



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:
Moving Forward Together



Nurturing Community, Belonging and Inclusion: Reflections and Recommendations from the Specialist Colleges

Introduction

This Insight stems from a report written on behalf of the Specialist Colleges group which sought to gather reflections on practice before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, and to propose some recommendations for future policy and practice in higher education. The Specialist Colleges group comprises members from the following institutions:

- Marino Institute of Education (MIE)
- Mary Immaculate College (MIC)
- National College of Art and Design (NCAD)
- Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM)
- St. Angela's College, Sligo (SAC)
- Carlow College, St. Patrick's (CC)
- St. Patrick's College, Maynooth (SPCM)

This group formed during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic in response to emergency pivots to online teaching and learning, and meetings throughout this period were chaired by MIC President, Professor Eugene Wall. While the Colleges differ in terms of size and course offerings, a number of common features can be identified between them. Five of the Colleges offer concurrent and consecutive programmes in generalist and specialist initial teacher education in Music (RIAM), Home Economics (SAC), Visual Art (NCAD), Business, Gaeilge, Religious Studies, Mathematics, Accounting (MIC) and others provide concurrent and consecutive programmes in initial teacher education (primary) (MIC & MIE). The Colleges also offer programmes in the humanities, fine arts and liberal arts (SPCM, RIAM, NCAD, MIC, CC). Some of the common features across all providers are: a) smaller numbers of students on some courses, b) specialised tuition and facilities for practical engagement with subject knowledge and skills, and c) active learning within teacher education programmes where practice tends to model real-world classroom practice.

Focus Group Discussions

Further to an initial meeting of the Presidents of the Specialist Colleges, Dr Gwen Moore (Director of Teaching and Learning, MIC) was nominated to lead the Specialist Colleges' contribution to the Next Steps project. The Presidents group convened a meeting on 9 June 2021 chaired by Dr Moore and agreed a strategy and actions for the group's contribution. It was agreed that each institution would invite lecturer/teacher participants to partake in focus group discussions (approximately 3-4 participants). In total, fourteen representatives from the Specialist Colleges participated. The focus groups comprised a mix of lecturers from across five of the Specialist Colleges with varying levels of experience and disciplinary backgrounds.

Drawing from the overarching research question 'What have we learnt and what does it mean for the future of teaching and learning in Irish higher education?', three key areas of discussion around teaching and learning before, during and after Covid-19 were prompted by a range of questions under each area. It was acknowledged that opinions might vary considerably across the focus groups in the context of different programmes, Colleges, and philosophies of teaching. While consensus was not of critical importance due to these factors, the themes that follow highlight a considerable convergence of perspectives.

Before Covid-19

A Sense of Community and Belonging

It was evident from the focus group discussions that the Specialist Colleges took great pride in the **relational aspect of student-teacher engagement** and valued the **close-knit community** that prevailed across campuses. Lecturers got to know their students very well with some mentioning getting to know each of them by name and the benefits that this afforded in building relationships with students when on campus. Impromptu conversations were mentioned as a catalyst to knowing when students needed additional help or if they were struggling. From the participants' perspectives, this atmosphere generated a degree of **trust and certainty** for both students and staff. It was felt that students received additional supports when needed and were also able to avail of peer support.

Disciplinary Approaches and Pedagogies

Across the focus groups, there was a recognition of the value of **practical engagement within subjects** that afforded deep encounters with disciplinary knowledge and skills. Participants felt that pedagogical knowledge and expertise was a particular strength within the Specialist Colleges and that discipline-specific pedagogies were often **dependent on physical space**, for example, Physical Education, Music Performance, Art/ Music Education. Conversely, some lecturers mentioned large lecture halls or classroom layouts as prohibitive to groupwork and student engagement. Participants noted that they had innovated in teaching and learning prior to Covid-19, were familiar with the work of the National Forum and that they had engaged in professional development (PD) through National Forum seminars and other events.

There was also a recognition of elements that did not work well prior to Covid-19. There was an acknowledgement that the established traditions and practices in Higher Education could be prohibitive to students with personal/caring responsibilities and that practice needed to be more inclusive. Finally, participants spoke of a perceived widespread limited level of technological skills among staff and students to enhance learning and that there had been an over-reliance on in-person teaching with asynchronous material/resources made available after classes on campus had taken place.



During Covid-19

Competence and Support in Online Teaching

There was a sense of unpreparedness for the emergency pivot, particularly as it related to using the available technology. The focus during the initial emergency period was on the need for a rapid familiarisation with the basics of the technology to maintain contact with students. This required **major upskilling by lecturers in digital technologies and pedagogies** and increasing awareness of the workload involved in creating material for a blended or online mode of teaching and learning. Most lecturers planned for a blended approach but the sudden directive from the government to move fully online in August 2020 increased the workload for lecturers enormously. Many of the participants expressed how this manifested emotionally for them and for their students.

Participants felt that live practical engagement, modelling of practice (in education programmes) and the evaluation of in-class activities was lost to a great extent online. There was a sense that the performance aspect of face-to-face lecturing was also lost, however participants acknowledged that the **provision of more online materials** and the recording of lectures, whether pre-recorded or synchronous, were of benefit to students.

Participants were also asked from whom they took the lead/direction for changes to their practice during Covid-19. In general, most of the lecturers relied on **peer support**. Some mentioned that they worked through trial and error, and that they took risks to enable student engagement. Some shared teaching resources with others in and across other institutions as learning progressed and a few created a repository of teaching materials. Some of the larger Specialist Colleges reported having dedicated teaching and learning teams for example the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development (LEAD) team at MIC and the voluntary staff committee 'TELL MiE' (Marino Institute of Education) and a 'train the trainer' model at departmental level.

Into the Future

Assessment

The sudden pivot to online learning highlighted the **exclusive nature of traditional summative assessment** modes such as examinations and essays. Participants noted that the sudden pivot helped clarify that learning could be enhanced by technology whilst ensuring that learning outcomes were met. It was agreed that the traditional nature of assessment should be reviewed at programmatic levels and that the introduction of **more continuous assessment** would be of benefit to students into the future.

Universal Design for Learning and Inclusion

Participants noted that the incorporation of more **blended or hybrid delivery** would be of benefit to all. For example, it was acknowledged that keeping the option of some online delivery through a blended model of recorded lectures would have many benefits for students who fall ill or who cannot attend in person. The sudden pivot to online teaching and learning propelled teaching staff and students towards a rapid utilisation of technology enhanced learning tools and systems. Consequently, this shone a light on the barriers in terms of accessibility in higher education. Into the future, participants agreed that **inclusive and universal design for learning should underpin curriculum design and assessment**. It was also noted

that the use of **e-portfolios** would be of immense benefit to students studying creative arts and in initial teacher education.

Participants spoke of the vast amount of preparation by lecturers prior to classes in addition to the immense workload that this generated. It was agreed that there was a risk of losing all of this hard work and that Colleges should encourage staff to leverage this by **reusing and improving digital content** while embracing the progress made to make it more sustainable into the future.

Participants recommended a new focus to generate more independent learning strategies with students for more active and engaged learning. It was thought that an approach of utilising contact time for other types of relationship building between the lecturer and the student would be beneficial. Finally, it was noted by participants that blended teaching approaches will most likely remain into the future and more importantly, that lecturers want sustainable approaches to teaching and learning for the benefit of all students.

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