All those who teach
Part 1 - Practice in a Pandemic

NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction

In two Next Steps Insights, we trace the voice of all those who teach, and their experiences during a pandemic which necessitated the closure of campuses across the country. Part 1 documents and reflects on practice during the initial stages of the pandemic. Part 2 shares messages for the future from the analyses of these experiences and in the words of those who teach. Both Insights reference the submissions from IUA, RCSI, HECA, THEA and QQI. We have also drawn from previous National Forum research and consultations with National Forum Associates (NFAs), our Advisory Groups, and the Networks and Disciplines.

What was it like to teach during the pandemic?

Teaching, learning and assessment centre stage

The sudden shift of teaching, learning and assessment to centre stage as a result of the pandemic is reflected across all our data. Without access to physical spaces, all activities had to be reconsidered, and rapidly redesigned. Institutions suddenly focused on continuity of provision for students, with senior leaders, professional services and academic departments working closely together to make decisions quickly in order to sustain teaching, learning and assessment.

Alternative teaching strategies and modalities came into use: using flipped approaches, peer learning and support, virtual office hours, small group teaching (online or in person), informal meetings for questions and answers, the use of simulations and online role plays. Nationally and internationally, numerous online resources were shared and publishers amended or lifted licensing limitations for their materials. The sharing of resources, approaches and experiences was highly valued. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles have had renewed emphasis and attention, and this has continued to develop. The nature of the emergency closure was in some senses liberating for those who teach, allowing rapid change with "less expectation of perfection" (RCSI). Much good practice emerged from the emergency and there are opportunities to share this.

The initial uncertainty gradually gave way to some acclimatisation, with teaching and learning remaining central concerns while access to campuses was limited. The importance of maintaining quality teaching, learning and assessment processes remained in the foreground. As we consider the future landscape, practitioners want ongoing consultation about the value of teaching and learning, and the importance of the relationship between each institution and its learners.

Equally, there was a sense of being overwhelmed and overworked, and the risks of staff and students becoming isolated. People were not at equal levels of digital literacy and confidence working online. Access to technologies and quality connectivity were further important concerns. Most importantly, the need to connect with people and form relationships in education was often seriously undermined. There is still a need

to process the shock of the closure (itself arising from a human tragedy), and its effects. This can be done with a positive purpose, and to develop new and meaningful approaches particularly in how we use technologies in teaching and learning in the future.

Things changed, but how exactly?

The snapshot of experience in our data shows that some fundamental elements of teaching, learning and assessment practice have changed rapidly. We have numerous ways of disseminating content to students but we need to understand much more about how digital technologies mediate teaching, learning and assessment. Some previous practices feel broken and outdated. While more time is needed fully to reflect, there are clearly identifiable changes:

- The value of community and collaboration has been repeatedly highlighted with calls for more collaboration and continued work with colleagues across the sector. This led some people to call for new forms of educational leadership.

- Both staff and students developed new competencies in working remotely, and for students this will be a new graduate attribute, which can be developed further.

- New modes and patterns of communication grew between educators and students.

- Processes that support core teaching activities changed: team meetings, programme validations and external examining were conducted successfully online, often saving time and budget.

- Assessment changed, with a greater variety of approaches being used, leading some to call for review of the ways we assess students.

- Practitioners saw ways to involve students more as active learners in the online environment building on the interactions that have taken place during this time.

There are choices about how we assess

Assessment has been the focus of much attention in higher education during the pandemic. The elimination of large in-person terminal exams threw up solutions and dilemmas around how to assess in non-traditional ways. Adapting assessment in the context of Covid-19 has pushed the consideration and practice of alternatives to terminal exams including more continuous assessment, open book/take home exams, online assessment (both proctored and non-proctored). These shifts have breathed life into conversations about choice in assessment, peer assessment, negotiated self-assessment, synoptic assessment, students as partners and co-creators in assessment, programmatic approaches to assessment, approaches to assessment which are reflective of the principles of UDL and the designing out of the need for reasonable accommodation in assessment. The reality of assessing in the

pandemic also fanned debate about academic integrity and in particular proctoring. These important conversations have contributed much to our sectoral understanding of assessment more broadly, albeit that we would rather not have conducted them against the backdrop of a pandemic and an overnight move to emergency remote teaching and learning.

In this data, assessment was considered with reference to learning outcomes and curriculum design, and mindful of institutional and national systems around awards, standards, quality and academic integrity. The conversations reinforced the need for partnership with external partners such as professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). Important disciplinary differences emerged with respect to particular assessments on-site (e.g. in labs or studios). The need for authentic assessment was explored by students, staff and other stakeholders as a marker of academic success but also to develop professional attributes which would be valuable in work settings.

People need to stay healthy and well

Staff and student health and well-being has been a key concern during this time. In the initial closure period, many people felt overwhelmed, isolated, and later reported anxiety, fatigue and exhaustion. Those institutions with good communication strategies, who also acted to provide interventions and support for their staff and students, reported mitigation of the worst effects of the lockdown on their communities. There was a sense of care and support for other people during the pandemic and this could be strengthened and developed further in the future.

Staff have called attention to workloads and the sustainability of their efforts over this time with many reporting digital fatigue by autumn 2020. Managers have been keenly aware of the level of work undertaken, that workforces are exhausted, and that this is not sustainable. Staff called for leadership around well-being as an institutional responsibility, not only that of an individual. Gender issues have also emerged with many female staff reporting additional caring responsibilities at home during lockdown, along with increased pastoral responsibilities for students. New ways of working may make some tasks more straightforward, but also require time and effort. Staff want to know what blended working means, and that institutions will view flexible working positively.

Conclusions

We continue to navigate a difficult period with many emergency measures having passed, but some constraints remaining along with new guidelines for teaching, learning and assessment on campus. Our data show openness to change from staff, and a recognition that students' expectations have also changed. Ideas for the future discussed throughout this data are shared in Part 2.

There may have been a desire to 'go back to normal' but most staff do not anticipate this any longer. Blended approaches and flexible working are part of the future picture, and partnership with students is crucial. Different pedagogies and different sets of challenges exist here, with discipline-specific challenges particularly online for some subjects. This period of time has forced us to think much more about how the student can be engaged and supported: how do we continue to keep this focus and use it to design better learning experiences in the future?

Staff have gained new skills and competences and there is scope to continue the development of practice, particularly when mediated by digital technologies. There is renewed discussion of academic integrity and authentic assessment. We have realised anew how many people teach and also support teaching. Staff highlighted a desire to continue collaborating, but also to showcase and share best practices and new practices.

The data also clearly showed that we will need to recognise the ongoing effects of the shock of the pandemic, and that students and staff have themselves potentially experienced illness and bereavement. This is in addition to the anxiety and worry experienced by the population since early 2020. Not everyone will be able to return to campus or remain on campus continuously, depending on the potential risks to their health. Many will experience anxiety about travel and attendance. The disruption to normal patterns of living, working, learning and socialising have effects which will continue to be felt over the months ahead. In Part 2 we consider how this disruption can be navigated successfully, and how we can also foster positive engagement, enjoyment and love of learning amongst our students over the next period of time.