

LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #23

Development and strategic
benefits of learning and
teaching centres

Thematic Peer Group Report

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of the European University Association (EUA) Learning & Teaching Thematic Peer Group “Development and strategic benefits of learning and teaching centres” (hereafter “the group”, see Annex). In the context of European higher education, learning and teaching centres (hereafter “centres”) are generally located within an institution, with their primary mission being to support the development of the institution’s learning and teaching. The group, comprising 10 representatives of various centres within the European Higher Education Area, was established in early 2023. Its mandate was to offer an introspective analysis on the topic, delving into strategies for developing the centres themselves, with the vision of enabling centres to take leading roles in the institutional strategic development of learning and teaching.

The structure, positioning and function of a centre within an institution can vary significantly from one country to another, and even among institutions within the same country. This will become evident in the section “Diversity and characterisation of the 10 represented centres”, where the diverse composition of the group members is briefly introduced. This variety also makes it difficult to determine when individual centres came into existence. However, current data, although sparse, indicates that they are becoming an ever more widespread feature of institutional structures. The EUA’s *Trends 2015* report, which captured developments in learning and teaching across Europe through an institutional survey, suggested that “creating [...] centres for learning and teaching [seems] fairly common although it is difficult to evaluate the scope of these changes based on the Trends questionnaire”.¹ The subsequent *Trends 2018* report noted that 65% of survey respondents had a dedicated centre or unit for the entire institution and that 7% had a centre only at the faculty or departmental level. A comparatively small number of respondents (12%) reported having neither a central nor a decentralised structure providing strategic support to learning and teaching.² The report concluded that “[w]hile their roles, functions, and place within the institution may differ, the findings clearly indicate that learning and teaching centres are emerging across Europe and are growing in importance for the development of learning and teaching missions”.³

Based on this background, the group members convened in both physical and virtual settings over the course of 2023. They engaged in discussions using both real-time and asynchronous methods to explore potential measures and considerations for advancing the development of centres. A key interest has been how centres can amplify their strategic contributions to the fulfilment of the institution’s educational mission in a more systematic and targeted fashion.

1 Sursock, A., 2015, *Trends 2015: Learning and teaching in European universities* (Brussels, EUA). <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/trends%202015%20learning%20and%20teaching%20in%20european%20universities.pdf> (accessed 12/10/2023), p. 14.

2 Gaebel, M., Zhang, T., Bunesco, L., & Stoeber, H., 2018, *Trends 2018: Learning and teaching in the European Higher Education Area* (Brussels, EUA). <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/trends-2018-learning-and-teaching-in-the-european-higher-education-area.pdf> (accessed 12/10/2023), p. 18.

3 Ibid., p. 20.

The group's findings are detailed in the following sections. They begin with a presentation of the centres represented in the group, illustrating centres' diversity across Europe regarding their levels of maturity, positioning and function within the institution, size and services. The report proceeds by presenting a virtuous cycle model developed by the group for the continuous advancement of centres. The elements of the cycle – positioning, action, impact, (self-)reflection and culture – are then presented in more detail through key questions relating to centres' day-to-day activities and long-term strategic plans commonly encountered by group members. In addition, recommendations accompany each of the model's elements and, where possible, are illustrated through real-world practices at a centre belonging to one of the group members.

The insights outlined below are not intended as a one-size-fits-all recipe for success, but rather as impulses for any centre to reflect on its own future development. The group hopes that these findings will prove valuable for institutional and centre leaders and staff of existing centres as they contemplate the future trajectory of their centre. Additionally, these insights can be beneficial to institutions contemplating the establishment of a new centre.

Diversity and characterisation of the 10 represented centres

Table 1. Overview of the characteristics of the 10 group member centres

Group member	Centre	Established	Mission/Function	Profile of centre members
Austria: WU Vienna (Vienna University of Economics and Business)	Program Management and Teaching & Learning Support: Learning and Teaching Development Unit	2012	There is no mission statement as the Learning and Teaching Development unit is not positioned as a standalone entity, but integrated in a larger structure. However, its core function is to support the university's strategy and ambitions in all areas linked to academic programmes, learning and teaching.	Specialists with a diverse range of professional backgrounds, including academic background (doctoral level, still active in teaching and research)
Estonia: University of Tartu	The University of Tartu's Centre for Learning and Teaching was originally not a dedicated centre per se, but its services were located in different units (e.g. Academic Affairs, Human Resources); as of 2024, the centre is directly positioned under the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs	2008	To provide academic programmes and consultation to staff on the development of learning and teaching, developing learning environments (e-learning)	By official classification, academic developers and instructional designers working in the centre are non-academic staff but many have an academic background
Iceland: University of Iceland	Centre of Teaching and Learning	2000	To provide professional consultation to staff and university leadership on educational development, and to maintain a leading role in higher education development	Administrative and teaching experts, as well as academic educational developers

Group member	Centre	Established	Mission/Function	Profile of centre members
Italy: University of Bergamo	Centre for Teaching Quality, Teaching Innovation and Learning (CQIIA)	2005	To promote initiatives and research on teacher education and educational innovation	Academic staff
Netherlands: Tilburg University	Centre for Teaching and Educational Innovation: TUNED IN	2023	To enable lecturers to create the most challenging and excellent courses and programmes for the years to come	Mostly non-academic staff
Portugal: University of Minho	IDEA-UMinho	2017	To promote and value innovation and the development of learning and teaching	Academic staff
Romania: Ovidius University of Constanta	Department for Teacher Training	1996	To provide initial training to students interested in a teaching career, lifelong learning programmes for teaching staff, and scholarship of learning and teaching	Academic staff
Sweden: Linköping University	Didacticum	1996/2014 (predecessor centre/today's Didacticum)	To stimulate engaging and high-quality teaching, and to support development of courses, programmes and learning environments	Academic developers, most of them also working as lecturers in various disciplines at Linköping University
Türkiye: Yeditepe University	Yeditepe University Learning and Teaching Unit (YU-LEARNT); as of 2024, the unit will be reconfigured as a centre	2021	To provide support to any member of the institution in their educational and academic life, from students to alumni, and from academic to administrative staff	Academic and administrative staff, undergraduate and graduate students
United Kingdom: University of Hull	Teaching Excellence Academy	2019	To celebrate, develop and promote excellent teaching	A blend of professional services and academic staff

As demonstrated by the overview in Table 1, the centres represented in the group, though few in number, exhibit considerable diversity in terms of levels of maturity, missions and functions, and staff profile.

With regard to their positioning, all centres in the group are formalised in the institutional structure, except for the IDEA-UMinho centre, which was created as an institutional project and is awaiting regulatory changes that will enable its full integration into the university. Some centres in the group were established relatively recently and are dedicated specifically to supporting and enhancing learning and teaching at the institution; examples include the University of Hull's Teaching Excellence Academy and Tilburg University's Centre for Teaching and Educational Innovation: TUNED IN. In other cases, the centre is relatively mature and takes the form of a fully integrated, long-established department or unit which, among other things, covers the typical duties of a centre. Examples include the Program

Management and Teaching & Learning Support department of the WU Vienna, and Ovidius University of Constanta's Department for Teacher Training. Conversely, these duties may also be spread over different institutional units or departments, as is the case with the University of Tartu.

The centres' staff members may also vary in their professional profiles. Most centres employ instructional designers and academic developers. Staff in some centres hold PhD degrees and/or have an academic background, and some are run by teaching staff, either through a secondment or employment arrangement. This is the case with, for example, the University of Linköping's Didacticum and the University of Minho's IDEA-UMinho centre. The employment status of centre staff within the institution and their academic qualifications are, indeed, common issues highlighted by the group. These factors impact the trust placed in these staff members and their expertise by the institutional community, notably other academic staff. Further details on this matter will be addressed in further detail below.

Finally, an additional crucial factor not included in Table 1 but confirmed by the group members is a strong correlation between institutional policies and the centres' strategies to enhance learning and teaching, to a degree that they mutually support and potentially propel each other's development.⁴ In the case of the University of Iceland, for example, a number of new initiatives and units dedicated to supporting and improving the quality and innovation of teaching have come into existence in recent years, such as a department of digital teaching and a formal teaching academy for public universities. This development now provides an impetus to re-evaluate the centre's role and responsibilities in supporting teaching and leading academic development in a sustainable way. Another example is Yeditepe University, which at the time of the group's activity was undergoing self-evaluation and the development of a new five-year strategic plan, which also covers its learning and teaching activities, as an ongoing process.

Apart from the institutional context, the national environment also plays a key role. For example, the establishment of the Tilburg University Centre for Teaching and Educational Innovation took place in the context of a national programme initiated in 2023 and aimed at fostering the development of centres across the Netherlands. As another example, at the time of the group's work, the University of Bergamo's CQIIA was undertaking a process of internal rethinking and reorganisation, in response to national reforms.

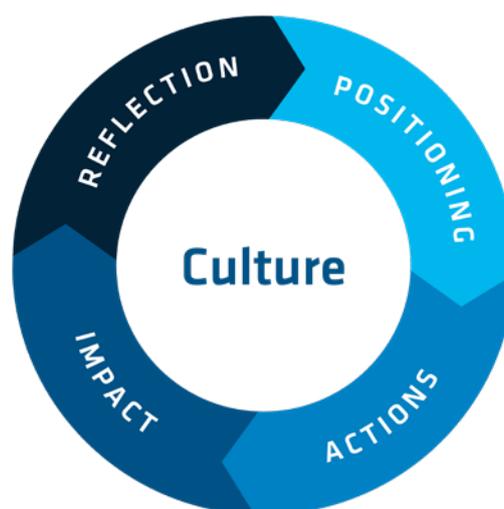
⁴ *Trends 2018*, p. 19.

Towards a virtuous cycle of centre development: key questions and recommendations

As outlined in the previous section, centres may all seem to fulfil the same or very similar function within their institutions, but on closer inspection can be quite diverse due to various factors such as their positioning within the institutional environment, structure and academic cultures, and staff profiles. However, there are several critical questions that highlight common challenges in the daily operations of centres, which could potentially affect their sustainability and future growth. The primary objective of every centre is to improve learning and teaching throughout the institution. Therefore, the key questions to be addressed within the centre all revolve around how to achieve this overarching goal and are focused on a centre's positioning, action, impact, (self-)reflection and culture.

These five themes are presented below in the form of a virtuous cycle of centre development, since pathways to address a specific theme build on pathways to address others. Another reason for the choice of a virtuous cycle model was the group's ambition to put forward an enhancement-gear model for addressing key questions and to communicate that centres are constantly in a state of flux, influencing and being influenced by the environment in which they are situated.

Figure 1. Virtuous cycle model of centre development



Reading the cycle in a clock-wise direction, positioning is a pivotal factor in establishing any centre. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, a centre's positioning significantly shapes its actions, which are determined by the scope of the centre's mission and function within an institution. A centre that seeks to understand itself and make informed decisions on (or a plea for) its future development needs to proactively and strategically consider the impact it wants to achieve and how it can do so. Subsequently, the centre should engage in a comprehensive reflection: i. to ascertain if it is attaining the envisioned impact and if it is capable of persisting in doing so; ii. to determine whether the actual impact aligns with the centre's mission, vision and resources; iii. to ensure it meets the needs of its learning and

teaching communities. The outcomes of this reflection will influence institutional judgements about the adequacy of the centre's positioning, and create impetus for appropriate follow-up action (including, again, a consideration of desired impact and follow-up reflection) jointly with university leadership. The central placement of culture within the model reflects its pervasive influence in all other themes, and also highlights the strong interdependence between each element of the cycle.

The key questions related to each theme, as well as recommendations to address these questions and good practice examples shared by the group, are outlined in the subsections below, starting with the first element of the virtuous cycle, "Positioning", and continuing in the sequence outlined above. The "Culture" aspect, being a transversal element, is covered together with other cross-cutting considerations.

POSITIONING

How can a centre be best positioned to influence and be a trusted partner in the development of learning and teaching within an institution?

The positioning of the centre within the institutional structure varies and significantly influences the centre's capacity to fulfil its mission and shape future developments in the institution's teaching culture.

The conceptual position of the centre can range from being service-oriented, providing bottom-up support to teaching staff upon request, to enhancing the policy and supporting the quality of learning and teaching by providing consultation to educational institution leaders.

Depending on institutional resource availability and priorities, the positioning of a centre within the institution may influence **staffing**, including the number, academic background and profile of staff, whether employed or volunteers, and the allocation of **resources**, including material and financial resources. This is no small issue, considering the prominence of resource concerns in higher education today.

Another pivotal question is whether a centre has a centralised (for example, as a central service under a rectorate) or decentralised positioning (for example, in individual schools) within the institution. The answer to this question may have an effect on the centre's capacity to **influence** institutional, national or even international discourses on learning and teaching. If a centre is perceived as a separate entity or solely as a service unit, it may lack integration in high-level institutional discussions about the future of learning and teaching. This goes against the centre's interest, as being in a leading position is considered crucial for effective support. A service positioning hinders the centre's ability to utilise its expertise, even if it has strategic tasks such as horizon scanning and foresight on matters of learning and teaching.⁵

⁵ This group finding is supported by research on the role of educational leadership's perception of academic developers, and how this perception either enables or disables academic development units to figure as change agents. See Fosslund, T., & Sandvoll, R., 2021, 'Drivers for educational change? Educational leaders' perceptions of academic developers as change agents', *International Journal for Academic Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1941034> (accessed 19/10/2023). A previous article on strategic leadership of centres came to a similar conclusion; see 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. 807-21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.539600> (accessed 19/10/2023).

Recommendations

P1 – Define who you are and who you are not.

Centres may undertake diverse responsibilities, including strategic planning for learning and teaching closely coordinated with university leadership, assisting academic staff in their development and innovation efforts related to teaching, and aiding students in enhancing their learning skills. All responsibilities can be appropriate for a centre, but concentrating on a selected few rather than assuming numerous roles may prove advantageous, especially in light of resource constraints.

In the initial development phase, centres should ensure that their mission, vision and activities are aligned with the university's strategic priorities. Additionally, centres can actively engage in shaping and influencing the development of these priorities. A close alignment with the university's core strategy will ensure the necessary relevance and institutional support of activities of the centre. For example, if a university prioritises research-led teaching in its strategy, the centre could design staff development programmes aimed at incorporating research findings into curricula.

In this context, it will also be crucial to establish a clear understanding with university leadership on whether the centre should have a centralised or decentralised positioning, depending on which option allows the centre to most effectively fulfil its mission. Equally significant is the collaboration with institutional stakeholders such as schools, departments and academics who are actively involved in the advancement of learning and teaching within their specific contexts. Such organic collaboration requires trust, but will foster meaningful conversation and collaborative progress.

P2 – Broaden or deepen the centre's portfolio, as appropriate.

While centres inherently focus on learning and teaching, they should also consider the interplay of education with other university missions. Specifically, centres should contribute to an appropriate balance of institutional focus on both research and education.

Although a centre may primarily focus on providing practical assistance to individual teachers, it should also utilise its expertise to influence university policies that recognise and encourage effective teaching practices. Ultimately, such an approach would contribute to the centre's overarching goal of supporting educators in their roles. Additionally, maintaining connectivity with the broader framework of university, national, and international policies and guidelines is always essential.

P3 – Develop centres as “third spaces” connecting university missions.

Centres defy easy classification as either a traditional service unit or an academic department, as the main mission varies from one to another. Therefore, it can be beneficial to position the centre as a “third space”, i.e. a space that bridges the research and the teaching mission of the university. As an example, centres can embrace the objective of enhancing both the practice and scholarship in learning and teaching, while acting in the seemingly more traditional realms of learning and teaching support.⁶ Such positioning entails offering teaching support while also collaborating with teaching staff to enhance the scholarly grounding of learning and teaching. In doing so, the centre bridges two key university missions.

One example of how this can be achieved is in place at the University of Iceland, which has appointed educational developers at all of the university's five schools. The educational developers each hold an academic position within their school and lead various educational projects. Their main task is to enhance

⁶ This notion is also featured in Mihai, A., 'Advancing Excellence in Education: The Changing Role of Centres for Teaching & Learning', <https://media-and-learning.eu/type/featured-articles/advancing-excellence-in-education-the-changing-role-of-centres-for-teaching-learning/> (accessed 19/10/2023). See also Sharif, A., et al., 2019, 'Faculty Liaisons: an embedded approach for enriching teaching and learning in higher education', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 24(3), pp. 260-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2019.1584898> (accessed 06/12/2023).

the institutional dialogue on quality teaching and to support educational development. They form a working network of the Centre of Teaching and Learning with and between the five schools, allowing for better use and sharing of expert knowledge and practices. With an identical purpose, the teaching staff of the IDEA-UMinho centre in Portugal are engaged in leading communities of practice across the university, simultaneously stimulating the enhancement of learning and teaching and conducting applied research focused on learning and teaching practice.

A positioning as a “third space” can be difficult, especially since academic staff may be sceptical over the centre’s academic and disciplinary expertise. To alleviate scepticism, the centre should avoid imposing top-down directives and, instead, create opportunities for collaborative discussions among academics and professionals on learning and teaching practices in a judgement-free environment. Such interconnectedness would also be instrumental in promoting continuous improvement and innovation both at the centre and within the institution.

ACTIONS

Which actions should be in a centre’s portfolio to coherently achieve its goals and fulfil its mission and role within the institution?

Another central question relates to the services and activities covered by the centre. A first consideration in this regard concerns the centre’s **target audience**: to which profiles is the centre ultimately catering, or rather, which profiles should a centre consider in order to have the broadest and deepest impact on the institution’s learning and teaching? This question leads to the need to explore how activities can best engage and attract the target audience. It focuses on determining the most beneficial actions and efficient delivery methods, considering various factors.

Thinking further into the future, centres might also ask themselves how to **scale up** activities, in view of available resources, their established mission and the desired impact on the institutional learning community.

Recommendations

A1 – Identify and communicate with key stakeholders.

In any proactive decision-making process, it is crucial to start by identifying key stakeholders in the envisioned action and establishing clear communication routes between the centre and such groups. In addition, this process should be aligned to the institution’s overall strategy and communication structure.

In this regard, it is also important to recognise that external and internal factors can serve as both enablers and barriers, depending on the context. Generally speaking, trust in practice, support from institutional leadership, and a clear mandate are enablers. Conversely, expertise in specialised methodologies or discipline-specific pedagogies can cut both ways. If limited to a few individuals and not disseminated effectively, it can pose challenges. Yet when utilised to support the development and empowerment of a wider group, expertise becomes a potent enabler.⁷

⁷ On this relationship, see also van Dijk, E.E., et al, 2023, ‘Connecting academics’ disciplinary knowledge to their professional development as university teachers: a conceptual analysis of teacher expertise and teacher knowledge’, *Higher Education*, 86, pp. 969–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00953-2> (accessed 09/01/2024).

A2 – Prioritise activities by relevance of impact.

Given finite resources, it is essential to discern which activities will have the strongest positive effect. Centres may thus wish to identify and prioritise relevant activities based on their projected impact and their relevance to institutional needs and strategic objectives. For example, if feedback indicates that students struggle with online learning tools, the centre could prioritise the provision of training and material on effective e-learning over other less pressing matters, as has happened at Tilburg University, whose Centre for Teaching and Educational Innovation has developed templates for course designs and lesson plans that include preconditions and learning activities suitable for hybrid learning and teaching.

Conversely, if a centre's resources do not allow it to implement the most impactful activities within its remit, it might be timely to reconsider the centre's positioning and mission.

A3 – Develop scholarly informed activities.

Utilising scholarly evidence provides a solid foundation to make informed decisions, not only about the actions, but also about all stages of the virtuous cycle model of centre development. It also enhances the probability of success in the implementation of teaching approaches or curricular reforms and increases the likelihood of engagement and buy-in across the institutional and wider learning and teaching communities.⁸ Implementing research-backed learning and teaching strategies and teacher training initiatives boosts the centre's credibility and strengthens its connection to the institution's research mission. A centre will thus benefit from grounding actions on scholarly research as much as possible, while also emphasising practicality, pragmatism and proven methodologies. Instead of hastily embracing the latest trendy teaching methods, centres are advised to consider, for instance, published studies and to collect evidence before advertising a specific methodology/teaching approach.

One approach to achieving this is in place at the University of Hull. The Teaching Excellence Academy is regularly supported by Teaching Fellows, academic staff who are seconded on a part-time basis for a period of two years to work on a particular scholarship project. Their projects link closely to the university's education strategy and with the work of the Teaching Excellence Academy to ensure that the centre can continue the Teaching Fellows' work after their contract finishes. The fellows benefit from a space to carry out an in-depth project and from support from the Teaching Excellence Academy in raising their profile within and beyond the university. For the Teaching Excellence Academy, this has proven to be an effective way to focus on a particular topic and also have a series of new voices within the team on a regular basis, while maintaining close links with the academic community.⁹

8 See Felten, P., 2013, 'Principles of good practice in SoTL', *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal*, 1(1), pp. 121–5. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/teachlearningqu.1.1.121> (accessed 06/12/2023).

9 See <https://libguides.hull.ac.uk/inclusiveeducationframework/Introduction> (accessed 18/10/2023) for an example of an output from one such project.

IMPACT

How can a centre's impact and added value within the institution and beyond be defined, ensured and communicated?

As outlined above, the ultimate goal of every centre is to enhance learning and teaching across the institution, which can be accomplished through the fulfilment of various specific subgoals. A central question is thus how to clearly define what centres want to achieve and how to ensure the intended impact.¹⁰ **Trust** is a key concern in this regard. The recognition of a centre's **competence** by staff in teaching careers is often linked to whether the academic developers and instructional designers working there have academic qualifications, that is, research and/or discipline expertise. Insufficient trust might prove an obstacle to the engagement of teaching staff and thus undermine the centre's ability to achieve its intended impact.

Conversely, centres that primarily depend on voluntarily engaged staff, typically teachers dedicated to the issue, may encounter obstacles of a different nature. Issues such as seasonal or permanent staff shortages may arise, and the exclusive reliance on voluntary participation might convey the unintended message that the institution is not fully committed to enhancing learning and teaching. In addition, frequent staff turnover might ultimately limit the centre's potential to grow the knowledge and competences gathered within. Also, disproportionate representation of disciplines will imbalance disciplinary coverage.

Finally, a centre's impact may radiate not only **internally**, but also **externally**, and could extend, for example, to other institutions and centres regionally, nationally and internationally. Key questions in this context are how to build credibility externally in order to become a trusted partner in enhancing learning and teaching (e.g. in national-level reform planning), and how to establish meaningful and authentic collaboration with peers and key partners.

Recommendations

I1 – Consider the desired impact from the beginning.

It is important to conceptualise impact from the outset of any new initiative/action – that is, what should be achieved with the activity, including desired and potential unintended consequences, such as on the quality of learning and teaching, the teaching staff and the students. An example of what this could look like in practice is in place at the University of Bergamo's CQIIA, which has had a two-year didactic innovation project running since 2021. The project aims to develop a collaborative learning environment and to achieve a shift towards more inclusive, student-centred learning through teacher training and technical support. The project has identified learner needs, the different target groups to be reached and the objectives to be achieved through a student census. The experimental teaching models tested in the project are also being evaluated against general criteria such as the reduction of organisational and managerial effort, based on a systematic monitoring and evaluation process.

On a similar note, a centre's work and credibility will typically benefit from diligently considering how its activities align with the broader context of the institution, for example to other units, or to the university strategy.

¹⁰ For a model of systematically categorising and thinking about the impact of instructional development, see Stes, A., et al., 2010, 'The impact of instructional development in higher education: The state-of-the-art of the research', *Educational Research Review*, 5, pp. 25–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2009.07.001> (accessed 09/01/2023).

12 – Engage key stakeholders to jointly identify expectations and conceptualise impact.

Across any institution, different stakeholder groups will inevitably have widely divergent expectations of a centre’s added value. This includes different actors within the centre, across the institution and in relevant external environments, but also – and in particular – students, who can be considered the ultimate beneficiaries of a centre’s activities but who very rarely experience this benefit by directly engaging with the centre. Stepping into a dialogue per se might already increase a centre’s impact. For the same reason, it helps to ensure that the work and achievements of the centre are communicated appropriately to the various target groups.

For example, by making use of a qualitative-participative methodology, WU’s Teaching Impact Map¹¹ makes visible the diverse impacts of university teaching on the institution, its environment and society at large. The mapping is based on 20 different case studies, tracing different “impact carriers” such as alumni, teachers and teaching materials. A concrete example of these impact pathways is the dissemination of WU’s Teaching Awards beyond the borders of the institution: three of WU’s internally awarded courses have also received the national Ars Docendi Award, and six more were nominated for the shortlist. Selected examples of good practice are also showcased in the Atlas of Good Teaching of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research and WU is represented with more than 30 articles in this publicly accessible database. Another example is the impact of textbooks published by WU faculty (over 200 in the last 10 years): these have an impact far beyond the individual courses at WU, as they are internationally used in more than 250 institutions and 70 countries, not only in universities but also in business practice.

13 – Celebrate learning and teaching.

Showcasing achievements such as successful projects and activities in learning and teaching is a way of showing appreciation to those who realised these projects and activities, but also of providing opportunities to collectively value and celebrate learning and teaching and reflect on how to build on these successes. Awarding teaching prizes can be a useful way to acknowledge the outstanding efforts of lecturers and to enhance the visibility of high-quality teaching.

Another way of celebrating learning and teaching is to stimulate peer learning and exchange on teaching in a constructive and appreciative way. The University of Tartu, for example, has been organising a “Visit your Colleague” week since 2019. During this week, 20–40 classes are opened for peer visits from all fields on a voluntary basis, with an average of 100 visits taking place each time the week is organised. After each visit, a follow-up discussion between the hosting colleague and the visiting colleague is organised in order to share challenges, impressions and ideas.¹²

Finally, the group would like to highlight that a culture of celebrating learning and teaching also needs to allow space for exploration and reflection on endeavours that did not meet (all) goals and expectations. An open appreciation of failed attempts might also pave the way for future successes.

¹¹ https://www.wu.ac.at/fileadmin/wu/h/structure/about/publications/Impact/Teaching_Impact_Map_EN.pdf (accessed 09/01/2024).

¹² <https://ut.ee/en/visit-colleague> (accessed 18/10/2023). The experiences of other universities also point to the importance of openness in teaching when creating an institutional learning culture. See Mueller, R., & Schroeder, M., 2018, ‘From seeing to doing: Examining the impact of non-evaluative classroom observation on teaching development’, *Innovative Higher Education*, 43, pp. 397–410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-018-9436-0> (accessed 06/12/2023).

REFLECTION

How can a centre reflect on and communicate its effect on institutional learning and teaching based on sound, convincing evidence?

The impact-related questions outlined above encompass several distinct enquiries, such as how the centre should reflect on whether this impact has indeed been realised and whether it remains capable and effective in the delivery of the desired outcomes. A critical reflection on these questions should run deeper than an evaluation of a centre's individual activities and notably should include an assessment of the centre's internal organisation, as well as potential adjustment measures for the future.

A key question related to both focus areas – that is, a reflection on whether the centre has achieved its desired impact and where it should go from there – is how to approach any such reflection, including which **evidence** to draw on, how to gather, interpret and present it, as well as to whom and how frequently this should be done.

As the quality and impact of learning and teaching itself is notoriously difficult to evaluate, a thorough reflection on a centre's impact might be equally challenging. It raises further questions over which **quantitative and qualitative indicators** are relevant (i.e. which indicators are true representations of impact, and which are proxies), and which **data** should be obtained.

Recommendations

R1 – Define an evaluative framework.

Reflecting on whether the intended impact has been achieved – including to what degree and through which outcomes – is a complex feat, much like any research process, yet the reward is worth the effort. A rigorous evaluation framework helps centres to capture and demonstrate the impact of individual actions but also of the centre on a broader scale. Based on key data such as quantitative performance indicators and results of qualitative evaluations, such as feedback surveys, the centre can evaluate whether its impact has been achieved and decide on potential follow-up actions. In this regard, centres should also explore existing research and connect with academic discourses in their field to create a scholarly grounded set of data for their impact evaluation. Centres are also encouraged to participate in other ongoing discussions on impact by sharing suitable data sets and methodologies.

As a starting point when evaluating a centre, key questions should in any case concern the defined goals of the centre and its activities, the primary objective of the evaluation, the conclusions that may be reliably drawn from the available data, potential gaps in the availability of contextual and other data, and the effect that the potential outcomes of the evaluation may have on the centre's positioning and its role vis-à-vis the institution's strategy and mission on learning and teaching. Another key focus of the evaluation should be the centre's impact on the learner.

R2 – Use transparent methods and indicators.

Since evaluation outcomes are an important element in decision-making processes and can help to foster awareness of and trust in the services of a centre, it is in the interest of the centres themselves to conduct evaluations transparently. Centres should thus communicate the data collected, including their sources, methodologies applied, key performance indicators and evaluation results. It is also important to consider how quality assurance might support the impact of a centre.

In order to ensure a meaningful and diverse variety of viewpoints in the process, transparent communication with the various participants in the evaluative process (e.g. centre staff, teachers, learners) is needed, together with broader self-reflection about what to make of the outcomes of the evaluation, as well as any follow-up action and who is responsible for it.

R3 – Consider the process as part of the outcome.

Self-reflection yields insights into the impact of a centre's initiatives and everyday operations. It is important to carefully design the reflection process, keeping record of the resulting decisions, methods, and outcomes. Self-reflection exercises may evolve over time or in response to evolving needs or unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, a comprehensive review of the entire process, including its outcomes and potential changes, along with the reasons for these changes, can provide valuable insights for the way forward.

CULTURE

How can a centre foster meaningful relationships with internal and external stakeholders in order to shape an innovative and appreciative culture of learning and teaching?

A final but pervasive question is related to culture, and it is intertwined with the previous questions. For the group, culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, customs and behaviours that characterise an institution, influencing the perceptions and interactions of individuals within the institution. Both the internal culture of a centre and the institutional culture within which the centre operates pose challenges, as does the even broader cultural environment, such as the **regional, national or international-level community** concerned with learning and teaching.

Looking inwards, the centre might ask itself how it can cultivate among staff a genuine **sense of belonging** to its vision and mission. Again, the centre's positioning and staffing situation will have a considerable impact on this question and how to respond to it.

When a centre aims to evolve university culture for the benefit of innovative learning and teaching, the key question is how to build meaningful **connections with teaching staff and university leadership, staff and students**, who are all a centre's key stakeholders. To the above discussion on the relationship with teaching staff, which can be quite sensitive at times, it is relevant to add the importance of cultivating and/or participating in broader "communities of practice". In this regard, it is particularly important to keep in mind that students are a centre's key stakeholder group. Centres should thus consider how to actively involve students as partners, rather than viewing them as direct or indirect "clients" of its activities.

Another crucial inquiry pertains to how a centralised structure can involve the broader academic community that is already fostering related initiatives across the institution. In this scenario, establishing connections with and providing support to these "champions" is of the utmost importance.

Turning its gaze outwards, another key question is how a centre can establish meaningful **partnerships** outside its own institutional context, with a view to contributing to learning and teaching innovation and appreciation on a larger scale. Academic culture places a high premium on engagement with nationally or internationally recognised platforms endorsed by academic leaders. Therefore, being part of or developing connections within national or international communities may be crucial for gaining insights into how institutional and national cultures can impact learning and teaching.

Alongside these questions, the group also finds it important to consider a few transversal aspects. In doing so, the group advises linking any efforts to develop a centre with its broader role and **mission within higher education as a public good**.

One key document that might provide guidance to centres on how to align their own mission and activities with higher education as a public good is the EUA publication *Universities without walls – A vision for 2030* (2021),¹³ which envisions resilient and effective universities serving Europe's societies towards a better future. Among other things, the publication confirms learning and teaching as one of the key university missions through which institutions will support Europe's open, pluralistic and democratic societies, specifically by nurturing and enabling “the development of learners as creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers and active and responsible citizens equipped for lifelong learning”.¹⁴

Centres have a key role to play in this vision, provided that, as outlined above, their positioning and actions are aligned with their institution's broader learning and teaching mission and strategy,¹⁵ taking into consideration quality assurance policies. Yet there are a few other, transversal considerations to take into account when aiming to contribute to a university without walls. They all have to do with the defining characteristics and habits – that is, the culture – that centres establish internally and in which they find themselves in their broader institutional and higher education context:

Recommendations

C1 – Prioritise student learning as the ultimate goal.

The EUA vision for a learner-centred university without walls¹⁶ should steer any centre's efforts to prioritise the enhancement of students' learning and university experience as the ultimate goal of its activities. Especially in the context of changing demographics and ever more complex demands on citizens' skills and competences, this need extends to non-traditional students and those who cannot easily access higher education. Centres may thus wish to reflect on how to support the mission of higher education, including in corners of society that are not already pervaded by it. An example of such a student-centred mindset is in place at Linköping University, which offers several programmes for students to study at so-called learning centres that are located in regions where few people continue to higher education. Didacticum offers both hands-on help and digital self-study courses to help teachers adapt to a new way of teaching.

As another example, the Department for Teacher Training at Ovidius University of Constanta, which is an autonomous structure within the university, supports the development of didactic skills among students across campus. The centre's target group currently includes both school and university teachers, who are offered continuous training courses financed by national or European projects.

¹³ European University Association (EUA), 2021, *Universities without walls – A vision for 2030* (Brussels, EUA). <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/957:universities-without-walls-%E2%80%93-eua%E2%80%99s-vision-for-europe%E2%80%99s-universities-in-2030.html> (accessed 18/10/2023).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵ See Solbrenke, T.D., & C. Sugrue, C., 2000, *Leading Higher Education As and For Public Good: Rekindling education as praxis* (London, Routledge).

¹⁶ *Universities without walls – A vision for 2030*, p. 8.

In addition, and in line with the EUA vision of learning and teaching as a “collegial and collaborative process”,¹⁷ centres should also consider students as active participants in designing initiatives and educational journeys. Through student engagement, centres can better tailor programmes and services to meet students’ needs and aspirations. Therefore, while designing models such as active, project-based and inquiry-based learning, it is also necessary to ensure the voice of students in learning design.

C2 – Forge collaborative alliances with diverse stakeholders.

Further aligning with the vision of collegial and collaborative learning and teaching processes, the group also advises that centres pursue both internal and external partnerships to enhance the impact of their initiatives.”. Building partnerships has the potential to multiply resources, knowledge and overall impact. Internal partners might include academic departments, research units and student organisations. External alliances may involve other universities (for example, within a European University Alliance), ed-tech companies or global educational initiatives. An example from the group is how IDEA-UMinho and the University of Aveiro’s centres have joined forces to create an annual 2.5-day educational development retreat named Docencia+. The retreat engages students as co-facilitators to support teachers in the design of an improvement plan for learning and teaching for a specific course and offers a combination of lectures on key issues and group work.¹⁸ Similarly, partnering with the university’s educational technology department can foster efficient integration of technological tools. An alliance with an ed-tech company could introduce advancements in digitally enhanced learning and teaching.

C3 – Embed alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals in centres’ further development.

The group considered sustainability questions based on two sources of inspiration: the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the EUA vision for 2030, which foresees universities aligning their missions with sustainability goals.¹⁹ For centres, considering sustainability would thus imply the need to align their own missions and actions with their institution’s efforts to support the achievement of the SDGs and the EUA vision of universities without walls. For example, YU-LEARNT at Yeditepe University is an academic initiative driven by the SDG of Quality Education and thus seeks to enhance academic life for students, graduates, academics and staff. Guided by the mission of “Leaving No One Behind”, YU-LEARNT integrates “Learning How to Learn” and “Lifelong Learning”, fostering personal and academic skill development, including upskilling and reskilling. It proposes a holistic learning and teaching excellence model addressing professional development in teaching, research and service. This mirrors the SDGs’ nexus approach, emphasising interconnectedness among professional goals and diverse needs across roles, learner levels and departments.²⁰

Sustainability may also be understood as long-term feasibility, in this context of the centre itself. It covers substantial questions such as how any of the key questions outlined throughout the report can be addressed through sustainable action and a long-term perspective, and how to balance a centre’s mission and resources. The group has no single recommendation to address these questions, but it believes that if centres commit to rigorous self-reflection and open dialogue with their university leadership and educational community, they will be in a better position to continue fulfilling their mission and long-term goals.

¹⁷ *Universities without walls – A vision for 2030*, p. 8.

¹⁸ <https://idea.uminho.pt/pt/agenda/proximos-eventos/Paginas/DocenciaMais-2021.aspx> (accessed 18/10/2023).

¹⁹ *Universities without walls – A vision for 2030*, p. 6.

²⁰ https://yulearnt.yeditepe.edu.tr/sites/default/files/2022-01/A_Nexus_Approach_to_Professional_Development_Regarding_Quality_Education_Yeditepe_University_YU-LEARNT-merged-compressed.pdf (accessed 20/02/2024).

Conclusions

As the group's discussions and findings have shown, centres can play a key role in supporting their institution in the achievement of its strategic goals and the fulfilment of its various missions – including, but not limited to, learning and teaching. They may also contribute to universities' broader, long-term mission of being open, inclusive places that help to tackle society's challenges today and tomorrow. However, their ability to fulfil this function depends on numerous factors and considerations, as outlined above.

One consideration that was mentioned in passing in the report, but that merits deeper exploration, is national and international networking and collaboration between centres and other key actors in learning and teaching. The group itself experienced the beneficial effects of an international centre network in the course of its work, first by discovering the variety of forms, positionings, remits and contexts of centres across the European Higher Education Area, and then by realising that the centres nevertheless faced very similar key questions and that they could learn from each other's experiences and good practices.

The group shared an understanding that establishing centres serves as a critical step in an institution's development, since it draws attention to educational quality and supports its enhancement, but also fosters parity of esteem between education and research. Particularly in countries with no or less advanced national policies for learning and teaching development, centres can have a significant positive impact on academic engagement at a national level – provided that they are well embedded in a collaborative network of stakeholders with a vested interest in the advancement of learning and teaching.

As a final recommendation, the group would thus like to advocate for more exchange and collaboration between centres, either bi- or multilaterally, or through the formation of national or international networks. There is strength in numbers, since networks could allow for a sharing of expertise but also of resources. In addition, research on peer learning in a higher education context, specifically among junior academic teachers, suggests that the acquisition of teaching competence is, much like other forms of learning, socially situated and grounded in authentic practice, and thus dependent on communities of practice.²¹ Such findings can be extended to the work and professional development of the staff of the centre, as they too would greatly benefit from systematic networking and synergetic collaboration across centres, in Europe and beyond.

²¹ Warhurst, R.P., 2006, "'We Really Felt Part of Something': Participatory learning among peers within a university teaching-development community of practice', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 11(2), pp. 111-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13601440600924462> (accessed 20/10/2023).

Annex

ANNEX : EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

As part of its work on learning and teaching, EUA carries out activities with the aim to engage with university communities in charge of learning and teaching. One of these activities is coordinating the work of a set of Thematic Peer Groups. The groups consist of universities selected through a call for participation to:

- discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European universities;
- contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key recommendations on the selected theme.

The 2023 Thematic Peer Groups, active from March 2023 to February 2024, invited participating universities to peer-learning and exchange of experience, while at the same time they contributed to EUA's policy work as the voice of European universities in policy debates, such as the Bologna Process.

Each group was chaired by one university and supported by a coordinator from the EUA secretariat. Each group had three base meetings, either online or at a member university, to discuss 1) key challenges related to the theme, 2) how to address the challenges through innovative practices and approaches, and 3) what institutional policies and processes support the enhancement in learning and teaching. Outside the three meetings, the groups were free to meet online for shorter meetings or organise their work independently. Members of the groups also attended a final workshop, where they had the opportunity to meet and discuss the outcomes of other groups and address synergies. The workshop was hosted by Ruhr University Bochum in Germany on 7 February 2024 and followed by the 2024 European Learning & Teaching Forum from 8-9 February, where focus groups based on the work of the Thematic Peer Groups were organised to obtain feedback on their results.

Composition of the Thematic Peer Group 'Development and strategic benefits of learning and teaching centres'

(starting with the group chair, then proceeding by alphabetical order of the country name):

- **University of Minho, Portugal**
 - Manuel João Costa (Pro-rector for Student Affairs and Pedagogical Innovation; Chair)
- **Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria**
 - Oliver Vettori (Dean for Accreditations & Quality Management/Director Program Management and Teaching & Learning Support)
 - Carina Weiß (Senior Expert in Teaching & Learning Development)
 - Johanna Warm (Head of Teaching & Learning Development)

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- **Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania**
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 - Mihai Girtu (Vice-rector for Research and Innovation)
- **Linköping University, Sweden**
 - Gunvor Larsson Torstensdotter (Head of Learning and Teaching Centre “Didacticum”)
 - Peter Dalenius (Associate Director of Learning and Teaching Centre “Didacticum”)
 - Josefine Kilborn (Student union representative)
- **Yeditepe University, Türkiye**
 - Berrin Yanıkkaya (Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Coordinator of the Learning and Teaching Unit „YU-LEARNT“)
 - Mehmet Korman (Student; Visual Design and Production Team Leader)
 - Denizalp Şimşek (Student; Content creator and Video Editor)
 - Toprak Cem Savaş (Student; Translator and Production Crew Member)
- **University of Hull, United Kingdom**
 - Graham Scott (Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning & Teaching)
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 - Catherine Lillie (Teaching Enhancement Advisor)
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The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 49 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.