



# NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:  
Moving Forward Together



## Perspectives of Chief Academic Officers



### Context

**This Insight presents the outcomes of a series of facilitated reflections with the Registrars and Chief Academic Officers of higher education institutions that are members of the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA). These reflections examined the experiences of senior leaders charged with key responsibilities for their institutions' overall academic provision, including academic quality and integrity. Existing documentation from the very frequent meetings of the group during the public health emergency and associated sectoral / national policies were used to inform two workshops designed to explore what lessons had been learned during this time, and which key changes might be successfully maintained into the future. The workshops were facilitated by Maynooth University Innovation Design Lab (Mi:Lab) and took place in June 2021 (online) and August 2021 (face-to-face).**

Two key facts proved central to the context for these reflections. First, that the considerations of Registrars during this time, collaboratively and individually, were underpinned by the existence of well-established principles, policies and procedures to maintain and enhance the quality of provision, and to provide agreed structures for decision-making. While adaptations were required to operationalise these policies and procedures in an environment of a rapid and large-scale move to remote learning, these strong foundations proved invaluable. Second, the additional pressures caused by Covid-19 highlighted known issues and challenges to teaching, learning and assessment rather than revealing entirely new issues. For THEA member institutions, the enormous transformation already underway with the move towards single, multi-campus Technological Universities represented, and continues to present, unique opportunities and challenges as the attendant impacts on teaching, learning and assessment experiences for students and staff are more fully explored and better understood.

### Key issues

Workshop one focussed on the forces enabling and inhibiting change within institutions; those aspects that were welcome, or should change, or which merited further exploration as well as some emerging trends within higher education. The second workshop was scheduled just before the start of the next academic year with the intent of focussing on what experiences and lessons learned may mean for the future of teaching, learning and assessment.

### Hybrid models of teaching, learning and assessment

Assessment featured strongly in participants' reflections with a widely shared view that the culture of traditional summative examinations felt "broken, ineffective or outdated". It was acknowledged that the emergency pivot to remote learning and assessment had taken place much more quickly than

might have been anticipated and that great flexibility had been demonstrated by staff and students to enable this change. However, in more usual circumstances when higher education (and society as a whole) learns to "manage with Covid-19" longer-term, concerns were expressed about maintaining or embedding sufficient systemic flexibility to accommodate a suitably diverse range and schedule of assessment approaches. The importance of maintaining the academic integrity of assessments was stressed as well as the need for care to revisit changes made in an emergency context. Indeed, the theme of carefully considered, evidence-based decisions applied to multiple issues. One important example raised was enabling a holistic student experience of higher education. In an environment where some voices are actively promoting the benefits of teaching and learning which is substantially online, the need to balance such aspirations with the desire of students for a meaningful on-campus experience highlighted some of the competing perspectives to be considered when seeking an optimal model of providing higher education experiences into the future.

### Robust support infrastructure

From the perspective of senior leaders responsible for quality of provision, the importance of rigorous quality assurance of emerging / proposed teaching, learning and assessment practices was regarded as essential before any long-term changes were implemented. The robustness of (existing) procedures and practice was essential in ensuring that the changes rapidly introduced in 2020 and 2021 worked as effectively as they did. Recent experiences also provided opportunities to mainstream training in assessment design and academic integrity, as many more staff had availed of this than might have been the case in other circumstances. This example also illustrates increased appreciation of the higher education institution as an ecosystem, with academic and professional and managerial support service staff (PMSS) all playing their part to contribute to the overall provision of engaging experiences for students. To facilitate the core activities of teaching, learning and assessment, and enable a diverse and inclusive student body to achieve success in higher education, a fully supportive infrastructure - consisting of quality assurance and enhancement; student support services; physical and technology-related facilities; and institutional decision-making - is required. The interplay between these different and complementary components was deeply appreciated during the past eighteen months in a way which may have been previously perceived as somewhat theoretical. The contribution of different organisational units within institutions to shared decision-making made a persuasive difference to this deeper understanding. Co-creation and collaboration across different staff teams, and with students, were viewed as key positive experiences during this time. Similar experiences were seen when Registrars discussed issues with peers. As one stated, "For the Registrars' group, collaboration and sharing was very important throughout the process. When this happened, the true value of the relationships came to the fore".



The technological sector, in general, has lower proportions of PMSS staff than other institution-types, which is largely due to historic funding arrangements. However, the importance of effective, scaled and agile infrastructure to support students' success was repeatedly identified during the period of public health restrictions. For example, making more effective use of data featured repeatedly in discussions by senior leaders, in order to inform communications and decision-making. It was regarded as extremely important to ensure that additional requests for information were minimised and that maximum intelligence was harnessed from data already maintained. There was also acknowledgement of the need to develop a wider range of methods to communicate with students and with the wider staff body.

### **Consideration of flexible, healthy spaces**

Greater flexibility in use of physical spaces was considered in order to accommodate more flexible learning and varying group sizes, with increased use of hybrid teaching and learning models. Many institutions are physically set up for traditional modes of teaching and learning and multi-annual strategic funding is required to enable the development of multi-functional healthy spaces at a pace to match anticipated demand. The blend of on-site and online meetings worked well for institutions, for quality-assurance panels such as validation, external examining and for PMSS staff. If the potential changes in demand for space could be addressed in a sustained and planned manner, a range of flexible and diverse teaching and learning spaces could be provided.

### **New challenges for those managing others**

In terms of authority and decision-making, many logistical changes were evident throughout the pandemic, with meetings scheduled exclusively online. These changes, and the topics being considered in these meetings, facilitated increased involvement of participants from a wider range of organisational units than would have been commonplace previously. In some instances, these mechanisms worked well but the reduced opportunities for informal discussions also increased the risk of a perception of less transparency. There was consensus that leaders and managers would benefit from training and support to manage staff in a remote working environment, and that it was insufficient to rely on individual leadership styles.

### **(Re-)claiming institutional autonomy**

At sectoral and national level, participants reflected on the benefits of sectoral collaboration to inform decision-making and governance in the context of increased direction from the state during the emergency period, and additionally the ongoing managerial challenges and workload relating to the rapid transition towards becoming Technological Universities. It was strongly argued that care should be taken to reflect on the appropriate remits, role and responsibilities of state actors, representative bodies and individual institutions in a future with a smaller number of larger, autonomous Technological Universities with significant regional footprints and broader strategic aspirations. Key actors could be identified to lead on development of new / refreshed policies to reflect the "new" hybrid working / learning realities; increased involvement with geographically distant experts (e.g., for quality assurance or external examining); collaborative consideration of legacy academic contractual arrangements; and other opportunities to enhance teaching, learning and assessment practices by examining good practice elsewhere.

### **Summary**

Many of the issues and topics identified and reflected upon here are particularly pertinent in the context of the establishment of new Technological Universities. Building a shared ethos; redesigning teaching, learning and assessment experiences; and fostering practice focused on equity and inclusion across these institutions emerged strongly. The need to examine flexible use of space; to deliver clearly communicated blends of face-to-face and online provision for students and for staff; to provide a diverse range of teaching, learning and assessment experiences underpinned by inclusion, diversity and equity; and to build upon the strong student-centred focus of existing institutions is evident. The importance of the support infrastructure of robust quality assurance / enhancement policies and procedures, and sufficient investment to provide student support services cannot be overstated if teaching, learning and assessment are to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

---

**Sean O'Reilly**

Sean.OReilly@thea.ie

---