

Learning and Teaching in Europe's Universities: An EUA position paper

Background and rationale

In Europe, as elsewhere, demand for higher education is growing, resulting in increased participation and greater diversification of student populations, including international students. This has led universities to pay increasing attention to learning and teaching (L&T) and to explore new approaches to ensure the student learning experience, also in view of shifting learning needs in rapidly changing societies. To address the impact of globalisation and digital transformation, as well as changing labour markets (and thus skills needs), universities are, for example, developing strategies for L&T, establishing learning centres, and introducing staff enhancement measures – in some cases supported by national and/or European initiatives.

In parallel, policy makers are calling for closer monitoring of financial investments and outcomes, which results in increased pressure on universities to demonstrate quality and relevance.

The purpose of the present paper is to contribute to efforts aimed at enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education provision and underline the importance of L&T as a core mission and responsibility of universities. EUA believes that universities and their members must drive developments in L&T and this requires close collaboration with all major stakeholder groups, including national and European policy makers.

The following key messages reflect the current development trends in European universities and are intended to guide EUA's work on L&T, both as the voice of universities in policy debates, and as the platform for member collaboration. They complement the [Principles for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching](#), which aim to support institutional development.

Key messages

Universities should ensure that their L&T activities are geared towards student learning and success.

Student learning needs and success, including high-quality learning, progress and retention, must remain at the centre of universities' educational mission. At the same time, the broader purposes of higher education should be borne in mind: personal development, active citizenship, the employability of graduates and the development and maintenance of a broad and advanced knowledge base (Council of Europe 2007).

All educational offerings should be geared towards ensuring that, and assessing whether, students achieve the intended learning outcomes. In defining them, the knowledge and skills required by future graduates should be front and centre.

The desired learning outcomes should be achieved through the active engagement of students in their own learning process. These include discipline-specific knowledge that graduates acquire, but also transversal skills, such as critical thinking, digital and data literacy and intercultural skills, that will enable them to take up active roles in society and in professional careers.

Universities should ensure that their L&T activities respond to the changing needs of our societies as well as contribute to the advancement of academic and professional knowledge and skills.

Core to higher education is research-based and informed L&T, designed to promote a creative and innovative learning environment and culture, and open to adapt to the changing needs of students and society.

Universities demonstrate their contribution to society by educating future experts and leaders, while promoting social inclusion and encompassing more diverse student bodies. This includes outreach activities that provide students with learning opportunities organised in collaboration with other societal actors. Equally important is the use of different pedagogies and teaching methods as well as support structures that accommodate different learning styles and needs, such as those of lifelong learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. All these elements should be incorporated in the design of study programmes.

Enhancing L&T requires promoting staff development and better recognising of teaching as central to the academic profession.

Student-centred L&T encompasses various methods and approaches to learning, including lifelong learning, personalised learning paths and digital provision, in response to the diversity of the student body. The input, engagement and competence of academic staff is crucial in this context. A variety of measures at both the institutional and system level are required to enable and encourage teachers to embrace new learning and teaching approaches.

More investment is needed in staff development programmes focused on supporting staff in incorporating pedagogical innovation in their work. An increasing number of universities already organise teaching enhancement and staff development schemes, and there are also many national initiatives. Synergies between different schemes should be improved.

L&T enhancement measures should be based on sound knowledge on student learning patterns and how effective learning can be promoted. For this to happen, research on these matters and, importantly, dissemination and use of the research results, must be encouraged.

Presently, not all higher education systems provide sufficient attention to the value of the teaching mission. In these cases, it is important to review national and institutional policies and measures with regard to funding formulas, laws and regulations and their impact on the standing of academic staff. Teaching must be fully recognised as central to the academic profession, and considered in career development.

A clear institutional strategy and a holistic approach are needed to ensure high quality, consistent and effective L&T.

EUA's work with its members shows that there is a wealth of expertise and interesting initiatives taking place in universities. However, these are untapped, for the most part, as they tend to be uncoordinated and remain at the level of individuals or departments. The challenge lies in institutionalising these initiatives and making them mainstream.

Developing a framework and infrastructure for defining policies and setting up processes to support L&T, as a means of improving educational provision, requires a broad-based institutional strategy. It should encompass various institutional processes – from internationalisation to the management of human and financial resources and infrastructure. The institutional policies and processes need to include monitoring student success and acting upon results, when needed.

Universities have the main responsibility for assuring and enhancing the quality of their educational provision according to the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (Part1). The existence of an institution-wide approach to L&T facilitates this task.

European and international cooperation should be explored as a means to further enhance L&T.

Universities engage in exploring new practices and emerging trends in L&T across borders, thus strengthening the European dimension in L&T. Collaboration among universities and between universities and policy makers across the European Higher Education Area and beyond is important for the promotion of L&T and for the enhancement of the quality and the relevance of higher education provision.

Operating in an increasingly global environment, universities must ensure that their L&T activities provide students with an international experience as part of their learning, whether through mobility or internationalisation-at-home.

Institutional autonomy and sustainable funding are essential for the development of L&T activities.

The diversity of institutional profiles and educational programmes is one of the key characteristics and strengths of European higher education. Each university is expected to have a well-defined profile and clear objectives for its study programmes.

National legal frameworks should facilitate the implementation of context-sensitive L&T and provide sufficient autonomy for institutions to develop programmes based on cutting-edge disciplinary and professional knowledge in response to the needs of society, while also allowing for experimentation and innovation.

It is vital to ensure appropriate levels of public funding to enable the development and implementation of high-quality L&T. It is generally the case that when countries face funding cuts, these tend to be greater in teaching than in research. Given the importance of L&T for our societies, it will be crucial to continue to advocate for sustainable public funding for these activities.

