



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:

Moving Forward Together



Connected conversations:

The Teaching, Learning and Assessment practices experienced in Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) colleges, during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Overview of HECA context for Next Steps

The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) established in 1991, is the representative body for thirteen established and state accredited privately funded providers of higher education. All HECA members have quality assurance approval under Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and deliver QQI validated programmes across a diverse range of disciplines, between levels 6 and 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The student body within the HECA network of college providers is over 27,000.

HECA member higher education providers advance the highest standards of best practice, evidence-based teaching and learning. Learner-centred teaching is at the heart of the mission of each of HECA's member institutions. HECA providers have a shared strategic priority to continue to invest and enhance its teaching to a sector-leading standard. This core function, together with innovative and diverse assessment strategies, combine in a transformative process of education for the learner, building knowledge, skill and competence through state accredited programme curricula.

The opportunity to participate as partner in the Next Steps project further solidifies HECA's position as a collective united by a desire to connect, support and inform all those involved in the enhancement of teaching and learning in HECA colleges.

What HECA wanted to achieve with this project - our research questions

The HECA research design focused on capturing primary data from across the spectrum of colleges in order to contribute to the Next Steps project goals and to serve as a body of research that would inform the strategic collective goals of HECA colleges.

The aim of our research was to identify the Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) practices selected and applied during emergency remote learning in Covid-19 and to examine how these were experienced by educators and students in HECA colleges. The term educators, as used here, is defined as all who teach and all who support learning and teaching in Irish higher education as defined within the National Professional Development Framework (National Forum, 2016), that is lecturers, tutors, librarians, learning technologists, education developers, instructional designers.

In our research, the following questions were explored:

- What were educators' experiences of delivering these TLA practices?
- What were students' experiences of these TLA practices?
- What were student support staff's experiences of these TLA practices?

Summary of our method

Primary data was collected through the facilitation of five focus groups, in June 2021. The aim of each focus group was to identify the Teaching Learning and Assessment (TLA) practices selected and applied during emergency remote learning in Covid-19 and to explore how these were experienced by educators, students and support staff in HECA colleges.

Thanks to collaborative efforts across 12 of the 13 HECA colleges and the appointment of a Next Steps champion to mobilise students and staff within each college, 43 staff and students participated across the five focus groups, as outlined in the table below.

Each of the focus groups was structured with a 'start, stop, continue' line of inquiry. This was chosen for two reasons.

- To complement and support the National Forum's chosen what? so what? now what? framework for the overall Next Steps research project
- To enable participants to utilise retrospective and forward-looking lenses to provide insights into the broad range of TLA practices across the HECA colleges

Data from the focus groups was transcribed, coded and thematically analysed. Themes that were identified informed a literature review, carried out in July 2021. A synthesis of the focus group data and findings from the literature review resulted in the identification of six key strands.

In addition to these focus groups, a data insights workshop was held with The Higher Education Colleges Association Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF), in September 2021. This exercise served as an additional exploration of the data through a facilitated discussion on the key strands identified.

Cohort	No. of participants attended
Educator group one	9 participants
Educator group two	10 participants
Student group one	7 participants
Student group two	7 participants
Student Support staff	10 participants



Key findings

- There is an expectation that flexible **blended learning** will remain a feature of future teaching and learning practice, in HECA colleges, particularly within disciplines that contain theoretical programme content.
- The specifications and capabilities of **video conferencing software** need to be critically evaluated, to fully support the educational process, given its position as a dominant teaching platform.
- The **flipped classroom** is considered the most successful blended learning model by participants for the delivery of theoretical modules and programme content, with staff and students favouring this approach.
- **Practical modules** are complex and challenging to deliver online, during emergency remote teaching.
- Hybrid and blended teaching have changed the **communication patterns and modes between educators and students**. This calls for an examination of supporting policies and practices at institutional and programme level.
- Students place a very strong value on **peer support networks**. Technology facilitates the quick mobilisation of these networks and once established, these tend to remain for the duration of the students' studies.
- Educators welcome any additional **well-being supports** to address the mental and physical tolls experienced, due to a shift in their own work patterns and practices. Empathy was expressed for their students displaying fatigue/burnout due to arduous online learning schedules, during emergency remote teaching.
- Significant efforts were made by HECA colleges and individual educators to uphold the **integrity** of programme assessment strategies, during emergency remote teaching.
- **Authentic assessments** have strong buy-in and are valued as part of the overall learning journey, as students assign their academic outputs with values that they perceive relevant to their personal development and emerging professional identities.
- **Students' preparedness to work remotely** in a professional setting is considered an emerging competency, with consideration of this required by programme teams, in developing future learning outcomes/graduate attributes.
- **Open-book exams** reduced, or in some cases, negated the provision of reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. This was viewed as a welcome and timely change to the assessment landscape.
- Driven by technological innovations and reflecting the values of **universal design for learning**, HECA educators are keen to provide further elements of choice and variety in assessment for their students.
- Staff training and **continuous professional development** is critical for the success of future blended and hybrid teaching. Continuous professional development for HECA educators should also include an exploration of the changing role of the lecturer, in the post-COVID landscape.
- Every effort should be made to identify and address **digital divides** present among staff and students. Digital skills and digital confidence also hold increased strategic importance.

Concluding remarks

There is a body of global literature emerging, describing the spectrum of experiences from higher education staff and students who have been working and learning during the pandemic. There is also a lot more to discover. The five focus groups conducted as part of our research, provide a snapshot of the experiences of HECA educators and students teaching and learning in the context of an evolving public health crisis. The findings contain past reflections and future-oriented hopes and ambitions, generously offered from a broad spectrum of HECA staff and students.

This research is the first step in the development of a narrative that describes the experiences of HECA staff and students of the teaching, learning and assessment practices undertaken during emergency remote teaching. As Ireland continues to experience the impact of the pandemic, the insights presented are a moving story. It is important to acknowledge the ground gained and avoid revisiting prior practices that no longer cater to learners' needs in the post-Covid-19 landscape.

An understanding of the evolving role of the educator is important. We know our learner profiles are rich in diversity. So too, are the lives and experiences of our educators. Equality, diversity and inclusion must be an instinctive lens, through which we view all teaching, learning and assessment activities. In the spirit of connected conversations, cross collaboration within colleges requires meaningful partnership between all members of the education community across different roles, contexts and levels. Crucially, this process must involve meaningful inclusion of the student voice, passion and enthusiasm to shape our learning environments.

Assessment is a vehicle that can unlock transformational change across the student experience. In light of alternative assessment design enacted during emergency remote teaching, timely conversations are continuing to interrogate issues surrounding assessment. Providing for a diverse assessment portfolio, requires a critical evaluation of the suitability and viability of individual assessment strategies.

HECA will use the Next Steps project findings to contextualise its own evidence-based vision of a post-pandemic teaching and learning landscape. This project helped us find clarity in the detail of our peers' lived experiences and inspiration from the collective consciousness of the sector. Greeting the dawning of a new horizon brings a responsibility to continue our critical conversations towards a shared vision that enacts meaningful and far-reaching change.

References

National Forum. (2016). National Professional Development Framework for All Staff who teach in Higher Education. <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/resource/national-professional-development-framework-for-all-staff-who-teach-in-higher-education/>

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