# POLICIES FOR REALISING RESPONSIVE, ENGAGING, ACTIVE, AND TAILORED EDUCATION WITH STUDENTS

Some suggestions for stimulating educational reform in the EHEA

A CREATES POLICY PAPER
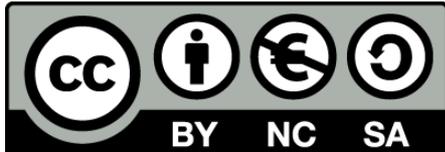
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# About CREATES

CREATES (Creating Responsive, Engaging, Active and Tailored Education with Students) is an ERASMUS+ Strategic Partnership between educators at Leuphana University Lüneburg, the University of Freiburg, Maastricht University, King's College London, Sciences Po, and Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna di Pisa. The CREATES partners share a belief in the importance of student-centred and co-creative education. The main goal of the partnership is to develop, exchange and promote best practices in undergraduate education, especially related to activating teaching methods and student guidance, to thereby advance student-centred higher education in the European Higher Education Area. The partnership has produced four toolkits containing educational tools and strategies, an academic paper summarising scientific evidence regarding the value of this approach, a position paper explaining the approach and its merits, and a policy paper discussing policies to encourage institutions to adopt it. The partnership has also organised a series of training events for staff and students from the participating institutions, along with several multiplier events for representatives from other universities and the higher education community. All materials can be found on the CREATES website: **http://europe-creates.eu/**

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# Acknowledgements

# Executive Summary

There is widespread agreement amongst educators, educational researchers, policy makers and institutional leaders that higher education in the EHEA should become more co-creative and student-centred. However, actual innovation has been slow. Policy makers and administrators thus require tools to encourage and incentivise institutions to modernise their teaching practices. This paper presents a number of policy instruments that policy makers might consider implementing in order to encourage higher education institutions to adopt co-creative learning practices. They are:

### Teaching Grants

A system of competitive teaching grants (mirroring the existing system of research grants) should be created to fund new educational initiatives. As a by-product, such a system will increase the institutional status of teaching, recognise excellence in education, and support the creation of recognised professional communities of practice.

### Teaching Careers

Higher education institutions should give more weight to teaching achievement when making decisions about the hiring, tenure and promotion of faculty. This will require a revision of HR policies and the creation of a framework for assessing contributions to teaching and educational innovation. Such changes will see excellence in teaching rewarded and incentivised, contributing to a cultural shift in academia in which educational achievements are appropriately valued. This will further the implementation of educational innovations, such as the ones CREATES champions.

### National Teaching and Learning Forums

There should be national teaching and learning forums that seek to support educational reform by fostering coordination between institutions and creating synergies between their work. These forums should provide networking opportunities for innovators, allowing them to learn from each other and exchange best-practices, as well as facilitating the sector-wide collection of evidence and a common understanding of the goals and means of reform. They should also recognise exemplary work and stimulate a culture of educational innovation that transcends individual institutions.

### Student Engagement Surveys

Higher education institutions should be encouraged to participate in a national student engagement survey, in addition to the more typical student satisfaction surveys. The results of these surveys should be used in both internal and external quality assurance processes. The results should also be made public for the benefit of prospective students and in order to spotlight institutions and programmes that perform particularly well or badly.

## Student-centred Quality Assurance

Quality assurance procedures, both internal and external, should be reformed to take into account the open nature of student-centred, co-creative education, in which every student's educational journey is different. This can be done by focusing quality assurance on the educational process and on the justifications programmes give for the choices they make. This effect can also be achieved by minimising unnecessary specification of general quality assurance standards, as well as ensuring quality assurance staff and accreditation panels are well-informed about student-centred education.

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# 1 Introduction

There is widespread agreement amongst educators, educational researchers, policy makers and institutional leaders that higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) should become more co-creative and student-centred, as championed by CREATES. International bodies such as the OECD and the European Commission, as well as national governments, think tanks and higher education networks, have all argued that to adequately prepare students for the future, a more co-creative, student-centred approach to higher education is required. Furthermore, educational research has convincingly shown the pedagogical value of such an approach. At the same time, it is also clear that, even though there are excellent examples of reform, innovation has been slow and on a rather modest scale. A lot of higher education in the EHEA is still conducted in a traditional, teacher-centred fashion. While there are many reports and studies that argue for the modernisation of higher education, they rarely offer concrete policy instruments that can speed up change and influence day-to-day educational practice. Hence, policy makers and administrators require tools to encourage and incentivise institutions to modernise their educational practices.

The goal of this paper is to present a number of policy instruments that policy makers might consider implementing in order to encourage higher education institutions (HEIs) to adopt co-creative learning practices, as elaborated in the toolkits provided by CREATES. The paper was not written by policy experts or scholars of educational management. Rather, it offers the observations and reflections of educators and programme directors who believe passionately in student-centred, co-creative learning and who seek to provide such education to their students. They see first-hand which features of the higher education system make reform difficult, and how institutional or cultural factors frustrate educational innovation. From the frontline, they have observed a number of new and innovative policy tools in their respective national contexts and institutions which they deem promising. It goes without saying that these policy-instruments cannot be transplanted wholesale but must be carefully adapted to specific contexts. Nevertheless, the CREATES partners feel that they can be a source of inspiration and might yield concrete avenues for advancing the shared policy goal of modernising higher education in the EHEA.

This policy paper will examine:

- Teaching Grants
- Teaching Careers
- National Teaching and Learning Forums
- Student Engagement Surveys
- Student-centred Quality Assurance

Each section will start with an analysis of one aspect of the status quo in higher education that frustrates the implementation of student-centred, co-creative education. This will be followed by the presentation of a policy intervention and a discussion of how this might solve the issues identified and promote educational reform. Each section concludes with a discussion of possible downsides and issues to consider.

As educators, we hope this paper might serve as an inspiration for policy makers on the institutional, sectoral, national and European level and that it might contribute to realising a more student-centred, co-creative higher education for students across Europe.

# 2 Teaching Grants

*A system of competitive teaching grants (mirroring the existing system of research grants) should be created to fund new educational initiatives. As a by-product, such a system will increase the institutional status of teaching, recognise excellence in education, and support the creation of recognised professional communities of practice.*

## The constraints on teaching innovation

As any educator or programme director knows, time and resources for educational innovation are often scarce. Delivering existing educational modules can take up a significant amount of time, especially in an age of mass education and expanding enrolments. Furthermore, faculty members are expected to participate in the familiar research cycle of applying for funding, conducting research, administering projects, publishing, and valorising or communicating their results. While teachers may have ideas for new courses, pedagogies or forms of student support, time and resource constraints often prevent them from realising these.

Moreover, unlike in research, there is no culture or system of permanent innovation in teaching. In research, practitioners are expected to continuously advance their work, in close dialogue with their academic peers. There is an extensive infrastructure for supporting research, developing work-in-progress, sharing results, and recognising excellence. One particularly important component of this research infrastructure is the system of competitive research grants, which are awarded to leading and innovative researchers. Prominent examples include the ERC and Horizon 2020 grants, but also grants on a national level, such as research council grants or those offered by learned societies, philanthropic foundations and the like. These research grants stimulate research innovation in a number of ways. Importantly, they provide ample time and resources for carrying out actual research, often by providing "relief" from ongoing teaching duties. However, they also provide external validation of the potential of new avenues of research and are markers of excellence for those who acquire them. They are often key to career advancement, especially the tiered grant schemes that offer different grants for researchers at different stages in their careers. Moreover, research grants give access to highly selective networks of grant-recipients and are often a pre-requisite of being recognised as a leader in the field. As a result, these grants are highly sought-after, both by individuals and by institutions, which tout their success in acquiring them, reinforcing a culture in which research achievements are valued above all else.

## Grants for innovative teaching

In this context, it is not surprising that true educational innovation is difficult, and that the transition towards student-centred and co-creative education is slow. To remedy this, one promising policy is creating a system of teaching grants to mirror the highly influential system of research grants. Competitive grants would be given to teaching staff, who would apply with

concrete proposals for new courses, innovative pedagogical methods or systems of student guidance. A leading example is the Comenius Programme in the Netherlands, which inspired the proposal made in this section. This programme was introduced in 2015 and offers competitive grants of €50,000, €100,000, and €500,000 for educational projects proposed by educators at different stages in their careers.[1]

Teaching grants can provide direct, targeted funding for specific educational innovations, relieving educational innovators from day-to-day teaching activities so that they have the time and resources to actually implement new ideas. The calls for proposals can be given specific themes which proposals must address, targeting innovation in areas such as student support and co-creative education. Such themes would encourage the transition towards the kind of higher education that is deemed desirable. The Comenius Programme has focused on the transition from secondary to tertiary education, connecting education with social issues and personal development, although there is also always an open category.

Teaching grants would be awarded by panels of experienced educators, thereby providing external validation of proposed initiatives. In the case of the Comenius Programme, panels consist of educational researchers and teachers with an excellent track record, and they always include a number of students. Institutions must take selected projects seriously and must commit to implementing them, as a condition of the funding. Indeed, one might require institutions to organise internal nomination processes, and indicate strategic support for applicants. This process would make institutions more aware of the educational innovations proposed, putting these initiatives more firmly on the institutional radar.

Moreover, since these grants are competitive and awarded by high-level bodies, they are likely to acquire a significant level of prestige. Receiving such a grant may become a marker of excellence in educational innovation, which could increase an educator's status within their institution and serve as input for a system of teaching careers (see section 3 on this topic). Like many research grant programmes, teaching grant programmes could offer tiered grants, appropriate for educators at different stages in their careers, and providing a clear progression track that mirrors what is common in the field of research. While the Comenius Programme has only existed for five years, anecdotal evidence suggests that many educators who have received grants have also received promotions and have enjoyed an increase in their institutional status.

Lastly, recipients of teaching grants can be brought together in a network of peers, who can exchange work-in-progress, share best practices, and present themselves as recognised experts in teaching innovation, thereby fostering a sustainable system of permanent innovation in education. This can be done in the context of a national teaching and learning forum (discussed in section 4). Such networks can manifest themselves as voices in debates about higher education and undertake activities to promote reform in higher education, much like traditional learned societies do. In the case of the Comenius Programme, the associated

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[1] For more information on the Comenius Programme, see **https://www.nro.nl/en/comenius-programme/**

Comenius Network connects over 100 leading educators, who exchange best practices and have established working groups on matters such as inclusion and sustainable employability.[2]

## The limits of teaching grants

Needless to say, teaching grants could also have disadvantages. The fact that they are competitive means that not all proposals can be funded, potentially leading to frustration on the part of applicants. While the selective character is likely to add to the prestige and cachet of these grants, it also means that, just as with research funding, some good proposals will not receive support. However, the process of preparing a proposal, even if it is not funded, can have significant benefits. Institutions might be convinced to support well-evaluated proposals that were not funded from their own means, and the act of working out a detailed proposal can help crystallise mere ideas into concrete plans, which can then be implemented on some other occasion or in some other way.

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[2] For more information on the Comenius Network, see
**https://comeniusnetwerk.nl/traces/default.aspx**

# 3 Teaching Careers

*Higher education institutions should give more weight to teaching achievement when making decisions about the hiring, tenure and promotion of faculty. This will require a revision of HR policies and the creation of a framework for assessing contributions to teaching and educational innovation. Such changes will see excellence in teaching rewarded and incentivised, contributing to a cultural shift in academia in which educational achievements are appropriately valued. This will further the implementation of educational innovations, such as the ones CREATES champions.*

## Missing recognition for educational excellence and innovation

In many higher education institutions, educational excellence and innovation are insufficiently recognised in HR policies. Oftentimes, hiring decisions do not prioritise an applicant's interest in and aptitude for teaching. Moreover, academics who focus on teaching generally have fewer career possibilities compared to those who focus on research. This disincentivises educational innovation and improvement. Hence, it is important to create explicit HR criteria to recognise and reward teaching achievement throughout academic careers and to develop teaching-focused career tracks that are equal in status to research-focused career tracks.

Currently, prestige and career options in academia are closely tied to research achievement. While teaching is a core task of universities, this does not translate into the systematic recognition of teaching talent, and the possibilities of academic promotion in rank based on educational excellence are few. On the contrary, ambitious academics notice quickly that dedicating time to teaching and educational innovation is not conducive to their career. As a consequence, even academics with a clear interest in and aptitude for teaching focus more on research in order to secure career possibilities. Although this incongruence is well known, offering diverse career pathways that recognise various academic responsibilities is not yet common practice.

A barrier to advancing teaching-oriented career pathways is the lack of an accepted framework that defines and measures educational excellence. Although much debated, measures of research performance are well-established. Teaching-oriented performance indicators, on the other hand, often rely too heavily on student evaluations and lack common standards. They are not seen as reliable measures for decisions about hiring, tenure and promotion. As long as shared standards are lacking, it is difficult to recognise and reward educational excellence.

## Towards greater diversity in academic career paths

Any initiative seeking to successfully address the topic of teaching careers has to consider two levels of intervention. On a strategic level, striving for a change in culture and HR policies within the academic system means addressing a fundamental question: What is a good academic? On a more operational level, recognising teaching excellence means dealing with

questions regarding the reliable definition and measurement of academic achievements that go beyond current practices.

The following paragraphs present two promising initiatives that complement each other in addressing these issues. The first initiative aims at a system-wide change in HR policies for academics by addressing the fundamental question of academic value. The second initiative provides an operational approach for defining and measuring teaching achievements.

Rather than focusing on teaching careers in isolation, the Dutch initiative "Room for Everyone's Talent"[3] uses an integrated approach that emphasises teaching, research and impact as core responsibilities of universities. It has the ambition to modernise the system of academic recognition and reward by creating diverse academic career pathways that reflect these responsibilities.

Reflecting on the purpose of academia, the starting point of this initiative was dissatisfaction with a one-sided emphasis on quantifiable research performance indicators for academic careers and the related undervaluation of other academic performance areas such as teaching, impact, leadership and patient care (in the medical professions). The initiative strives for greater diversity in career paths, each having a clear profile in one or more of these areas.

Such a fundamental change of the academic career system requires a shift in mindset, policies and structures. It cannot succeed without the support of leading academic institutions and scholars. What makes this Dutch initiative particularly promising is the scope of its aims and corresponding network:

- It links international developments in both academic research and teaching, notably the Open Science movement, the Science in Transition movement, and the international network around Ruth Graham's Career Framework for University Teaching (see below).
- With its focus on academic recognition, it also connects to critical discussions concerning research performance measures and standards for assessing research at Dutch universities.[4]
- Its steering committee includes the major players in the Dutch academic system, including highly regarded national research-funding organisations and leading universities.

If this Dutch initiative is focused on system-wide change, the second initiative this paper examines provides a framework for recognising and rewarding teaching performance. Such a framework is a prerequisite for establishing teaching-oriented career paths. The "Career

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[3] **https://www.vsnu.nl/recognitionandrewards/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Position-paper-Room-for-everyone%E2%80%99s-talent.pdf**

[4] **https://www.vsnu.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/SEP_2021-2027.pdf**

Framework for University Teaching"[5], developed by Ruth Graham on behalf of the Royal Academy of Engineering (UK), is an open-access resource that aims to provide a template for universities to define and measure the teaching achievements of their academic staff. The framework was developed in a four-year process, drawing on expert interviews, surveys, a literature review, and examples of good practice. An international network of university partners piloted the framework and provided feedback.

The results of the project showed that commonly used measures of teaching achievement do not command the respect of the academic community. The over-reliance on student evaluations was seen as particularly problematic. Moreover, university reward systems were found to put little emphasis on educational leadership. The research report specifies two structural barriers to change: (1) an absence of clear and accepted definitions of progressive "levels" of teaching achievement; and (2) the inadequacy of data on teaching achievement at each career stage. To help overcome these barriers, the framework defines four progressive levels of teaching achievement linked to increasing spheres of impact: effective teacher, skilled and collegial teacher, institutional leader in teaching and learning / scholarly teacher (two parallel branches), and global/national leader in teaching and learning. Furthermore, it specifies forms of evidence that can be used to demonstrate teaching achievement: self-assessment, professional activities, (indirect) measures of student learning, and peer evaluation and recognition.

If we agree that teaching is an important responsibility of universities, it is necessary to address the undervaluation of teaching achievements in the current academic recognition and reward system. We hope to have shown with the examples above that a change in this system requires an integrated approach that engages the academic community in a debate on the university's core responsibilities. Based on this fundamental discussion, academic performance domains, corresponding performance indicators, and levels of progression can be defined.


## The limits of introducing teaching careers

Overall, a status-sensitive system like academia is likely to reproduce status differentials even when introducing more diverse academic career paths. The idea of teaching careers is doomed to fail if the academic community is not prepared to discuss the overall system for assessing, developing and promoting faculty members. Recognising a variety of academic achievements, including teaching, will change the power structure within the system and will thus also provoke resistance of powerful players who benefit from the status quo. Having the support of influential academic leaders linked to networks that work towards a change in mindset and practices within their community is indispensable for such a system-wide change.

On a more operational level, the further development of a well-respected system of teaching-oriented recognition and reward is a prerequisite for enhancing the visibility and validation of

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[5] **https://www.teachingframework.com/**

excellent educators. Without such a framework, a status upgrade of the teaching domain is unlikely to be achieved. The introduction of teaching grants and national teaching and learning forums (see sections 2 and 4) will provide important stimuli in this regard.

Any incentive structure risks producing undesired side-effects or excesses. For instance, incentives that disproportionally favour "solo stars" have a tendency to destabilise the institution. When designing a teaching-oriented recognition and reward system, it is therefore important to keep a balance between rewarding individual excellence and contributions to the collective. The same caution is required with regards to teaching innovation. An incentive structure that overemphasises teaching innovation can lead to experimentation for the sake of experimentation and a disdain for excellence in execution that weaken the quality of teaching and learning.

Finally, academic careers are international. During the transition from the current career system to a more diverse one, some academics will be risk-averse and avoid career paths that are promoted in their national context yet less well established internationally. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that initiatives that promote teaching careers – like the ones presented in this section – connect to existing international movements and strive to develop a network of change.

# 4 National Teaching and Learning Forums

*There should be national teaching and learning forums that seek to support teaching and learning enhancement by fostering coordination between institutions and creating synergies between their work. These forums should provide networking opportunities for innovators, allowing them to learn from each other and exchange best-practices, as well as facilitating the sector-wide collection of evidence and a common understanding of the goals and means of teaching and learning enhancement. They should also recognise exemplary work and stimulate a culture of educational innovation that transcends individual institutions.*

## The fragmented nature of teaching and learning enhancement

In many EU countries, educational innovation in higher education is highly fragmented and decentralised. Every university or programme is responsible for its own educational policy and pursues modernisation quite independently, and with varying degrees of commitment. Oftentimes, teaching and learning enhancement is driven by individual educators or programme directors, who pursue their initiatives in relative isolation. While some institutions have teaching and learning departments, these tend to limit their activities to those institutions and must compete with other departments for resources and support from higher management.

The fragmented way in which educational innovation is typically pursued limits its impact. While those who are working on teaching and learning enhancement do meet from time to time, meetings sometimes occur on an ad hoc basis and are not organised within the context of a larger system. As a result, there are few opportunities for educational innovators to learn from each other and exchange best practices. It is also hard to form networks that extend beyond an individual institution. Every institution must therefore reinvent the wheel. Moreover, the local nature of many innovations makes it hard to evaluate their effects in a reliable fashion or collect useful data for large-scale analysis. This makes it difficult to gather shared evidence or even build a common understanding of the goals and means of teaching and learning enhancement. Lastly, there is no common framework for professional development or a system of recognition for exemplary work, as discussed in sections 2 and 3.

## Teaching and learning forums

To combat the fragmented nature of higher education innovation, more countries should create teaching and learning forums. These should be national organisations that support and coordinate educational enhancement by seeking to foster cooperation between different institutions and to create synergies between their initiatives. A leading example of such an organisation, which heavily inspired this discussion, is the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. This is the national body, set

up in 2012, responsible for leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education in Ireland.[6]

National forums, like the Irish National Forum, should not be regulatory bodies which seek to enforce top-down change. Rather, they should be run by the higher education sector and hold an intermediate position between ministries of education and specific institutions. This would allow them to connect institutions together, but also to act as voices for higher education in policy debates. Forums should be run by a strategic director and be overseen by an academically-led board, including representatives of institutions, students, policy partners and other key stakeholders, to ensure they enjoy a respected position in the higher education landscape. The Irish National Forum has former Irish President Mary McAleese as its patron, and its board includes national leaders in education, international advisors and students. In addition to a core team, they could be staffed by educators on temporary secondment from higher education institutions, to help integrate them into the fabric of the sector. Moreover, projects could be carried out by teams consisting of members from different institutions, to encourage cooperation.

National teaching and learning forums promise to provide structure and cohesion in educational innovation in a number of ways. Firstly, they provide opportunities for those who are engaged in teaching and learning enhancement to meet each other in a structured fashion, so that they can learn from each other and exchange best practices. This can be done through conferences, journals, podcasts, websites or thematically organised groups that work on similar issues that meet regularly. The goal is to get innovators to be less isolated and allow them to share insights. The Irish National Forum has undertaken national projects related to professional development, teaching and learning enhancement within and across disciplines, student success, and teaching and learning in a digital world.[7] It has also established mechanisms such as a National Associates Assembly, including representatives from every higher education institution, who meet twice each year to provide crucial institutional perspectives which inform strategic developments within and beyond the National Forum.

Moreover, teaching and learning forums are well placed to provide recognition for exemplary innovations and leading educators by offering awards, fellowships and other forms of acknowledgement or reward. The teaching grants discussed in section 2 could be awarded through national forums. Such initiatives would bring a certain prestige to teaching, which it currently lacks. And institutions may be more willing to support innovations that have been externally validated.

National teaching and learning forums could also provide opportunities for continuous professional development, such as courses that inform teachers about recent pedagogical innovations or educational leadership development programmes. They could also create a framework of recognition for professional development activities. While many institutions organise these individually, running them on a national level is efficient, provides participants

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[6] For more information on the Irish National Forum, see **https://www.teachingandlearning.ie**

[7] **https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/our-priorities/**

opportunities to develop networks, allows for much more effective dissemination of best practices, and enhances the status of professional development. This can, in turn, feed into the criteria for tenure and promotion in the context of the teaching careers argued for in section 3.

Lastly, national teaching and learning forums are ideally positioned to collect data about educational innovation on a systemic level. Such data can help to generate a shared understanding of the state of the evidence in the field of higher education as well as stimulating consensus about priorities. Research projects on educational innovations could be executed by teams of innovators from different institutions, and involve a range of different programmes, providing richer data than local initiatives ever could. The Irish National Forum has recently completed a large project on improving assessment, producing a number of publications and supporting a range of projects at institutions that implemented innovative forms of assessment. This has resulted in a much better national understanding of what assessment is for and how it should be done.[8] Also, the National Forum worked with 32 institutions to conduct the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey, using its national influence to garner a dataset of close to 30,000 student and staff responses, which can now be leveraged by individual institutions to inform decision making.

Given the fact that higher education is primarily a national or sub-national responsibility in EHEA countries, it makes sense to organise these forums on a national level. However, this does not mean that they should confine their activities to the national context. Obviously, it is highly desirable for forums to connect educators across countries and to promote collaboration across national borders. One might imagine a network of teaching and learning forums on an EHEA level.

The activities discussed above will all contribute to less fragmentation in educational innovation, resulting in a more valued and informed culture of enhancement than is possible in a decentralised system. Innovative educators will be better informed about current developments and can build on each other's work, resulting in greater synergies. Feeling part of a system-wide community can be very empowering, especially if that community provides educators with recognition and opportunities for development that are currently lacking. External recognition, in turn, can give educators additional influence within their institutions, as it provides validation of their activities that administrators will find hard to ignore.

National teaching and learning forums promise to have a significant impact on institutions. Those institutions that are implementing promising reforms will be able to easily share their innovations, while institutions that lag behind will be pulled along, in part because such forums will make better resources available to them, but also because it is difficult to stay behind in the context of a culture of innovation characterised by a shared understanding of the means and goals of teaching and learning enhancement.

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[8] **https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/our-priorities/student-success/assessment-of-for-as-learning/**

## The dangers of centralisation

Higher education institutions are proudly independent, and they differ enormously in many respects. Hence, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to succeed. This means that national teaching and learning forums should not be top-down entities that instruct institutions how to reform their education. There is also a danger that the creation of national forums might be perceived as an attempt by the government to control the sector, causing resistance. To prevent this, forums should be facilitators of exchange and be owned, if only metaphorically, by the higher education sector itself. They should not become bureaucratic organisations that are calcified by procedures and perceived as distant. They should be run for and by educators, in an effort to coordinate and support their work.

# 5 Student Engagement Surveys

*Higher education institutions should be encouraged to participate in a national student engagement survey, in addition to the more typical student satisfaction surveys. The results of these surveys should be used in both internal and external quality assurance processes. The results should also be made public for the benefit of prospective students and in order to spotlight institutions and programmes that perform particularly well or badly.*

## The limits of student satisfaction

In most higher education systems, student satisfaction is key to how educational quality is operationalised and measured. In many countries, national student satisfaction surveys are held to inform prospective students and produce rankings of institutions. The results of these surveys have reputational and even financial consequences. Hence, institutions pay a great deal of attention to satisfaction surveys, and concern for their results can influence decision-making and educational policies.

Clearly, asking students how they perceive their education is an important part of quality assurance and accountability. However, the focus on student satisfaction can make it harder to implement co-creative forms of higher education and can even undermine valuable reform efforts in a number of ways.

Firstly, the attention that surveys receive communicates to students that what ultimately matters is their satisfaction, rather than their learning. Seeing student satisfaction as all-important reinforces the idea that higher education is all about what the teachers and institution do for the students and suggests that education is a passive process in which the results depend on what teachers do. The focus on student satisfaction promotes a consumer mentality. If students internalise this frame of mind, then they may see being asked to take an active role in shaping their own education in negative terms. They may perceive it as teachers shirking their responsibilities and seeking to short-change students.

Secondly, the national and institutional focus on maintaining the highest possible levels of student satisfaction might make programme directors and educators reluctant to implement more co-creative and student-centred forms of education, as they worry that these will make students uncomfortable and result in worse evaluations. Whether consciously or unconsciously, a concern for improving student satisfaction may lead educators to pamper students and prevent students from experiencing frustration and uncertainty, even when there might be good pedagogical reasons for doing so.

## The conceptual value of student engagement surveys

Rather than focusing only on student satisfaction, higher education systems and institutions might also measure student engagement. The key difference between student satisfaction surveys and student engagement surveys is that the former assess the extent to which students

are happy with their education, while student engagement surveys focus on the behaviour of students, how engaged they have been in their education, and what the institution has done to stimulate their engagement. Student engagement can be defined as representing "two critical features of collegiate quality—the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities, and how the institution deploys its resources and organises the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning." [9] Hence, the concept is closely aligned with the co-creative, student-centred conception of education that lies at the heart of the CREATES approach to learning.

Student engagement can be measured by asking students to report on their own study-related activities and how they have responded to the teaching they have received. A number of surveys have been devised to measure student engagement, the most well-known being the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)[10], run by the University of Indiana (USA), which has been the basis of a number of other surveys, including the UK Engagement Survey (UKES).[11] These surveys typically ask how much time students have spent on their studies and about other kinds of behaviour that indicate students' engagement with their education. But they also ask to what extent courses emphasised various activities deemed to be of value or how much the institution has encouraged them to undertake such activities. For example, the UKES asks students how often they engaged in learning with others, in interacting with staff, and in reflecting and connecting, as well as whether their courses emphasised critical thinking, research and inquiry, and independent learning. It also asks students if their education has contributed to the development of career, creative, social and learning-related skills.

The great virtue of student engagement as a concept is that it is much more closely linked to student learning and development than satisfaction is; students who are actively engaged with their education are highly likely to be learning, whereas students who are merely satisfied with their education might not be learning much at all. This makes it far more suited to the purpose of higher education, which is not to provide satisfaction, but rather to foster learning and development.

While some programmes and institutions already make use of engagement surveys, it would be highly beneficial if student engagement surveys became as common as satisfaction surveys, both within institutions and on a national level. One might imagine a national student engagement survey, much like the existing national student satisfaction surveys, in which all institutions are expected to participate. All institutions would get reports on the results for

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[9] **https://nsse.indiana.edu/nsse/index.html**

[10] For more information, see **https://nsse.indiana.edu**

[11] For more information, see **https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-surveys/uk-engagement-survey-ukes**

each of their programmes, noting highlights and trends.[12] These reports could become part of both internal and external quality assurance procedures, with programmes asked to reflect on their engagement results at the end of each year and during accreditations. Some version of the results would also be made public, to assist prospective students in making an informed choice about what and where to study. While it might be difficult to make rankings of educational quality based purely on these survey results, institutions and programmes that do particularly well or badly could be spotlighted. Results could also be taken into account in national evaluations of institutional quality, and in allocating targeted funding.

## The benefits of student engagement surveys for higher education

Introducing a system of student engagement surveys could contribute to higher education reform in a number of ways. Firstly, an engagement survey will make the benefits of co-creative education visible, as institutions that successfully implement reforms are likely to see improvements in student engagement and will be rewarded with better survey results. This will serve as reinforcement for educators who have innovative ideas and incentivise institutions to invest in such ideas. Institutions might develop entire strategies to improve engagement, as they have done for enhancing satisfaction. A focus on engagement will encourage them to consider more co-creative and student-centred educational practices, as these increase engagement almost by definition.

Secondly, the results of engagement surveys are likely to give a very good indication of what sort of reforms might enhance education, as the surveys highlight those areas in which students are less engaged. Institutions participating in the NSSE have undertaken many targeted interventions to improve student engagement based on the results of the survey.[13] Furthermore, linking the student survey results to data about students' ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds can enable targeted reforms that increase inclusion and close the attainment gap.

Thirdly, measuring student engagement sends a clear message that the higher education system values student engagement, and the development of students, as much as satisfaction. Organising a national survey would be a high-profile statement about the priorities of the education sector. This is likely to lead to renewed interest in activating and engaging forms of education, such as the ones CREATES proposes.

Fourthly, a survey of engagement promises to be beneficial for the students completing it. Reflecting on how active one has been, what one has done and not done during one's education, and how one has or has not been inspired by various educational initiatives can be a very valuable exercise. It may prompt a re-evaluation of priorities, but it can also make students aware of how much they have achieved. One might even design the survey in such a

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[12] For an example, see **https://nsse.indiana.edu/nsse/reports-data/sample-report/index.html**

[13] See **https://nsse.indiana.edu/support-resources/how-institutions-use-nsse-fsse-bcsse-data/lessons-from-the-field/index.html**

way that students would receive a personalised report on their engagement, one that placed their answers in the context of those of the general student population. This could be further supplemented by a longitudinal element, giving students feedback on how their engagement has developed between editions of the survey. This could stimulate more engaged studying on the part of students and make them more open to co-creative and student-centred forms of education.

## The limitations of student engagement

Needless to say, measuring student engagement has its drawbacks. For one thing, the concept of engagement is relatively novel to students, educators and the general public, and many will be unfamiliar with it. Moreover, the results can be harder to interpret than the results of satisfaction surveys. One cannot see at a glance how one is doing, or whether one institution is doing better or worse than another. It is hard to set benchmarks and key performance indicators, making the results less headline-worthy than the results of satisfaction surveys. Hence, the widespread introduction of student engagement surveys will require a great deal of careful communication about the concept of engagement and its importance.

It is also crucial to understand student engagement in a wider context that takes into account overall student well-being. While high levels of engagement might contribute to learning, they can also be associated with poor mental health and lead to burnout. If student engagement is emphasised without an awareness of these issues, institutions might start to overwork their students, resulting in less deep learning, higher dropout rates, and a significant decrease in student well-being. It is thus important to understand student engagement holistically and to include questions that explore work-life balance and healthy study behaviour.

# 6 Student-centred Quality Assurance

*Quality assurance procedures, both internal and external, should be reformed to take into account the open nature of student-centred, co-creative education, in which every student's educational journey is different. This can be done by focusing quality assurance on the educational process and on the justifications programmes give for the choices they make. This effect can also be achieved by minimising unnecessary specification of general quality assurance standards, as well as ensuring quality assurance staff and accreditation panels are well-informed about student-centred education.*

## The crucial role of quality assurance

Quality assurance policies play an important role in shaping how higher education is delivered. Institutions and educators are expected to conform to quality assurance standards and procedures, and this influences how they do their job. Inherently, any quality assurance system carries implicit assumptions about what higher education should be like, and educational practice is assessed relative to this. In many cases, conceptions of higher education are likely to be traditional in some sense, as they will be based on existing educational practice. This can make it difficult to accommodate innovative educational models that deviate from the norm, dissuading programmes from adopting co-creative learning practices. On the other hand, quality assurance policies can foster educational reform by incorporating a more progressive conception of higher education, with programmes and institutions then incentivised to adapt to the new standards. Hence, designing appropriate quality assurance policies and standards is important if one wishes to promote student-centred and co-creative education.

This is widely recognised. In 2015, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which provide a general framework for quality assurance across the EHEA, were revised to incorporate a new standard that focused explicitly on student-centred learning. The new standard 1.3 states that: "Institutions should ensure that the programs are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach." This is clearly an attempt to use quality assurance as a way of promoting co-creative educational reform. However, the ESG functions at a highly abstract level and must be translated into national accreditation frameworks and local quality assurance policies in order to have an effect on educational practice. This translation can sometimes be problematic. Traditional assumptions about how higher education should be conducted can even be incorporated into new policies, limiting their effectiveness at fostering reform.

The central problem is that many quality assurance systems are still based on a traditional, teacher-centred conception of higher education, in which students are passive consumers. If this is how one conceives of the educational process, quality assurance can easily mean no more than checking if pre-conceived standards are met. However, in student-centred, co-creative education, every student has a unique learning journey, having taken different courses or studied different issues, and one cannot say in advance how the educational

process will unfold. In short, learning is an open process that cannot be assessed against pre-defined standards, methods or outcomes.

## Student-centred quality assurance

To remedy these issues, and to promote student-centred, co-creative education, one must reframe the quality assurance system around a more active conception of the student as the author of their own education. From this perspective, education is about a process of learning, rather than about achieving a predefined outcome. Each student will take a different path, study different things, produce different work, and make different choices. In assessing students, one must take into account the quality of the choices students make in this process, by considering how well those choices are justified. Educators need to assess the information and options a student considered, how precisely they articulated arguments in support of their choices, and the values upon which their choices were based.

The same approach should be applied to quality assurance. Quality assurance should take into account the fact that different programmes may make different choices. It should not focus on judging the choices made, but rather on the justifications for those choices. It should offer educators the chance to explain how they designed their programme and how they operate it, but also why they do so. Rather than focusing on end results (as revealed in theses and final products) and indicators of success (such as graduation rates and study duration), the quality of education should be judged by considering student engagement and the learning trajectories of individual students. To do this, assessors should consider portfolios of student work from each phase of their education. Such a reframing of the quality assurance process requires a change of mentality. However, it can be furthered by making a number of changes to quality assurance policies.

Firstly, it is important to adjust the way in which the guidelines and standards of the ESG are applied in local contexts. It is crucial to note that the issues identified above are not caused by the standards themselves, but rather by how they are further elaborated and applied by panels and quality assurance administrators. National specifications, guidelines from accrediting bodies and quality assurance agencies, and institutional policies all add layers of specification to the ESG, which make it harder for programmes and educators to justify their choices as they have to fit everything into pre-determined categories. Hence, local quality assurance systems should not offer further specification of the ESG standards, and programmes should, within limits and according to certain categories, be free to present themselves to quality assurance officials, both internal and external, as they wish. Templates and forms asking detailed questions should be abolished, and while there should, of course, be certain standards, these should be formulated as topics to be addressed, rather than as requirements to be met. Programmes should have considerable leeway in how they present themselves. They should be encouraged to engage in a conversation about why they made the choices they did, and how things are working out. In making their case, they can present evidence taken from student engagement surveys, as described in section 5.

Secondly, it is important that quality assurance officials and other participants in the quality assurance process, such as members of accreditation panels and secretaries, are well-informed about student-centred education. On occasion, they seem to harbour a number of outdated

assumptions about what higher education should look like. Ensuring they have a better understanding of the nature of innovative, co-creative education will help them be more receptive to educational innovation and more open to the ways in which different programmes present themselves. This can be achieved by incorporating explanations into training activities and instruction manuals.

However, it is important not to rely on formal quality assurance policies to promote student-centred education. After all, such procedures are primarily reactive and can easily be seen as bureaucratic hoops to jump through, in which case they are unlikely to result in much actual improvement in teaching practices. Rather, one must take a broader view. This point was made in 2019 by the European University Alliance (EUA). The EUA has considered how institutions might address the new ESG standard on student-centred learning in quality assurance processes, and what might count as evidence in this context. Based on theoretical work and a focus group with representatives of various institutions, the EUA produced a report entitled "Student-centred learning: approaches to quality assurance."[14]

The report firstly argued that embedding student-centred learning in quality assurance means ensuring that attention is paid to student-centred learning in the design of programmes. Student-centred learning should also be considered when creating pedagogical training for teaching staff, ensuring appropriate learning spaces, providing resources and services for students, and making decisions on teaching methods. Secondly, it is crucial to make student-centred education a part of so-called secondary forms of quality assurance (i.e. existing systems of quality assurance that are not explicitly about student-centred learning) as well as latent forms of quality assurance (i.e. measures and policies that are not explicitly part of quality assurance but which do have an effect on the quality of teaching and learning, such as staff recruitment policies). Lastly, it is important not to see safeguarding the student-centred nature of education as the sole responsibility of quality assurance officials, but rather to stress that everyone has a role to play. There should be close cooperation between quality assurance officials and centres of teaching and learning, along with conversations with educators proposing innovations. As such, institutions should seek to develop a student-centred quality culture. This is, of course, the goal of all quality assurance, but it is perhaps especially important in the context of student-centred learning. After all, this paradigm goes further than determining second graders for final theses or the routing of evaluation forms. It is ultimately about how educators and students relate, and that is first and foremost a matter of culture.

## The limitations of student-centred quality assurance

Some might worry that this vision of quality assurance will not provide sufficient accountability. Programmes will be able to present themselves in the most flattering way, ignoring weaknesses and areas of concern. Quality assurance officials and panels would then

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[14] **https://eua.eu/resources/publications/884:the-quality-assurance-of-student-centred-learning-approaches-to-quality-assurance.html**

be unable to identify problems. Without clear criteria and hard standards, inferior educational practices will not be detected and relevant issues will not be addressed.

However, it is a gross mischaracterisation of this view of quality assurance that "anything goes." Programmes must indeed be accountable. But allowing them to present themselves in an open way will help quality assurance officials to understand programmes in their own terms. This will enable a more accurate judgment of their merits and demerits. Accreditation panels will still be able to conclude that a programme's justifications for particular choices and decisions are not persuasive, badly thought through, or based on irrelevant or inaccurate data. Panels will still be able to ask critical questions and point to inadequacies. But rather than doing so on the basis of preformulated standards and indicators, they will have to use their expertise and experience to actually judge. This may be harder than simply checking boxes, both for programmes and quality assurance staff, as one cannot focus only on that which is being counted, rather than what really counts. But it will result in a more reflective quality assurance process that engages stakeholders more deeply, creates room for innovation, and does justice to the kind of student-centred, co-creative education that is required to prepare students for a world in which they must do more than follow instructions.

# 7 Conclusion

It is sometimes said that modernising a university is like modernising a graveyard. One can expect little help from those inside. This is overly cynical. Many institutions have embraced co-creative forms of education and consistently encourage pedagogical innovation. At the same time, the reality is that, while there is a general consensus concerning the future direction of higher education, institutional and systemic constraints limit the pace of change. To overcome these, this policy paper has provided concrete suggestions to support the transition to more student-centred education.

Needless to say, none of these policy suggestions is a silver bullet; only a concerted effort that combines multiple initiatives is likely to have much impact. The different policies presented here are complementary, and they can be combined in practice into a clear reform agenda. For example, the teaching grants could be administered by a national forum and used as evidence of teaching achievement in the context of a career framework. Similarly, the information gathered through the measurement of student engagement can be used in more student-centred forms of quality assurance.

However, the greatest promise of the various initiatives lies in their collective effect on the culture of higher education. Together, they send a clear message that educational reform is a serious matter, that it is highly valued by institutions and society, and that there is honour in doing reform well. They contribute to an ethos of innovation and student-centredness in which educators constantly strive to make the education they offer to their students fit for the future.

Policy makers and institutional leaders who believe in co-creative and student-centred education need to do more than produce reports and give stirring speeches. They must enact policies that make a real contribution to realising educational reform. As committed educators, we feel that the policies described in this document have the potential to make a significant difference and hope that they will inspire action.