



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:

Moving Forward Together



Insights from Students and Core Services on the impact of Covid-19 and key lessons for moving forward



Introduction

42 participants from student and core stakeholder groups supporting teaching and learning across seven member institutions of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) took part in six focus group sessions in June 2021. The aim was to capture the “lived experience” of the Covid-19 situation, how changes in practice brought about by lockdown are being embedded into mainstream practice, and key lessons for moving forward. This Insight outlines common themes that emerged across all the groups and identifies emerging areas for greater inter-institutional collaboration, while recognising that this is a snapshot of contextualised experiences shared and highlighted by the groups in June 2021.

Background

In response to the National Forum Project, *Next Steps for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together*, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) ran a series of facilitated workshops with key stakeholder groups (students and staff). Stakeholders involved in the workshops were heads of services which are key to supporting the teaching function across each university. These included Heads of Teaching & Learning, Librarians, IT Directors, Examination Officers and Heads of Student Services. A sixth focus group involved student associate interns from the IUA-led *Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL)* project.

42 participants from IUA member institutions participated, and the five staff focus groups involved Heads of Service, or their nominee. The sessions were loosely structured on the ‘Stop, Start, Continue’ model, to allow reflection and consideration of next steps.

There were broad similarities in the approach and provision of services across each of the stakeholder groups, with contextual differences based on the size and makeup of the service within each university. Several common themes for moving forward emerged across all groups.

Common Themes

Leadership and rapid decision-making

There was praise for the emergency planning measures and leadership shown by senior management teams during the pandemic, which allowed for rapid development and implementation of a range of online services. Each group felt a renewed focus and understanding of the importance of their own service provision by senior management, indicative of the focus on a collective common goal of continuity of provision of essential services. Students felt they were consulted and listened to, and that feedback had been acted upon quickly. There was a clear desire for agile and rapid decision-making processes to be maintained post-pandemic, to allow services to continue to build on progress made in the previous 15 months.

Funding

While additional funding made available during the pandemic was welcomed, the short notice and application periods brought challenges around implementation. All groups expressed concern around the cost of providing ongoing support for some of the services introduced during the pandemic and uncertainty around budgetary allocations (for example, increased or expanded software licences and digitised textbooks).

The pandemic rapidly increased the trajectory towards digital transformation of all aspects of core university business and will require funding for both infrastructure and staff resources, if that progress is to be maintained and built upon.

Digital fatigue, well-being & flexible working

All staff and students have suffered digital fatigue from working almost exclusively in an online environment throughout the pandemic. All staff have worked additional (often unpaid) hours to support students and ensure that universities remained open. The unsustainability of staff working at this level was a clear concern for managers.

Staff roles have evolved and adapted effectively to remote working, and many want and expect to be able to retain a level of flexibility post-pandemic. Clear and consistent guidance, both at sectoral and institutional levels, around flexible working was highlighted as being a priority for moving forward.

Staff confidence and capabilities around using technology have increased significantly during periods of lockdown. Continuing to take full advantage of the affordances and continued development of flexible, digitally enhanced working practices further should be a sectoral priority.

Students also appreciated the greater flexibility brought about by moving learning and teaching online. They particularly appreciated the flexibility and improved accessibility of recorded lectures, in particular the ability to revisit recordings. The EDTL Student Voice campaign reported that ideally students would like to be on campus between one and three days per week (EDTL, 2021).

Intra- and inter-university collaboration

All groups highlighted the increased level of collaboration and co-operation at both intra- and inter-university level, which was seen as vital to the successful navigation of the rapid transition to fully online provision. The community support provided through the IUA was highlighted in providing a collegiate sounding board to share approaches to the challenges everyone faced.

There is an opportunity to build on that collaboration, and harness the rapid decision-making processes of the pandemic, as new models develop for the delivery of teaching, learning and assessment, and support for the wider student experience.



Emerging Areas for Greater Collaboration

Consolidation of experiences

There would be value in exploring additional ways to capture, share and consolidate the experiences across institutions and stakeholder groups. All institutions have reacted and adapted to ensure continuation of provision, but there has not been capacity to allow extended, dedicated time to reflect on the experiences and changes brought by the pandemic. Services made rapid and sometimes radical changes to service provision and modes of student engagement. Sharing these experiences in a structured way could provide opportunities for new approaches to build on progress made.

The role of students as decision-makers and integral to planning was highlighted as something that needs to be continued. More shared approaches to student partnership working could be beneficial.

There is an opportunity to consolidate pandemic experiences to create authentic narratives and develop more collective approaches to emerging technology-enhanced practices. New academic conventions are emerging around areas such as the assessment lifecycle, blended/hybrid learning, learning spaces, and student support provision.

Assessment lifecycle

The move to fully online assessments has brought a renewed focus on assessment practice. While digitally-enhanced assessment is not new, its adoption before the pandemic was not universal. Moving assessment online was a challenge in terms of pedagogical, technological and administrative processes. The success of that transition is a tangible example of a successful, rapid and agile collaboration between stakeholders. However, there are significant challenges around the ongoing development of assessment practice which need sectoral level investigation of emerging practice.

A review of the whole assessment lifecycle from pedagogical design, to delivery, to marking, to exam boards, grading and resits, would be timely. Students should be consulted about their experiences of online assessment, remote proctoring and the impacts of the increased targeting of online contract cheating services. Professional bodies should be brought into discussions around developing assessment practice to input into potential alternatives to final summative exams and ensure enhanced trust in the integrity of regulatory processes for alternative assessment approaches.

There was consensus amongst the student intern group that alternatives to final summative exams were significantly less stressful than in-person exams. They enjoyed the experience of more authentic assessments, and noted that alternatives such as continuous assessment and open book exams provided improved opportunities for them to demonstrate their learning. 84% of students would favour continuous or open book assessments over formal examinations in an ideal learning environment (EDTL, 2021).

Reimagining of physical and digital spaces for learning

Careful consideration needs to be given to the most effective use of digital and physical spaces and face-to-face interactions for learning and teaching. There is an opportunity to reimagine the use of all campus space, physical and digital, to support flexibility of working practices, approaches to teaching,

learning and assessment, and research. How can institutions provide a range of on-campus spaces to facilitate quiet study, joining online classes, group work, informal peer learning, and sensitive conversations? How can digital spaces provide a more consistent experience and access to learning resources, activities and assessments for all students?

A renewed focus on learning design that explicitly addresses use of both formal and informal physical and digital spaces could provide an additional way to extend the development of more flexible and active approaches to blended learning. Development of more team-based approaches to design and teaching, including support staff such as librarians, learning technologists and students, incorporating elements of space design and use, could be considered.

Providing dedicated and recognised CPD time for staff within work planning models to engage in learning design could help move practice forward, provide greater consistency, and prevent staff reverting to traditional modes of delivery.

Digital transformation and cyber-security

Across the focus groups it was clear that the extended adoption of online communication services, the rapid development of new ways of working, and online service provision have transformed working practices. A new sectoral vision for continued digital transformation would be timely. It would help to prioritise investment and planning for new and continued digital service provision and the accompanying cultural transformation.

As core business practices rely more on digital services, and as access from non-institutional secure networks grows, ensuring cyber-security needs to be a priority. There is potential to develop and share practice and approaches, and develop a vision for cyber-security across the sector.

In Conclusion

The focus group summaries surfaced a renewed sense of collective purpose during the pandemic, with groups working together to ensure that universities remained open throughout the lockdown period. New working practices and services have been developed which, if supported, could transform the teaching and learning experience for staff and students to be more flexible and accessible in future. Harnessing the collective experiences of institutions could provide an effective way to reflect on and consolidate experiences, develop commonly shared terminology/vocabulary, and provide clear sectoral direction to build on the experiences of the pandemic.

References

EDTL (2021). Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision: Results of the Student Campaign run by the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning project, April – May 2021. <https://edtl.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IUA-EDTL-Your-Education-Your-Voice-Your-Vision-Full-Report.pdf>

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