



# NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:

Moving Forward Together



## Selected insights from StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2021:

The impact of Covid-19 on first year undergraduates and PGR students



### Abstract

**This StudentSurvey.ie Insight has a dual focus. Initially, it will focus on the aggregated national results of new questions specifically addressing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which were added to StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie in 2021 (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021a). These results will have added value as higher education institutions emerge from the Covid-19 emergency with evolved priorities and challenges to overcome. The public health measures put in place in response to the Covid-19 pandemic also meant that first year undergraduate students who entered higher education in the 2020-2021 academic year are believed to have had a substantially different experience than their predecessors (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021b). The second focus of this paper will explore this belief.**

### Acknowledgements

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### Part 1 - the experience during the Covid-19 pandemic

In 2021, five multiple choice questions and two open-ended questions specifically addressing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic were added to StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie alongside the established survey instruments.

#### StudentSurvey.ie qualitative data analysis results

43,791 students responded to StudentSurvey.ie, which represents a national response rate of 28.4%. Of these, 34,655 responses to "What are the positive elements of the online/blended learning experience you want to keep when on-campus studies resume?" were analysed.

At the aggregate level, one answer appeared to dominate overwhelmingly and that was students wanting to have recorded lectures available to them. While this appeared to be a commonality across all student cohorts, from closer analysis of word choices across groups, we get some indications of how groups differed in their priorities when answering the question. First year undergraduates talked about the accessibility of notes and lecture slides when summarising the positive elements of an online/blended learning experience. Final year undergraduates were more likely to refer to assessment, be it final exams or continuous assessment. Taught postgraduates were likely to mention the flexibility of online/blended learning and how it reduces the time spent commuting, which frees up time for study.

There were 30,955 responses to the second open-ended question "In what way(s) could your higher education institution improve its support for you during the current circumstances?". At the aggregate level, the responses overall largely focussed on one area, communication, and students' desire to have more and better communication. Other themes that emerged were mentioned but to a much lesser extent, for example, seeking greater efforts through events and activities to mitigate the isolating effects that online teaching can have on students. First year undergraduates tended to mention things that have been missing from their student experience because of the shift to online learning, such as 'people', 'events' and 'activities'. Final year undergraduates focussed on assessment. In contrast, taught postgraduates highlighted the cost of fees and wanted to see these reduced because of their inability to access the full range of resources available to them in normal times. On the whole, students were realistic in assessing their situation and thought their HEIs were doing a good job of moving to online/blended teaching in the exceptional circumstances.

#### PGR StudentSurvey.ie qualitative data analysis results

3,541 students responded to PGR StudentSurvey.ie, representing a national response rate of 34%. A total of 2,962 responses to "How has Covid-19 most impacted on your research?" were analysed. The overall theme was one of absence and loss. Postgraduate research students have lost time, access to essential facilities and a suitable research environment. Themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1.



**Table 1 PGR StudentSurvey.ie themes and subthemes for question 1 nationally**

Themes	n	Subthemes	n
Disruption in access to:	1404	Labs	439
		Library/ archives	218
		Campus workspace/ facilities	167
		Specialist materials/ equipment	91
		Data collection/ fieldwork	489
Environment	822	Collegiate environment (incl colleagues, collaborators)	459
		Contact with Supervisor/ Academic Staff/ Support staff	161
		Working from home environment unsuitable	202
Time	706	Delays/ slowed pace	567
		Other commitments drawing on time	139
Personal impact	406	Negative impact on productivity	86
		Negative impact on motivation	131
		Negative impact on mental health (incl stress and isolation)	189
Other	243	Financial impact	91
		Travel	68
		Positive impact	47
Generally	112	Non-specific impact/ overall major revisions	
Not impacted	173		

\*Some comments received more than one code

Secondly, a total of 2,457 responses to “In what way(s) could your higher education institution improve its support for you during the current circumstances?” were analysed. The overall theme was one of need. Postgraduate research students need more - they need more time, more financial support, more support in general, and more access to facilities. Themes and subthemes are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2 PGR StudentSurvey.ie themes and subthemes for question 2 nationally**

Themes	n	Subthemes	n
Increase access to	648	Labs	111
		Library/ archives	125
		Campus workspace/ facilities	281
		Specialist materials/ equipment	25
		Online facilities/ software	106
Other Supports	495	Connection/networking opportunities	229
		Support for mental health	60
		Support for specific cohorts, e.g. student parents, international students	51
Engagement	426	More communicative (timing and quantity of communications)	244
		Change communications strategy	47
		Response to Covid-19 (incl vaccination/ testing)	62
		Recognition of circumstances and making allowances	73
Finance	356	Reduce/ Remove costs (incl waive fees)	79
		More funding/ funding opportunities (incl paying for teaching)	145
		Extension/reallocation of existing funding	131
Research Supports	317	Deadline extensions	190
		More/improved supervision	56
		Support for research challenges during pandemic	69
		Supports to WFH (equipment/ IT support/ costs)	158
Nothing	565	Nothing institution can do to resolve issues	158
		Institution has done all they can	407
Other	54		



## Commentary

The common thread through these responses is that both cohorts want their HEI to recognise the impact Covid-19 has had on them and to show compassion in their response. Students have shown tremendous resilience, with many respondents showing positivity and strength in their responses, along with recognising the efforts being made by their HEI to support them in difficult circumstances. They recognise that they are members of a community that includes themselves, as well as academic staff, support staff, and a diverse student body with a diversity of needs.

## Part 2 – a focus on first year undergraduates

The public health measures put in place in response to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that first year undergraduate students who entered higher education in the 2020-2021 academic year are believed to have had a substantially different experience than their predecessors. This part of the Insight seeks to better understand and quantify the impact of Covid-19 on first year undergraduate students in Irish higher education institutions in 2021 (Cohort 2021; 21,095 respondents) in comparison with first year cohorts from 2018, 2019 and 2020 (Baseline Cohort; 59,984 respondents). The aim was to demonstrate how analysing the results of StudentSurvey.ie over time can facilitate valuable insights into the experiences of students in higher education in a specific set of circumstances (the Covid-19 global pandemic) for a specific cohort (first year undergraduates).

## Summary of results

The results revealed statistically significant differences between Cohort 2021 and the Baseline Cohort for all indicators, except *Learning Strategies*. The overwhelmingly consistent finding was that the scores for Cohort 2021 were statistically significantly lower than the baseline cohort (Figure 1).

The difference between Cohort 2021 and the Baseline Cohort was statistically significant but small for *Higher-Order Learning*, *Reflective and Integrative Learning*, *Quantitative Reasoning*, and *Effective Teaching Practices*. Thus, the analysis focused on the indicators with medium, large or very large differences, and thereby deemed most affected by necessitated changes to the traditional on-campus higher education model. These were:

- Collaborative Learning
- Student-Faculty Interaction
- Quality of Interactions
- Supportive Environment

These four indicators were examined by exploring the differences between Cohort 2021 and the Baseline Cohort, across their mode of study, undergraduate programme type, field of study, institution type, and type of term-time residence, gender, age, and country of domicile. For all student and course characteristics, there were statistically significant differences between Cohort 2021 and the Baseline Cohort for *Collaborative Learning*, *Student-Faculty Interaction*, and *Quality of Interactions*. The lone exception was *Supportive Environment*, where there was no significant difference for part-time first year undergraduate respondents between Cohort 2021 and the Baseline Cohort. Of the four indicators examined, *Quality of Interactions* had the largest effect sizes.

This analysis is supported by the bespoke and interactive online dashboard on the StudentSurvey.ie website ([www.studentsurvey.ie](http://www.studentsurvey.ie)).

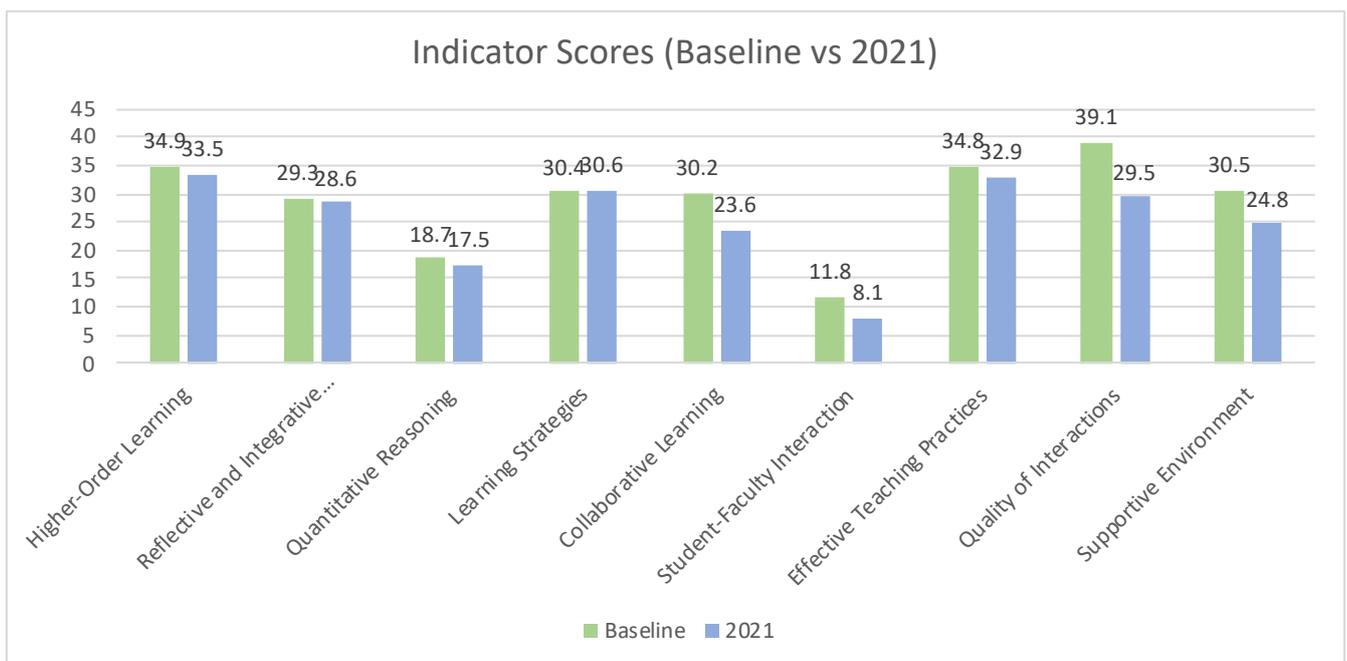


Figure 1: Indicator scores for 2021 respondents and Baseline respondents



## Relevance for policy and practice

In 2021, the results of national surveys of student engagement provided a broad-based study of the experiences of students during the continuation of the emergency online and blended teaching, learning and assessment. Hybrid or flexible models are favoured by some groups of students, such as those combining work and study, students with care commitments, and students with disabilities. To build on the potential offered by the continuation of a blended teaching and learning environment, consideration needs to be given to how teaching and learning communities of practice can be developed and maintained in an online environment, and how virtual spaces can be designed to foster the collaborative action, social bonds, care and compassion so necessary to, and desired by, students. The data highlight a real challenge of modern society; that information, experience, and identity are personal. Higher education institutions must find a way to communicate with large cohorts of students as individuals with unique circumstances. Students' Unions can play a significant role in this effort.

## Conclusion

Development and implementation of StudentSurvey.ie is driven by the intention to inform, support, and encourage enhancement discussions and activities throughout institutions, and to inform national policy. All participating HEIs have access to the results from respondents in their institutions and a responsibility to harness and use the insights that analysis of the data can offer. Other stakeholders in higher education should commit to careful consideration of these initial findings as we, collectively, seek to provide better opportunities for students whose educational experiences changed dramatically. We encourage looking to the future, where student voices continue to be amplified by such surveys and heard by institutions and national organisations to bring about enhanced student experiences and a better environment for all members of the higher education community.

## References

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