



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:
Moving Forward Together



Perspectives of Students



This document is an insight into USI's contribution to the 'Next Steps' project. The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level students in Ireland. USI represents more than 374,000 students in over thirty colleges across the island of Ireland. USI is represented on the Board of the National Forum by the Vice President for Academic Affairs.

Evidence

The following evidence has been taken from a number of reports such as [The Interim Results Bulletin from Studentsurvey.ie](#), [The Irish National Digital Experience Survey](#), [The USI National Report on Students and Covid-19](#), The USI Digital and Distance Learning Paper along with some specific institutional data collected from [Maynooth University Students' Union](#) and [University College Cork Students' Union](#). The following considerations have been outlined. Overall, students were generally positive towards institutional communication. However, in all cases, a sizeable proportion of students expressed negative attitudes towards institutional communication – suggesting that there is further work to be done. Flexibility was overwhelmingly viewed as one of the most positive outcomes during the Covid-19 pandemic, whether in the format or deadline of assessments, or in the way in which learning was provided, students appreciated the opportunity to access their learning in a way that worked for them. Advantages of open-book assessment and continuous assessment were noted. In addition, students acknowledged the opportunities that recorded lectures afforded for recapping on learning and accessing lectures via closed captioning.

Informal learning supplemented by interactions with peers and staff outside of the classroom was consistently raised as something that it was difficult to replicate in the online environment. Many students disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt connected to their institution throughout the pandemic. Students craved opportunities for more engagement and more communication. This suggests that one of the greatest challenges faced by students was the ability to foster those informal relationships with their peers and lecturers when they had limited opportunities to. Peer support is a hugely important element of the student learning journey.

The importance of accessibility of learning is also apparent throughout the feedback. Students encountered issues regarding connectivity as well as the lack of a suitable environment or suitable devices to allow them to carry out their work. Initiatives such as the Device Lending Scheme established by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science helped bridge this digital divide slightly. Many of these challenges faced have been ongoing for quite some time with remote learning highlighting them.

The increased use of digital teaching and learning methods necessitated upskilling for staff and students alike. Whilst the emphasis in pivot 19/20 was on completing the academic year, discussion for the 20/21 academic year concentrated much

more on effective modes of teaching online. The provision of professional development opportunities to support staff in upskilling should continue into the future.

Assessment received significant attention throughout the pandemic. The restrictions on on-campus activity meant that traditional in-person exams were no longer feasible. This resulted in a significant increase in continuous assessment. However, the bunching of assessment was highlighted as an issue across various studies. The National Forum has carried out significant work in the area of assessment, particularly in relation to 'Assessment Of, For, and As Learning'. There appears to be a significant appetite for a more diverse approach to assessment going forward.

Placement is a core element of the learning process for many students and plays a vital role in determining their eligibility to join the appropriate professional register. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, access to placement was a significant challenge across many professions, particularly but not limited to healthcare, social care, teaching, engineering and business. Communication regarding placement also appeared to be an issue. Going forward it may be necessary to ensure that professional body requirements are balanced with a recognition of existing circumstances. It also highlights the potential for a pipeline impact on placement opportunities in future years as a result of the disruption caused by Covid-19. Sectoral discussions have been facilitated on work-based learning, and it seems likely that conversations will be required in the future to explore more innovative ways of facilitating placement.

Focus Groups

USI carried out focus groups with students and Students' Union officers in June 2021 to explore some of the topics covered in previous research.

There was a consensus across all focus groups that recorded lectures and the provision of more flexible means of accessing learning content worked to the advantage of most students. The innovation in assessment and the increased use of continuous assessment was also welcomed. While many students noted decreased engagement or interaction in online lectures, it was apparent that less confident students often felt more comfortable engaging in class discussion via chat functions. It was also noted that the pandemic necessitated the use of virtual learning environments. In turn, the use of peer-mentoring and SU-led social opportunities was noted as a positive by many participants.

One of the key barriers identified within the focus groups was inconsistency in practice. Whilst some students reported positive experiences of engaging online teaching styles others had much fewer positive experiences. Some students felt that certain staff failed to consider the student perspective. Particularly challenging was the perception that because students were unable to socialise in the traditional way, the workloads were increased. Screen fatigue and connectivity



were issues faced by staff and students alike. Social connection was a challenge that many faced throughout. Positive attitudes were displayed towards the use of in-class interactive activities such as breakout rooms and online tools, but the lack of social connection often led to a lack of motivation which resulted in some students actively disengaging from class by turning their cameras off or not attending lectures. First years in particular had missed out on the informal interactions that cannot be as easily replicated online. In relation to communication between staff and students, many noted frustration regarding lack of feedback. Students, particularly first years, found it challenging to communicate with lecturers via email. Students with disabilities also reported some challenges from the last academic year such as the inability to avail of standard supports such as scribes. Extenuating circumstances policies were not always consistently applied meaning that some students were denied extensions where others had been granted them for similar reasons.

Institutional communication was noted as a barrier by many students and SU officers. Whilst the everchanging nature of restrictions was acknowledged, many felt that institutional messaging was not also aligned.

Whilst the provision of laptops was welcomed by many, some deficiencies were noted in this system such as inconsistent criteria across institutions, students with a short-term need unable to avail of short-term loans and students with specific software requirements being unable to download the required software on devices procured through the scheme. Nonetheless, students spoke to the importance of maintaining the laptop lending scheme.

The overwhelming majority of participants expressed an interest in retaining recorded lectures, noting their benefits for students with disabilities, students with additional responsibilities and for consolidating one's learning. It was suggested that students should have the option to avail of blended-learning opportunities. A strong interest was expressed in retaining the increased use of continuous assessment as opposed to terminal assessment via examination. However, it was acknowledged that exam may be a preferred mode of assessment for certain subjects. A preference was expressed for using technology to supplement in-person learning as opposed to replacing it. Examples given included the options of attending 1:1s with lecturers, and the recording of practical classes so students could recap on these via VLEs. An increased emphasis that some lecturers placed on meaningful engagement with students was suggested as a practice that should continue.

Many students felt that lecturers were more accommodating and understanding of personal circumstances this year and it was suggested that this approach be retained going forward through more flexible extension policies such as self-certification extensions. It was acknowledged that in many institutions, opportunities for students to engage with staff in decision-making structures were more frequent and accessible – there was strong support for this being maintained.

The current emphasis on Student Success was noted as being particularly important. It was suggested that every institution should consider what they need to put in place to ensure the success of every student, acknowledging that success will look different for everyone. Meaningful engagement was noted as an integral part of this process and there is a key emphasis on student partnership that should be retained. HEIs should

endeavour to engage students and their representatives at all levels of decision-making. This should be complemented at the national level by strong collaboration between all stakeholders and student representatives.

Central to the above suggestions, is increased investment particularly in core student services such as counselling and student-centred services, as well as continued investment into student grants and financial supports. Many students expressed a preference for continued focus on skills development being offered to both staff and students in engaging with technology.

References

- Student Survey.ie (2021). *Interim Results Bulletin*. https://studentsurvey.ie/sites/default/files/users/user27/StudentSurvey.ie%20Interim%20Results%20Bulletin%202021_0.pdf
- National Forum (2020). *Irish National Digital Experience Survey, Final Summary Report*. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/index/>
- Union of Students in Ireland (2020). *National Report on Students and COVID-19*. https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/COVID_RESEARCH_FINAL.pdf
- Union of Students in Ireland (2020). *Digital & Distance Learning Position Paper*. [Unpublished resource.] Unions of Students in Ireland.
- Maynooth University Students' Union. (2020). *Annual Survey of Student Opinion*. https://www.msu.ie/asset/News/6013/MSU_COVID19_Survey_Report.pdf
- UCC Students' Union. (2020). *Student Feedback on Online Learning*. <https://www.uccsu.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/UCCSUSStudentFeedbackOnlineLearningCurtin2020.pdf>
- National Forum (2017). *Expanding our Understanding of Assessment and Feedback in Irish Higher Education*. <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/resource/expanding-our-understanding-of-assessment-and-feedback-in-irish-higher-education/>