

Enhancing learning and teaching through staff development

Recommendations for university leadership
and policy makers in the European Higher
Education Area

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Policy recommendations

If supported strategically and sustainably, staff development can become a powerful driver for quality, innovation, and equity in higher education learning and teaching.



RECOMMENDATION 1

Take an ecosystem approach to staff development



RECOMMENDATION 2

Tailor staff development to the diversity of teaching tasks and levels of development



RECOMMENDATION 3

Clarify the relationship between teaching, staff development and career progression



RECOMMENDATION 4

Champion inclusion and equity in staff development

Why staff development in learning and teaching matters

Staff development in learning and teaching is widely recognised as a pivotal mechanism for enhancing the quality of higher education. Evidence shows that it improves teaching practices and student outcomes (Gibbs, 2004; Saroyan, 2025; OECD, 2012) and fosters educational innovation and leadership (Stevens, 2024).

In recent years, staff development in learning and teaching has become a growing area of interest for higher education institutions (HEIs) and policy makers – both at European level (European Education Area, Bologna Process) and at national level, with national initiatives and funding dedicated to staff training and skills development. In the EHEA, but also globally, this interest in staff development is taking place in a context that calls for new approaches to learning and teaching, because of trends such as:

- ❖ **Increasing diversity:** universities in Europe are welcoming increasingly diverse student cohorts.
- ❖ **Changing education formats:** they are also introducing or enhancing more flexible and diverse education offers (such as shorter, non-degree learning opportunities). This means that student-centred learning approaches require institutional agency for adapting learning environments and curricula, and relevant continuous development opportunities for their teachers.

- ❖ **Technological change:** the rapid pace of technological change means that adequate staff development schemes are needed more urgently than ever, particularly with regard to the use of artificial intelligence. New technologies are challenging and changing knowledge creation and usage, and teaching skills and roles therefore need to be re-evaluated and strengthened.
- ❖ **Societal polarisation:** as societal debates become increasingly polarised, teachers are required to navigate growing tensions within their classrooms. More broadly, the question arises as to how learning and teaching can contribute to strengthening social cohesion and democracy.
- ❖ **Emphasis on skills:** at European level, there is a renewed emphasis on skills that positively contribute to the needs of the labour market and evolving societies. While this may potentially lead to more concerted and sometimes too uniform or directional approaches to learning and teaching, it also fosters pedagogical innovation and highlights how the importance of institutions' and teachers' ability to enhance learning and teaching.

All these trends call for systematic approaches to continuously enhance learning and teaching. Moreover, there is growing awareness that higher education learning and teaching methods must be evidence-based and innovative in order to embrace societal, scientific and technological developments. This call for professionalisation is linked to the widespread demand in academia for the recognition and reward of university learning and teaching, particularly through appropriate academic assessment and career progression paths.



In the context of the project, **staff development** in teaching should be understood as opportunities for HEI staff involved in student learning to expand their professional competences and reflect on their roles, ideas and needs. This could manifest as training, community building and other development-related activities, for example.

Levels and actors in staff development

To demonstrate the context in which these policy recommendations are made, it is important to recognise the individuals responsible for staff development, the levels at which they operate, and the valuable contribution they can make to higher education learning and teaching.

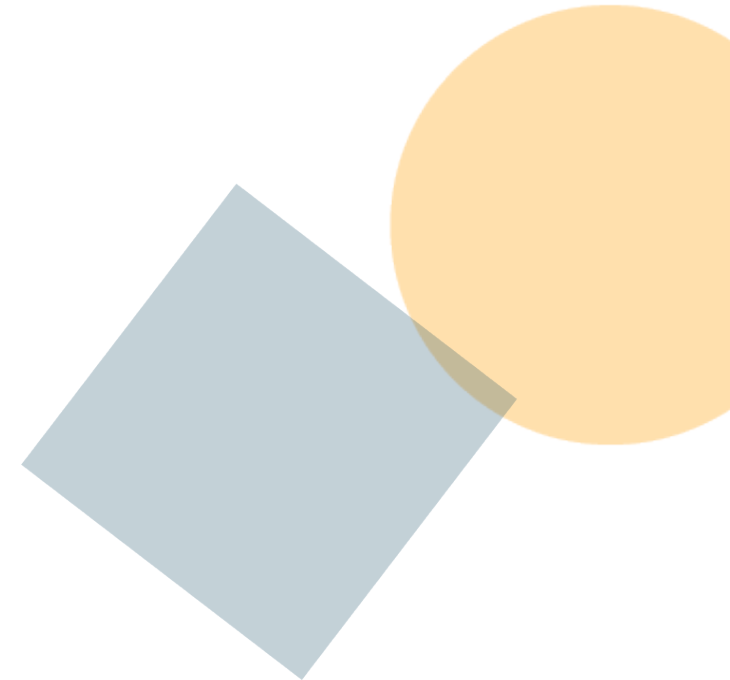
Individual HEIs hold the primary role and responsibility in organising and offering staff development opportunities (Zhang, 2025). Leadership in HEIs is crucial to provide impetus and make initiatives sustainable (O'Mahony *et al.*, 2025). Due to their proximity to teachers, faculties and departments play an important role in developing discipline-related content and self-organised, more informal development activities that meet teachers' immediate needs. Educational developers and staff involved in designing and organising staff development activities are closest in practice, but they may experience a “sandwich effect” when caught between leadership demands and the grassroots demands of individual academics.

In addition, the useful and necessary role of university networks and governmental organisations at national and regional level should be better acknowledged, particularly if reforms in this area are to be initiated, structured and financially supported. In some countries, networks of teachers and pedagogical advisers, as well as non-governmental organisations, play an active role in staff development.

The legal framework governing higher education has a significant influence on the type and scope of staff development measures (Zhang, 2022). While some systems impose obligations for continuing education in the field of teaching, others do not.

Finally, while education is mostly the responsibility of individual Member States or devolved regionally, guidelines, support and cooperation at European level can also influence the way staff development is designed and organised, and its overall contribution to learning and teaching.

The policy recommendations below focus on leadership in HEIs and public authorities, as these are the two principal groups of actors with the capacity and responsibility to advance staff development policy. Networks of HEIs are also included, as they can offer support in fulfilling the recommendations.



POLICY RECOMMENDATION #1:***Take an ecosystem approach to staff development***

Staff development should be connected to and integrated within a broader ecosystem that HEIs develop to enhance learning and teaching. This ecosystem should be based on the institutions' vision and strategy for staff development, which should be designed and organised as an intrinsic part of their commitment to quality learning and teaching. Specifically, staff development should be linked to human resource management, and transparent mechanisms for advancing teaching and learning should be built into career advancement structures. Reward measures that foster a culture of continuous enhancement in learning and teaching will usefully complement such policies and structures. Overall, institutions should combine staff development opportunities with an organisational structure that allows staff to take advantage of them.

Enhancing learning and teaching should encompass all systemic elements, extending beyond individual teaching practices. As well as focusing on the development of individual academics or teaching teams, institutions should review the contexts in which teachers can apply new skills and competences acquired through continuous development. The most important of these systemic elements is probably the curriculum design process, which is usually complex and may benefit from becoming more agile and open to pedagogical innovation.

WHAT UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP CAN DO

Lay the foundations for an ecosystem approach:

- ❖ **Make staff development visible and strategic:** position staff development clearly within the institution's learning and teaching strategy, grounded in identified needs and future-oriented planning. Combine formal, structured offerings, with a generally supportive environment for bottom-up, self-organised initiatives and communities of practice.
- ❖ **Champion and manage change in learning and teaching:** provide visible direction and impetus to change management processes so that they can foster a learning and teaching culture that values education, promotes meaningful student engagement, and recognises teaching as a core dimension of the academic profession.
- ❖ **Communicate positively and purposefully:** engage the university community on specific staff development measures as part of the overall strategic endeavour for learning and teaching.

Strengthen the building blocks of an ecosystem approach:

- ❖ **Create and sustain a shared vision for education:** lead the design, development and implementation of learning and teaching strategies and vision that articulate the institution's education mission and are collectively shaped and co-owned by the university community. This may require the institution to undergo a broader cultural and mindset shift towards improved esteem for teaching in academic life.
- ❖ **Establish and promote support and innovation structures:** create and promote structures such as learning and teaching centres, in ways that sustainably ground their mission and profile within the institution.
- ❖ **Develop and implement incentives to enhance learning and teaching:** introduce multiple complementary measures such as rewards, funding, awards, time allocation and mentoring. Together, these strengthen the recognition of teaching, foster teachers' professional commitment to develop their own teaching, and are development- and value-oriented.
- ❖ **Review and adapt human resource and career policies:** ensure that the recruitment, evaluation, promotion and career progression processes adequately recognise the importance of teaching in academic careers. This may involve establishing robust teaching evaluation methods and career pathways that align with staff development opportunities and expectations.
- ❖ **Adopt and promote reflective and evidence-informed approaches:** encourage and enable individual academics, teams of teachers, and the higher education institution generally to adopt a reflective, data-driven and evidence-informed approach to learning and teaching.

WHAT PUBLIC AUTHORITIES CAN DO

- ❖ **Adopt and actively promote an ecosystem approach to enhance learning and teaching in higher education:** high quality education requires interconnected and mutually reinforcing policies and instruments at institutional, regional, national and European levels.
- ❖ **Guarantee and respect institutional autonomy and resources:** enable institutions to design and implement staff development policies and support structures that effectively support learning and teaching enhancement in their specific context.
- ❖ **Review and adapt policy and regulatory frameworks to align visions and expectations:** in cooperation with the higher education sector, identify the drivers, enabling conditions and barriers affecting the enhancement of learning and teaching. This should include measures that foster recognition through academic career opportunities, as well as accreditation and quality assurance processes related to curriculum development and delivery. It should also review how those responsible for learning and teaching can move forward in similar directions, with measures that would not play against each other. Enhancing learning and teaching, notably by supporting academic careers, requires a long-term commitment. Public authorities are responsible for ensuring that the regulations in place enable and support a high level of commitment to improving teaching.

HOW HIGHER EDUCATION NETWORKS CAN PROVIDE SUPPORT

- ❖ **Establish and sustain platforms for sharing good practices:** support peer learning between institutions, foster mutual inspiration, and facilitate discussion around the shared priorities and challenges involved in enhancing teaching and learning.
- ❖ **Strengthen opportunities for transnational cooperation:** show how member institutions can contribute to and benefit from collaborative approaches, notably through peer learning between institutions, concerted policy advocacy activities, and by working together to find new solutions to technological and pedagogical developments.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION #2:

Tailor staff development to the diversity of teaching tasks and levels of development



To enable the successful development of teaching staff, it is crucial to recognise the full range and diversity of university teaching tasks. European HEIs report a wide variety of staff development formats and content, ranging from widely offered introductory courses in pedagogy to more specialised provision in educational leadership and scholarship (Zhang, 2025). Teaching tasks can vary across disciplines, institutions and national contexts. To help teaching staff develop fully in their roles, staff development programmes should reflect both the diversity of these tasks and the different career stages at which they are undertaken.

WHAT UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP CAN DO

- ❖ **Recognise teaching and the diverse range of teaching tasks as an integral part of the academic profession:** both staff development provision and academic assessment should recognise the diversity of teaching tasks requiring specific expertise.
- ❖ **Recognise and make room for the diversity of expertise in teaching:** not everyone has the ability to specialise and develop the same type of expertise in teaching. HEIs would benefit from acknowledging that teachers can work as part of teams, and draw on complementary expertise and experience in student learning.

- ❖ **Promote teaching practices that connect learning with real-world contexts:** encourage and support approaches that broaden the range of settings and environments in which students learn. This may include providing guidance, resources and opportunities for peer exchange on practices such as authentic learning and assessment (grounded in real life experiences and situations), citizen science, research- and inquiry-based learning, and problem- and challenge-based learning.
- ❖ **Recognise educational scholarship** as a legitimate and valued developmental pathway within staff training, assessment and promotion frameworks.
- ❖ **Connect staff development with appropriate feedback and/or appraisal activities:** integrate opportunities for reflection, peer learning, and developmental feedback to support the continuous professional development of teaching staff and the enhancement of teaching practice. This would also help to facilitate change management processes at the institution.
- ❖ **Support subject and discipline specificities:** support activities that facilitate subject- or discipline-specific networking and professional development.

WHAT PUBLIC AUTHORITIES CAN DO

- ❖ **Develop and promote a national/regional competence-based framework for higher education teaching competences:** such a framework should be broad, closely coordinated with the higher education sector, rooted in academic practice and informed by scholarly contributions. Any European-level competence framework should take into account the diversity and specificities of existing national, institutional, and, where relevant, disciplinary frameworks.
- ❖ **Adopt a sustainable, system-level approach:** there are many measures that public authorities could consider to enhance different aspects of learning and teaching. However, it is likely that they will not be able to implement all of them. Public authorities should consider how different measures could complement one another to improve the functioning of higher education systems, in a sustainable way.

HOW HIGHER EDUCATION NETWORKS CAN PROVIDE SUPPORT

- ❖ **Make the best use of staff development provision:** not all HEIs are able to offer activities and training that meet the full range of needs of their teaching staff. Networks can help to fill this gap, for instance by opening their specialised programmes to staff from other HEIs, where feasible.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION #3:

Clarify the relationship between teaching, staff development and career progression



A lack of time and recognition is consistently cited by HEIs as a major barrier to engagement in staff development. While some institutions already give significant weight to teaching in assessment and career progression, the role of teaching and staff development in academic career paths is not always clear. Staff development may be framed as an incentive, an option, an expectation, or even as a formality or requirement, and the boundaries between these different approaches can be blurred (Zhang, 2025). Such ambiguity may discourage staff from investing time in improving their teaching practices.

WHAT UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP CAN DO

- ❖ **Develop and apply transparent criteria for career progression:** initiate and support processes to establish clear, consistently applied criteria and assessment methods for progression across career stages. For each requirement or criterion, staff should be able to identify and access relevant staff development opportunities to support their professional growth.
- ❖ **Integrate staff development into existing institutional structures and processes that support career progression:** the strategic endorsement of teaching and learning must be supported by policies that ensure staff have the necessary capacity, including time, to participate in professional development (O'Mahony et al., 2025).

- ❖ **Ensure an appropriate balance between formal and informal approaches to staff development:** it is important to acknowledge the potential tension between mandatory training and fostering a genuine culture of motivation for staff development. Staff development initiatives should be flexible and responsive to both staff needs and institutional goals, ensuring that staff feel competent and are able to situate their work within a broader institutional context (O'Mahony *et al.*, 2025).
- ❖ **Systematically involve the university community in staff development and career policies:** ensure that all staff involved in student learning and staff development, regardless of their status or profile, can contribute to discussions on assessment reform and staff development policies. Early-stage academics in particular should be informed, consulted and empowered to express their views on how such reforms may impact their work and careers. Institutions should also consider how students can be partners in staff development activities.

- ❖ **Engage with relevant international initiatives such as the Coalition for Advanced Research Assessment (CoARA):** it is important to foster a holistic reflection on academic careers and benefit from the exchange of good practices across higher education systems.

HOW HIGHER EDUCATION NETWORKS CAN PROVIDE SUPPORT

- ❖ **Promote and share inspiring practices for reform:** facilitate the exchange of institutional and national examples demonstrating how academic career assessment and staff development measures can be reformed to support teaching and learning and improve student outcomes.

WHAT PUBLIC AUTHORITIES CAN DO

- ❖ **Ensure structural parity of esteem between teaching and research:** in line with the commitments set out in the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué ([Annex III](#)), national authorities responsible for higher education should support structural measures to assure parity of esteem for teaching and research. If needed, academic career schemes should be revised to ensure better recognition of teaching in academic careers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION #4:

Champion inclusion and equity in staff development



Supporting and encouraging staff participation and engagement in professional development is part of HEIs' broader commitment to ensuring quality learning and teaching. However, staff involved in student learning do not always enjoy equal access to development opportunities. Differences in employment status, workload and contractual arrangements may create unequal conditions for participation in training and professional development activities. For example, temporary or part-time staff may have limited capacity or motivation to prioritise career development activities alongside mandatory responsibilities such as course preparation, teaching hours and assessment duties. In addition, the provision of formal staff development activities at HEIs often does not sufficiently include non-academic staff, despite their important contribution to the institution's learning and teaching ecosystem (Zhang, 2025; Gaebel & Zhang, 2018).

WHAT UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP CAN DO

- ❖ **Develop inclusive teaching competence frameworks:** design and implement institutional teaching competence frameworks that reflect the diversity of teaching roles and responsibilities (see also Recommendation #3) while promoting equal access to development opportunities across different staff categories and positions.

- ❖ **Ensure that workload and human resource management are adequately aligned with opportunities for professional development:** the choice of developing professional practices should not rely on individual teachers' ability to spare time from other duties. HEIs should provide workload allocations and sabbatical arrangements that reflect their commitment to enhancing learning and teaching.
- ❖ **Advocate for Open Education and Open Educational Resources:** staff development should prioritise openness and sharing of practices so as to make the best use of existing examples. Open Educational Resources have considerable potential as a vehicle for such openness, provided that HEIs actively embed their use within their learning and teaching ecosystem, with due recognition of staff creativity and non-commercial purposes.
- ❖ **Address the development needs of professional staff:** identify and support the professional development needs of professional staff that are not academics, and recognise their contribution to student learning and teaching enhancement. Staff development policies should include teaching support staff, administrative staff and all those involved in organising and supporting learning and teaching within the institution (Fitzpatrick & Zhang, eds., 2026).

WHAT PUBLIC AUTHORITIES CAN DO

- ❖ In close cooperation with the higher education sector, ensure that regulations, **frameworks and recognition measures for academic careers adequately and equitably address the diversity of career paths** and career stages.

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How the STAFF-DEV policy recommendations were developed

Led by the European University Association (EUA), the ‘Staff development for learning and teaching at European universities’ (STAFF-DEV) **project** aims to map and analyse how staff development is being implemented in European HEIs. The project contributed to a knowledge base on staff development by conducting a survey which received over 160 responses from HEIs in 40 countries across the EHEA. STAFF-DEV also organised peer learning and capacity-building activities, benefitting HEIs at different stages of developing their support for and strategic approaches to learning and teaching and academic assessment.

The project’s actions and results have informed this set of policy recommendations. They target institutional, national and European policy makers, and can serve as a basis for engaging in discussions with them.

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

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