedagogical research and a growing interest in attending conferences and publishing on teaching and learning. This itself was seen as a motivator to remain connected with staff development. In some cases, pedagogical research was seen to meet an institutional requirement around research activity.

Despite the expressed interest in pedagogical research from staff of varied backgrounds, some scepticism was expressed about the value of research in this space as compared to more traditional academic disciplines. In terms of promotion, educational scholarship plays a role in academic assessment at 39% of HEIs and it impacts on career progression at 42% of HEIs (Zhang, 2025).

Interest in research into teaching and learning was further expanded upon by the directors of teaching and learning centres. They argued that research fortifies the evidence base used to inform the planning and delivery of staff development initiatives. Arguably, increased engagement in pedagogical research can be seen as an indicator of a growing culture of teaching and learning given the time investment required to pursue such research.

The need for ongoing evaluation of staff development was also flagged in the focus groups, with one participant voicing frustration over their lack of capacity to conduct such work. One participant in a unit tasked with staff development spoke of their own internal motivation to inquire into the impact of staff development and *"check did it work"*. Another critiqued the instruments and tools used for teaching assessment which they felt focus on the popularity of the teacher rather than quality of the teaching.

2.3. RELATIONSHIPS MATTER, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS

The third theme is focussed on relationships. The connection and collaboration cultivated during staff development initiatives can promote the development of an institutional culture which values and prioritises teaching and learning. Numerous studies have pointed towards the importance of human connections and relationships for student learning and wellbeing (Felten and Lambert, 2020) and this requirement follows through into staff development initiatives also.

Those tasked with designing and implementing staff development spoke of intentionally designing activities to foster relationships and encourage collaboration. This sense of connection can also act as a preventative against academic burn out and help create a broader community or significant network for participants; one which they may not feel part of in their home discipline.

Connection and conversation were consistently identified as not only an essential element of effective staff development, but a coveted outcome. As connection is central to enhanced learning outcomes and increased motivation, it follows that connection is also important in ensuring effective staff development. One participant summarises this sub-theme succinctly when discussing the benefits of staff development initiatives at their institution:

> *"For me teaching is on relationships, so, we want people to be more confident and better in relationships."*

Engaging with and learning from peers is also relevant when considering the incentivisation of staff development initiatives. Academia can often rely on independent work and staff can feel isolated. A participant representing institutional leadership describes how friendships which emerge from staff development initiatives can prompt intrinsic motivation to continue to prioritise staff development:

> *"It's also about friendships, and it's also about communities"*

Staff development that encourages connection and collaboration can promote the development of an institutional culture which values and prioritises teaching and learning.

Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2015) is a useful framework for exploring the engagement of staff in professional development. As seen in section 2.1.1, the majority of staff development initiatives were voluntary in nature, thus staff were free to choose to engage or not and demonstrate their sense of autonomy. In the main, staff in higher education do not come to their teaching role with formal development in teaching, which is distinct from staff who teach in other educational domains. Whether responsive to staff need or reflective of common standards, staff development initiatives arguably respond to staff need to develop mastery. We have touched on here how fostering relationships and providing space for community is beneficial in staff development. Thus, the three aspects of self-determination theory have emerged in focus group findings and potentially provide one useful organising principle amongst others for the design of staff development.

2.3.1 Staff development provides space to connect, share concerns and feel heard

While the relational aspect of staff development was strongly reflected across the cohort, many more participants highlighted that engaging in staff development makes them feel heard and valued. One participant who organises staff development captured this point when discussing a desired outcome for prospective participants:

> *".. they feel that [they] can be a partner in dialogue or a consultant or a follower... ... they feel that they're listened to."*

This resonates with Wergin's reflections on recognition where he suggests that salary disputes are somewhat symbolic and that faculty *"need evidence that someone's paying attention"* (Wergin, 2001, p. 52).

Another participant spoke of the benefit of providing staff with opportunities to share concerns and issues:

"We do some events when people can come and speak about teaching and learning..., but also people just want to come and say what is not OK with our teaching... ...this is crucial for me, meeting teachers and talking to them and also allowing them to tell us [their issues]"

Providing academic staff with a platform to share their experiences, concerns, and successes in teaching arguably promotes a culture which supports teaching and learning.

2.3.2 The value of connecting

The value of connection resulting from staff development initiatives is far-reaching. One participant with responsibility for the delivery of staff development attributes these connections as factors which have promoted increased interest in pedagogical initiatives:

> *"The motivation for the teacher is not mainly the financial aids. I think the main motivation is that they can share their project. ...They can share their experience and their projects."*

Staff connecting with peers during staff development initiatives ensures that the initiative is not taking place in a vacuum. These connections encourage staff to engage with staff development over a longer period which literature has shown to be important in terms of impacting teaching practice (Ingvarson, 2003; Chism 2004; Gayle et al, 2013; Cordingley et al 2015).

A participant representing institutional leadership acknowledges the value of sustaining support:

> *"We never finish the training. We always end the sessions of the training and invite people to keep sharing."*

Participants also pointed to more pragmatic requirements of staff development, i.e. the need to develop relevant skills and understandings to enhance teaching practice. One participant highlighted the importance of the impact of staff development initiatives:

> *"They had a course of professional development, which they had evaluated. The main result there was, 'It was very interesting to compare our experiences with other teachers, that taught me a lot.' And I said, well, if that had been a course in methods for doctoral students in chemistry or mechanics or something, and they said,' well, it was very interesting to meet other doctoral students and hear their experiences'. And that was it. It would never have been accepted and the teachers responsible for the course would have been removed. So, should we really accept this?"*

This point connects back with earlier point on evaluating impact of staff development initiatives and situating staff development within a broader strategy or change initiative.

2.4. ACKNOWLEDGING BARRIERS WHILE DIGGING DEEPER

The final theme considers the barriers to engagement in staff development and how these need a more thoughtful examination. The barriers to engagement in staff were time and the volatility of institutional and national support.

2.4.1 Time pressure as a barrier to engagement

Time was regularly referenced as a barrier to engagement, yet there was a note of scepticism as to whether time was truly the barrier. Arguably, when individuals cite time as a barrier this can also reflect their perceptions of departmental or institutional valuing of certain activities.

Focus group participants reflecting institutional leadership placed less emphasis on time being a barrier and two expressed outright scepticism about time pressure impinging on staff ability to engage in development activities. While participants with responsibility for organising staff development did recognise time as being a barrier against engagement.

This disparity between leadership and those who organise staff development hints at a broader question around the translation of institutional priorities. The supposition is that citing a lack of time as a barrier to engaging with staff development reflects a failure to prioritise staff development at individual, departmental and institutional levels, or to connect staff development to a broader vision around teaching enhancement within an institution.

Many of the leadership focus group participants stated that staff development was a focus of institutional strategy. However, the perceived or actual lack of time to engage in staff development suggests a misalignment between strategy and practice or potential clashes with other policies such as work-load allocation, promotional criteria etc. One institutional leader did reflect

> *"..most universities are doing formal things on paper, but not much really on the ground".*

2.4.2 Volatility of institutional and national support

The planning and delivery of staff development initiatives takes place within institutional and national contexts. A prominent reflection across all of the focus groups was, beyond a lack of resources, that the instability of institutional and national support for teaching and learning was a major barrier to engagement. This perspective was particularly present among directors of teaching and learning centres, who outlined that the planning and delivery of staff development initiatives is shaped by the extent to which teaching and learning is prioritised by institutional and national leadership.

The EUA STAFF-DEV survey showed 73% of HEIs surveyed have a teaching and learning strategy, and 89% of such strategies address staff development. Teaching and learning centres can be the focus of top-down change initiatives for new leadership seeking to have an impact. Where this is not connected to a longer-term vision or responsive to evident need, new initiatives can easily wither away once leadership and priorities shift. The knock-on effect of such instability can be evident in poor planning and being unable to ensure a consistent, high quality staff development offer.

This instability can also be evident at the national level in terms of government priorities which then play out or impact on institutional priorities. Such instability can hamper the maturation of staff development provision (Palmer et al., 2011).

A lack of stability in budget allocation for teaching and learning can hinder the establishment of evidence-based frameworks for staff development. Staff

development funding may instead be reliant on tailoring initiatives to short-term funding or project requirements, which can undermine quality.

Laursen and Rocque (2009) talk about staff development as a central change strategy, in their case to increase the representation of women in STEM in the US. One insight from their study is that *"the most transformative efforts will 'shake the tree in different places,' combining faculty development with policy and cultural changes"* (Laursen and Rocque, 2009, p. 26).

Rather than enacting multiple approaches to enhancing staff development, which our earlier finding about growing institutionalisation of staff development would suggest is the case, the lived experience of the focus group participants attests to the volatility of staff development. There is a need for diverse and longer-term, systemic approaches to staff development to contribute to a lasting and impactful teaching and learning culture.

2.5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One limitation of this study is the over-representation of some countries and lack of representation from others with only 10 countries represented in the final sample (see Figure 1 and Table 1). There is potential to skew the findings due to this narrow focus. In preparing for the focus groups, a structured literature review was undertaken to get a sense of the diversity of approaches to staff development across the EHEA. Similarly, the insights from the EUA Trends survey and the STAFF-DEV survey reflected the diversity of approaches to staff development evident in European higher education, and this was reflected in the focus group findings.

A second limitation is the gender imbalance evident in the first two focus groups with all males attending the institutional leadership focus group and all females attending the directors of teaching and learning centres focus group. This was despite repeated recruitment efforts to ensure gender balance. However, it is reflective of gender breakdowns of different positions in higher education (Zimmerman et al, 2021).

A third limitation regarding recruitment was our inability to recruit staff who benefitted from attending staff development initiatives. Participants across all four focus groups had some responsibility in the organisation and delivery of staff development, whether leadership, teaching and learning centre directors, or staff implementing various programmes. This limitation is not surprising given the staff that typically engage with the EUA teaching and learning activities are staff involved in these roles. This means that the question on the effectiveness of staff development was not answered in any depth here. There is a plethora of literature covering this topic already (Stes et al., 2010; Steinert et al., 2016; Vreekamp et al., 2023; Hoffman et al., 2024; Wright, 2024), so this absence is not problematic.

Chapter 3

Conclusions and recommendations

In considering the four themes evident in this qualitative research, this chapter provides some conclusions and recommendations for those with responsibility for enacting strategies or designing and delivering staff development offerings relating to teaching and learning.

Institutionalisation of staff development

Various incentives for staff development were highlighted, including recognition in promotional criteria and opportunities for research. Two tensions became apparent in the organisation of staff development. The first related to whether staff development was mandatory or voluntary. Some institutions made staff development mandatory for new hires, while it was voluntary for staff to engage for the majority of participants.

The second related to whether staff development was responding to expressed needs of staff or to institutional competences or standards for teaching and learning. Staff development that is responsive to the needs of individuals may enhance feelings of competence, as it addresses areas where staff desire growth, and autonomy as they have the choice to engage. However, alignment with institutional, national or even European standards would enhance recognition for staff engagement. The question is whether these competences or core understandings can be translated into common standards across the sector, and who should do this work.

One outcome of engaging in staff development was staff increased engagement in pedagogical research and its dissemination. This was largely welcomed with participants highlighting the strengths of an evidence-based approach to teaching. However, there was a suggestion that research into teaching and learning is valued less than research in a cognate discipline.

Recommendation 1: Staff development initiatives should be flexible and responsive to both staff needs and institutional goals, ensuring that staff feel competent and can situate their work within a broader institutional context.

From a 'tick-box' climate to a culture of teaching and learning

Some participants expressed concerns that staff development initiatives were perceived as mere formalities for promotion rather than opportunities for genuine development. When development becomes just a tool for management or a means to an end (promotion), staff might feel coerced rather than motivated to engage.

In contrast, some participants advocated for a broader, more supportive culture of teaching and learning. When staff development initiatives create meaningful relationships and collaboration, they contribute to a culture that values teaching, making staff feel both supported and connected.

Recommendation 2: To create a sustainable teaching culture, staff development should be aligned with both individual needs and institutional goals, while ensuring that it fosters meaningful connections rather than reducing development to a 'tick-box' exercise.

The role of relationships in staff development

A vast majority of participants noted that staff development initiatives were valuable for creating connections, enabling peer learning, and fostering collaboration. Relationships formed through staff development initiatives can help cultivate a supportive institutional culture that prioritizes teaching and learning.

Participants also highlighted the role of staff development in creating 'significant networks' (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009) that extend beyond immediate learning contexts. These networks foster a culture of collaboration and peer learning.

Recommendation 3: Staff development initiatives should prioritize relationship-building and peer learning to foster a supportive, collaborative environment that enhances both individual and institutional growth.

Barriers to engagement

Time and the instability of support were identified as barriers to engagement in staff development. When these were explored more deeply, it was suggested that time constraints were more reflective of perceptions of the institutional value placed on staff development. Staff need time to engage in staff development and the lack of this provision is indicative of a misalignment between strategy and practice.

The volatility of staff development has been covered substantially in the literature and also surfaced in these focus groups. Changes in leadership, funding instability, and inconsistent government support create uncertainty for units or staff responsible for staff development, and indeed for institutional leadership seeking resources for institutional level initiatives.

Recommendation 4: The strategic endorsement of teaching and learning must be supported by policies which ensure staff have the necessary capacity, including time, to participate in professional development.

References

Aškerc, K., & Kočar, S., 2015, Teaching and the Pedagogical Training of University Teaching Staff – Practice and Opinions under Slovenian Higher Education Legislation. *Education Inquiry*, 6 (2), 25591. https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v6.25591.

Blackmore, P., & Blackwell, R., 2006, Strategic leadership in academic development. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (3), pp. 373-387.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2006, Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3 (2), pp. 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2019, Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11 (4), pp. 589-597.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2021, One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18 (3), pp. 328-352.

Coate, K., Barnett, R., & Williams, G., 2001, Relationships between teaching and research in higher education in England. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 55 (2), pp. 158-174.

Council of the European Union, 2024, *Proposal on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education*. 2024/0078/NLE. https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-03/Proposal%20for%20a%20Council%20Recommendation%20on%20attractive%20and%20sustainable%20careers%20in%20higher%20education.pdf (accessed 06/12/2024).

Chism, V.N.N., 2004, Evaluating Approaches to Faculty Development in the Use of Learning Technologies. *Journal of Faculty Development*, 20 (1), pp. 31-36.

Cordingley, P., Higgins, S., Greany, T., Buckler, N., Coles-Jordan, D., Crisp, B., Saunders, L. & Coe, R., 2015, *Developing great teaching: lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development: Project Report* (London: Teacher Development Trust).

Costa, M. J., & Peterbauer, H. (Eds.), 2024, *Development and strategic benefits of learning and teaching centres: Thematic Peer Group Report, Learning & Teaching Paper #23* (Brussels, EUA). www.eua.eu/publications/reports/development-and-strategic-benefits-of-learning-and-teaching-centres.html (accessed 06/12/2024).

EFFECT, 2018, *Promoting a European dimension to teaching enhancement: A feasibility study from the European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching (EFFECT) project* (Brussels, EUA). www.eua.eu/downloads/publications/promoting%20a%20european%20dimension%20to%20teaching%20enhancement-effect%20feasibility%20study.pdf (accessed 06/12/2024).

European Commission, 2022, The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area. European Education Area. https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/bologna-process (accessed 06/12/2024).

Eurydice, 2024, The European higher education area in 2024 - Bologna process implementation report. Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/483185 (accessed 06/12/2024).

Felten, P., & Lambert, L., 2020, *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College* (Johns Hopkins University Press).

Felten, P., A. Kalish, A., Pingree, A., & Plank, K., 2007, To Improve the Academy: Resources for Faculty, Instructional and Organisational Development. In: *Towards a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Educational Development*, edited by D. Robertson & L. Nilson, pp. 93-108. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass).

Fitzmaurice, M., 2010, Considering Teaching in Higher Education as a Practice. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15, pp. 45-55. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510903487941.

Fremstad, E., & Ewins, K., 2021, The critical-constructive potential of academic development: a case study. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48 (7), pp. 1097-1110.

Fung, D., Besters-Dilger, J., & van der Vaart, R., 2017, *Excellent education in research-rich universities*. Position Paper: League of European Universities. https://www.leru.org/files/Excellent-Education-in-Research-Rich-Universities-Full-paper.pdf (accessed 06/12/2024).

Gaebel, M., Zhang, T., Bunescu, L., & Stoeber, H., 2018, *Trends 2018: Learning and teaching in the European Higher Education Area* (Brussels, EUA). www.eua.eu/publications/reports/trends-2018-learning-and-teaching-in-the-european-higher-education-area.html (accessed 06/12/2024).

Gayle, B.M., Randall, N., Langley, L., & Preiss, R., 2013, Faculty Learning Processes: A Model for Moving from Scholarly Teaching to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 1 (1), pp. 81-93.

Graham, R., 2025, *Rewarding teaching in academic careers: mapping the global movement for change* (Advancing Teaching). www.advancingteaching.com/resources/2025-Global-mapping-report.pdf (accessed 06/12/2024).

Hoffmann, S., Klinger, M., & Deutscher, V., 2024, On the effectiveness of professional development training at German universities: A strategic review. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 27, pp. 1063-1085.

Ingvarson, L., Meiers, M., & Beavis, A., 2005, Factors Affecting the Impact of Professional Development Programs on Teachers' Knowledge, Practice, Student Outcomes & Efficacy. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 13 (10), pp. 1-28.

Kobayashi, S., Dolin, J., Søborg, A., & Turner, J., 2017, Building Academic Staff Teaching Competencies: How Pedagogic Continuous Professional Development for Academic Staff Can Be Organised and Developed in Research-Intensive Universities. In: Stensaker, B., Bilbow, G., Breslow, L., van der Vaart, R. (Eds) *Strengthening Teaching and Learning in Research Universities*. (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham: Paris). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56499-9_5.

Laursen, S. L., & Rocque, B., 2009, Faculty development for institutional change: Lessons from an ADVANCE project. *Change* (March/April), pp. 18-26. https://doi.org/10.3200/CHNG.41.2.18-26

LOTUS, 2022, *Leadership and Organisation for Teaching and Learning at European Universities: Final report from the LOTUS project* (Brussels, EUA). www.eua.eu/publications/reports/leadership-and-organisation-for-teaching-and-learning-at-european-universities.html (accessed 06/12/2024).

Mihai, A.I., Dailey-Hebert, A.L., & Beausaert, S., 2025, Understanding the complexity of centers for teaching and learning: introducing a four-dimensional model. *Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-025-01399-y.

Palmer, S., Holt, D., & Challis, D., 2011, Strategic leadership of Teaching and Learning Centres: from reality to ideal. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 30 (6), pp. 807-821. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.539600.

Roxå, T., & Mårtensson, K., 2016, Agency and structure in academic development practices: are we liberating academic teachers or are we part of a machinery supressing them? *International Journal for Academic Development*, 22 (2), pp. 95-105.

Roxå, T., & Mårtensson, K., 2009, Significant conversations and significant networks – exploring the backstage of the teaching arena. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (5), pp. 57-559.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L., 2017, *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness* (New York, USA: Guilford Publishing).

Stensaker, B., 2018, Academic Development as Cultural Work: Responding to the Organizational Complexity of Modern Higher Education Institutions. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23 (4), pp. 274-285. https://doi:10.1080/1360144X.2017.1366322.

Steinert, Y., Mann, K., Anderson, B., Barnett, B. M., Centeno, A., Naismith, L., Prideaux, D., Spencer, J., Tullo, E., Viggiano, T., Ward, H., & Dolmans, D., 2016, A systematic review of faculty development initiatives designed to enhance teaching effectiveness: A 10-year update. *Medical Teacher,* 38 (8), pp. 769-786. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2016.1181851.

van Dijk, E.E, van Tartwijk, J., der Schaaf, M.F. & Kluijtmans, M., 2020, What makes an expert university teacher? A systematic review and synthesis of frameworks for teacher expertise in higher education. *Educational Research Review*, 31 (11), pp. 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100365.

Stes, A., Min-Leliveld, M., Gijbels, D., & Van Petegem, P., 2010, The Impact of Instructional Development in Higher Education: The State-of-the-Art of the Research. *Educational Research Review*, 5 (1), pp. 25-49.

Vreekamp, M., Gulikers, J. T., Runhaar, P. R., & Den Brok, P. J., 2023, A systematic review to explore how characteristics of pedagogical development programmes in higher education are related to teacher development outcomes. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 29 (4), pp. 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2023.2233471.

Witte, J., Huisman, J. & Purser, L., 2009, European higher education reforms in the context of the Bologna process: How did we get here, where are we and where are we going? *Higher education to 2030: Globalisation*, 2, pp. 205-229.

Wergin, J.F., 2001, Beyond carrots and sticks. *Liberal Education*, 87(1), pp. 50-53.

Wright, M.C., 2023, *Centers for Teaching and Learning: The new landscape in Higher Education* (Maryland, USA: Johns Hopkins University Press).

Zhang, T., 2025, *Staff development in learning and teaching at European universities: Results from the STAFF-DEV survey* (Brussels: EUA).

Zimmerman, A., Illmer, L., & Oliveira, D., 2021, *Gender Equality Measures in Academia* (SNSF). www.snf.ch/media/en/0mqvK5zD6Y0OHR9F/academianet-literature-review-interaktiv.pdf (accessed 06/12/2024).

Appendices

Appendix A: Composition of focus group

Country	Institutional Affiliation	Self-Selected Position	Focus group
Cyprus	European University Cyprus	Institutional leadership	1
Portugal	University of Minho, Portugal	Institutional leadership	
Romania	Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania	Faculty responsible for providing staff development (e.g. programme directors, academics, etc.)	
Albania	EPOKA University, Tirana, Albania	Institutional leadership	
Portugal	Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (UTAD), Villa Real, Portugal	Institutional leadership	
Sweden	Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden	Directors of teaching and learning centres (or equivalent)	2
United Kingdom	Queen Mary University of London	Directors of teaching and learning centres (or equivalent)	
Poland	Wroclaw University of Science and Technology, Poland	Directors of teaching and learning centres (or equivalent)	

Country	Institutional Affiliation	Self-Selected Position	Focus group
France	Sorbonne Université, Paris, France	Faculty responsible for providing staff development (e.g. Programme Directors, Academics, etc.)	3
The Netherlands	University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands	Faculty responsible for providing staff development (e.g. Programme Directors, Academics, etc.)	
Poland	Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland	Faculty responsible for providing staff development (e.g. Programme Directors, Academics, etc.)	
The Netherlands	Royal Conservatory of the Hague, The Netherlands	Faculty responsible for providing staff development (e.g. Programme Directors, Academics, etc.)	
Sweden	University of Boras, Sweden	Institutional leadership	4
Poland	University of Warsaw, Poland	Director of teaching and learning centre	
France	Université Jean Monet Saint-Étienne, Lyon, France	Institutional leadership	
Spain	Universidad de Granada, Spain	Faculty responsible for providing staff development (e.g. programme directors, academics, etc.)	

Appendix B: Focus group schedules

Semi-structured Interview schedule for Focus group A: Institutional leadership

*Italicised items are probing questions, implemented at the facilitator's discretion.

1. What role does staff development, in the context of teaching and learning, play in your institution's strategic focus?
   a. How does your institution ensure that staff have the capacity to engage in staff development opportunities alongside other responsibilities during the working week?
   b. What staff members are targeted by staff development strategy at your institution (i.e. academic/administrative, career stage, time served at the university, department etc)?
   c. How does your institution incentivise participation in staff development opportunities (i.e. voluntary/compulsory, cert/diploma, etc)?
   d. What competencies are targeted by staff development opportunities (e.g. EDI, research skills, supervision skills, etc)?
   e. What do you prioritise in your staff development initiatives?

2. What impact have you observed as a result of staff development at your institution?
   a. Discuss how you think staff development impacts the overall quality of teaching and learning at your institution?
   b. How does teaching and learning staff development impact the quality of other endeavours across the institution (e.g., research, administration, etc)?
   c. Have you observed any unexpected or unintended impacts as a result of staff development initiatives?

3. What are the main factors promoting or preventing the proposal and delivery of formal staff development at your institution?
   a. What do you see as the main factors promoting or preventing staff at your institution from engaging with staff development opportunities?
   b. Are there any staff development initiatives that you want to implement at your institution but haven't? What would need to change for you to be able to implement this initiative?

4. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss in relation to staff development in the context of teaching and learning?
   a. What motivated you to participate in this focus group/project?
   b. What are your long-term dreams/aspirations in terms of staff development in the context of teaching and learning, if any?

Semi-structured Interview schedule for Focus group B: Directors of teaching and learning centres and equivalent units

*Italicised items are probing questions, implemented at the facilitator's discretion.

1. How do you see the work of your teaching and learning centre responding to institutional strategy?
   a. What was the catalyst for the creation of your centre? Has that changed?
   b. Is teaching and learning referenced in strategic plans at your institution?

2. What, in your experience, are the main factors which have promoted or prevented the proposal and delivery of staff development opportunities, in the context of teaching and learning?
   a. How do these factors influence the planning and delivery of staff development opportunities: funding, institutional support, staffing of T&L Centres, staff workload/lack of time, staff interest, etc?

3. How do you plan staff development at your institution? What considerations underscore the planning of staff development activities, in the context of teaching and learning, at your institution?
   a. What populations are targeted by staff development efforts at your institution? (e.g. junior academic staff, PhD students, senior academic leadership, etc)?
   b. What outcomes are you seeking when implementing staff development opportunities?
   c. How do you ensure that these learning outcomes are being achieved by the staff development opportunity?
   d. How have you seen staff development benefit your institution?
   e. How do you maximise engagement in staff development opportunities at your institution?

4. Putting the barriers we discussed earlier aside, what is one change you would make in relation to staff development in the context of teaching and learning at your institution?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss in relation to staff development in the context of teaching and learning?
   a. What motivated you to participate in this focus group/project?

Semi-structured Interview schedule for Focus group C: Faculty responsible for the delivery of staff development initiatives

*Italicised items are probing questions, implemented at the facilitator's discretion.

1. Why do you think your institution offers staff development?
   a. To what extent is staff development a strategic priority at your institution?

2. What factors influence your level of engagement with staff development opportunities at your institution?
   a. What would, hypothetically, make staff development opportunities more attractive?
   b. What are the primary obstacles that prevent engagement with staff development?
   c. In your context, does institutional culture support engagement with staff development?
   d. Does the level of engagement with staff development opportunities at your institution have implications for career progression?

3. What benefits have you observed as a result of formal staff development opportunities at your institution?
   a. Are there any drawbacks as a result of participating in staff development?
   b. What observations have you made about the impact of informal staff development?

4. Reflect on a staff development opportunity you engaged with that you found particularly beneficial. What do you think were the key elements that made this training so beneficial?
   a. How have you seen this training benefitting day-to-day practice?
   b. Are there any topics that you associate increased engagement with?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss in relation to staff development in the context of teaching and learning?
   a. What motivated you to participate in this focus group/project?

Semi-structured Interview schedule for Focus group D: Horizontal session

*Italicised items are probing questions, implemented at the facilitator's discretion.

1. How is staff development, in the context of teaching and learning, approached by your institution?
   a. Is there general alignment between the strategic approach to staff development and the reality of staff development initiatives at your institution?

2. What factors do you believe influence engagement with staff development opportunities at your institution?
   a. What are the obstacles?
   b. What are the key benefits of engaging in staff development?

3. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss in relation to staff development in the context of teaching and learning?
   a. What motivated you to participate in this focus group/project?

Appendix C: Detailed participant quotes per theme

THEME 1: INSTITUTIONALISATION OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Balancing voluntary and mandatory staff development

Some participants delivered compulsory staff development for new staff in fulfilment of external requirements, and others did so in line with institutional policies. One participant shared:

"One of the reasons my institution offers staff development, for example, is a legal obligation for the institutions. We have that legal obligation for staff development for our early career academics. They must have a certain number of staff development courses."

1.2 Responding to expressed needs or alignment with standards

Exploring voluntary staff development initiatives further, two ideological approaches were observed. Some voluntary staff development initiatives were delivered on a bottom-up basis, requiring either individual staff members or department heads to request initiatives based on their specific needs. One participant shared:

"We also stopped making - going out with offers, offering workshops or offering seminar series and so on, and now we have like a menu and then we need the head of departments to come to us and say that I want my staff to work with this".

The second approach was providing staff development aligned with established standards or core competences. This approach lends itself to having engagement in staff development initiatives recognised at national or even international level and potentially of value to staff in terms of career progression and mobility. One participant involved in coordinating staff development, shared their reflections on an overly complex institutional model for staff development:

"The problem of the tools is really relevant. Because you can develop a theoretical model. For example, we had a model here for the teaching development. The first level, second level. But the problem is that it's so theoretical that you don't know how to apply".

One participant involved in running staff development training advocated for a European recognition of varied staff development offerings:

"There is no recognition among the programmes certificates in the European level.. it could stimulate also other countries to recognize the importance of professional development in teaching and learning and also share experiences, and not invent the wheel all the time again."

1.3 Balancing the demands on teaching and learning centres and equivalent units

The value of growing interest in conducting research in the area of teaching and learning was further developed in discussions with the directors of teaching and learning centres. The argument presented was that research in this area will serve to fortify the evidence base used to inform the planning and delivery of staff development initiatives. One participant emphasises the importance of reflection and evaluation alongside the delivery of staff development initiatives:

"That's the problem with us we're putting out fires, but we never make an analysis. What is? What is this? So, I think that's our most important task to say, let's wait. Hang on, let's take a look at this. What is this a sign of and is it a larger problem?"

In further discussion, the participant explained how conducting research in this area is a key responsibility of their unit:

"To really make this work, we need to work on our own research in higher education, because we are advocating the academic approach to accreditation, so we need to be producers of relevant research for our institution."

THEME 2: FROM A 'TICK-BOX' CLIMATE TO A CULTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Another overarching theme in the research considers how to incentivise engagement so as to create a culture of teaching and learning. Although staff development initiatives must be relevant to career progression to ensure that participation offers staff concrete benefits, this incentivisation model has the potential to undermine the benefits associated with voluntary staff development as it lessens staff autonomy. One participant discusses how meaningful engagement can be eluded where staff development is required for career progression:

"When it comes to factors promoting the participation, the fact that it counts towards the evaluation of teachers is obviously important, though I have to mention that this has also a negative impact, because to be fully honest, there are a few, not many, but there are a few teachers who we understand are actually just collecting the certificates of the completion of training in order to achieve the necessary points in their evaluation."

The need to align staff expressed needs with institutional or national goalposts and requirements was also evident when we explored the role of teaching and learning centres within institutions. One participant, a director of a teaching and learning centre, saw their unit as being dedicated purely to responding to staff needs in the institution:

"I mean we're not a tool for management, we're a tool for faculty..."

In contrast, a second participant, the director of a teaching and learning centre in a different country, shared that their centre was (re)established in order to facilitate the accomplishment of various institutional goals:

"...everything we do is in response to institutional strategy and we reconfigured as a teaching learning centre in 2020 with a specific remit of delivering the strategy,"

Institutional strategy and staff needs are not necessarily incompatible. Indeed, there can be a reciprocal relationship between these two perspectives when planning and delivery of staff development. A participant, an institutional leader, explained that while staff development is delivered in order to facilitate the achievement of institutional goals, these goals are set in response to staff needs as identified by an annual survey:

"We revise that scheme every year, aiming at introducing new topics by sending out the previous year a survey to all our staff for their teaching needs, but also additional issues, topics that they would like us to bring in, activities, webinars, seminars and so on."

Reflecting on the benefits of staff development initiatives, one participant talked about a rebalancing of priorities and encouraging greater enjoyment in teaching:

"I hope that it will make teachers enjoy their teaching more. We have a tendency to talk about excellent teachers and unsatisfied students. I think I said this in learning and teaching forums. I prefer to have satisfied teachers and excellent students. Much better. So, courses help this effect."

One participant, reflecting the perspective of institutional leadership, shared that increased interest in pedagogical research among teaching staff was an unexpected positive outcome of staff development initiatives at their university. They explained that pursuing excellence in teaching and learning has led to emergent communities of practice and research publications at their institution:

"What we have seen here is some interest in researching our own teaching practice. So there has been a movement of creation of professional communities aiming at observing themselves, developing their teaching, but at the same time collecting data in order to reflect among the peer group how things could be better. There have been also a few publications coming out from that."

Another participant shared how academics at their institution, outside of those who specialise in pedagogy, are beginning to conduct research in this space following engagement in staff development initiatives:

"Some of the teachers who are developing these projects are starting to publish internationally, in conferences or in journals, the results of these projects. So, this is obviously limited. We're talking about a small number of small number of people, 3, 4, 5. I don't know, but it is starting to happen. So this is also developing apart from the people who do educational research."

2.2.1 Intersection of staff development and research into teaching and learning

Another participant shared that, while they have strong personal beliefs around the value of staff development in teaching and learning, from a professional perspective, they greatly value research as an evidence base for planning and delivering staff development initiatives:

"I think that professional development is an extremely important area and that we are obliged to do that so I have enough of internal motivation and I believe that it is necessary to do it evidence-based, to check did it work."

Despite this emergent interest in pedagogical research from staff of varied backgrounds, some scepticism was expressed about the value of research in this space as compared to more traditional academic disciplines. One participant shared that among academic staff, a degree of hierarchy remains:

"What happens is that generally, the high performers in terms of research tend to look down at these guys who do research on education."

The participant further shared how their institution encourages academics to publish pedagogical research relevant to their primary discipline in order to satisfy annual requirements:

"What we want is all these guys, particularly that are interested in teaching and particularly those that don't do a lot of research in their own field. The suggestion was why not publish in, say, physics education? Since I'm a professor of physics, education for math, chemistry and so on. So, you can reach and be effective and maybe accumulating points for the yearly evaluation or for promotion by doing research on education."

THEME 3: RELATIONSHIPS MATTER, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS

This theme considers the importance of designing staff development to foster relationships and encourage collaboration. It also considers how to balance the development of disciplinary specific or technical skills.

3.1 Staff development can support connections and foster relationships

Connection and conversation were consistently identified as not only an essential element of effective staff development, but a coveted outcome. As connection is central to enhanced learning outcomes and increased motivation, it follows that effective staff development is too. One participant summarises this sub-theme

succinctly when discussing the benefits of staff development initiatives at their institution:

"For me teaching is on relationships, so, we want people to be more confident and better in relationships."

Reflecting upon the benefits of staff development which they have observed in their institution, another participant highlights the long-lasting connections they have made with colleagues:

"When I go to the restaurant every day, I get so many 'Hi, do you remember me?'. I think that's some kind of recognition for quality of education, and so the recognition of us".

Another participant also shared that the relationships they build when facilitating staff development initiatives are a defining aspect:

"But very important it is also a role in which I can make connections with many different professionals, with peers, that I enjoy very much."

Engaging with and learning from peers is also relevant when considering the incentivisation of staff development initiatives. A participant representing institutional leadership describes how friendships which emerge from staff development initiatives can promote intrinsic motivation to continue to prioritise staff development:

"It's also about friendships, and it's also about communities. So, if these enthusiasts are also people that are like gluing together other people and then they form groups that have fun working together so they just come for having fun, this is rare, but it does happen."

Academia can often rely on independent work and staff can feel isolated. One participant describes the value of connection as an element and outcome of staff development initiatives:

"For [staff] also connections, making connections with other colleagues, is a huge factor and something that they appreciate the most of being able to do this course is meeting other professionals. Because most of the times in our teaching practice, this is quite, I wouldn't say necessarily lonely, but you're quite alone all the time doing things and having the opportunity to discuss with your peers what it is you are struggling with is highly appreciated."

3.2 Staff development provides space to connect, share concerns and feel heard

The need to feel heard and valued was also highlighted by focus group participants. One participant captures this point when discussing the key outcome they seek in the planning and delivery of staff development initiatives:

"The most important thing is I think the mutual respect that they feel that we can be a partner in dialogue or a consultant or a follower or something like that. That's the main thing, so that they would come back to us. So that they feel that they're listened to."

Providing academic staff with a platform to share their experiences, concerns, and successes in teaching arguably promotes a culture which supports teaching and learning. One participant describes how an initiative in their institution fostered interdisciplinary connection and facilitated the identification of staff needs:

"We do some events when people can come and speak about teaching and learning, and this is quite a hot topic, but also people just want to come and say what is not OK with our teaching, but this is the good starting point. The point that they are unhappy, then they can just come and tell it loudly and they are heard, it's important. But then we can also show some solutions. It's possible that you could be a happy teacher in my university. So, meeting people, this is crucial for me, meeting teachers and talking to them and also allowing them to tell us [their issues]"

3.3 The value of connecting

The value of connection resulting from staff development initiatives is far-reaching. One participant with responsibility for the delivery of staff developments, attributes these connections as factors which have promoted increased interest in pedagogical research:

"The motivation for the teacher is not mainly the financial aids. I think the main motivation is that they can share their project. They can show their project to other colleagues and they can partake. They can share their experience and their projects."

Staff connecting with peers during staff development initiatives also ensures that the initiative is not taking place in a vacuum, assisting in creating a teaching and learning culture. One participant representing institutional leadership acknowledges the value of this and provides continued support following on from staff development initiatives:

"We never finish the training. We always end the sessions of the training and invite people to keep sharing. Keep talking and this happens. So, I do have a strong view that it does percolate in teaching and strongly in some cases."

Although connection and collaboration have been identified as essential elements and outcomes associated with effective staff development initiatives a crucial aspect of staff development, there is a need to develop relevant skills and understandings to enhance teaching practice. One participant highlighted the importance of the quality of staff development initiatives when reflecting on their own institution:

"They had a course of professional development, which they had evaluated, and the course evaluations, the main result there was, 'It was very interesting to compare our experiences with other teachers, that taught me a lot.' And I said, well, if that had been a course in methods for doctoral students in chemistry or mechanics or something, and they said, well, it was very interesting to meet other doctoral students and hear their experiences. And that was it. It would never have been accepted and the teachers responsible for the course would have been removed. So, should we really accept this?"

THEME 4: ACKNOWLEDGING BARRIERS WHILE DIGGING DEEPER

4.1 Time pressure as a barrier to engagement

Time was one barrier identified by participants and is seen as a finite resource, particularly when academics are tasked with prioritising their commitments. One participant said:

"There are so many things that we like to do because they are nice, but we cannot because we don't have time."

Another shared frustration that despite expressed interest, staff felt they could not engage:

"There is a serious interest in many topics among teachers, and we did a survey a few years ago, did they want to know more about student motivation, about what critical thinking can mean in their subject? There was a great interest. And everyone also stated, 'but we don't have the time'"

However, members of institutional leadership expressed scepticism about the extent to which a lack of time is a justifiable reason for not engaging with staff development initiatives. One participant suggested reasons for not engaging in staff development could reflect a deeper lack of interest in participating. Another suggested a reluctance to change in their perception of their role:

"Why they don't want to engage? Because they must question themselves. They must change the role. And that is, I think, a psychological problem that some of them have".

Another participant in a leadership role suggested that the reason for not engaging in staff development could reflect a lack of interest in participating:

"From the point of view of academics what they complain mostly about is the lack of time. Time is always a scarce resource, so it's also an excuse sometimes, but clearly their academics report not having enough time to dedicated to training."

The supposition is that citing a lack of time as a barrier to engaging with staff development reflects a failure to prioritise staff development at individual, departmental and institutional levels. The focus group results show a difference in perspective between senior leadership and those tasked with organising staff development offerings.

4.2 Volatility of institutional and national support

The planning and delivery of staff development initiatives takes place within institutional and national contexts. A prominent reflection across all of the focus groups was, beyond a lack of resources, that the instability of institutional and national support for teaching and learning was a major barrier. Participants outlined how the planning and delivery of staff development initiatives are shaped by how teaching and learning is prioritised by institutional and national leadership. Participants who occupied leadership roles within their institutions generally identified teaching and learning as an important element of strategic planning:

"Ensuring high quality of teaching and learning has been consistently the first among the four things that involve all the units that are engaged in the implementation of the strategic plan of institution. It also remains so in the new strategic plan that we have adopted as a university."

However, when discussing institutional prioritisation of teaching and learning, one participant discussed how support can change between successive leaders:

"If [staff development in the context of teaching and learning] is currently important strategically, the answer is yes, and it is, yes. Particularly, since the current Senior Leader Director moved into place. So, this of course hints you that the strategic importance is not fully embedded in the tissue of the institution, I would say."

Further, a lack of stability in budget allocation for teaching and learning presents a hindrance in establishing evidence-based frameworks for staff development. Specifically, one participant who directs a teaching and learning centre highlighted that securing funding for staff development was reliant on tailoring the initiatives to the funding body requirements, which can undermine quality:

"I would say that there are a lot of challenges in the process, and the first is the lack of stable financing of the process. What we are doing now is financing the training courses for academics from external sources, usually from our government or some organizations who are responsible for dividing those funds among universities, and it is very difficult to present some systematic approach when you have different projects the money comes from and you need to adjust the programs you would like to offer to academics to the expectations and the requirements from the project."

The same participant discussed how instability in funding for teaching and learning can result in staff in these centres having to redirect their efforts towards securing financing, which can take away from other responsibilities, such as pedagogical research and the planning and delivery of staff development initiatives:

"We started [a didactics] program and developed it under a project we had at the beginning. When we lost the financing, we were fighting for maintaining this good practice at the university. We managed to find money for it, but it was really a huge effort from our side to find financing for this program, which we all agreed was very, very good practice at the university and was really a very important program".

Beyond the institutional context, participants explained how a lack of support for teaching and learning from the national government can restrict progress in the area of staff development. When outlining the barriers to planning and delivering staff development at his institution, one participant emphasised the importance of teaching and learning being prioritised at a national level:

"We're not an exception in the country. I think we are in a way a very positive example in the country. It is a country in which teaching and learning has not had support - specific support until last year, and so, it's a country that needs to be aware of the importance of supporting teaching and learning."

Another participant expressed frustration at the fluctuation of national support for teaching and learning:

"I would just wish that national incitements were sort of not dependent on different governments coming and going."

This publication has been developed under the Erasmus+ co-funded "Staff development for learning and teaching at European universities" (STAFF-DEV) project, led by the European University Association (EUA) and in partnership with University College Cork (Ireland), Utrecht University (Netherlands), the University of Oslo (Norway) and Ruhr University Bochum (Germany).

The project aims to analyse how staff development and academic assessment are conducted at European higher education institutions and to strengthen institutional capacity and strategies in this regard.

More information: https://www.eua.eu/our-work/projects/eu-funded-projects/staffdev.html