

INDEX Survey: Final Summary Report

April 2021

This INDEX Survey Final Summary Report outlines how INDEX Survey findings provided a source of evidence for the initial response to the COVID crisis, have supported data-informed decision-making in multiple ways, and represent an important baseline of pre-COVID teaching, learning and digital experience.

Background

In autumn 2019, the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey was completed by nearly 30,000 students and staff who teach at 32 higher education institutions in Ireland¹. The National Forum coordinated the INDEX Survey in close partnership with all participating institutions and student and staff stakeholders. The INDEX Findings Report was published in May 2020².

The terrain of higher education has changed enormously since autumn 2019. At the time the INDEX Survey was undertaken, for example, 70% of staff who teach had never taught in a live online environment. Just a few months later, when institutions went fully online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this proportion was reduced to zero; all who teach became online teachers, and all students became distance students. Despite these enormous changes, the original aim of the INDEX Survey remains relevant i.e. highlighting what makes a difference to students and staff who teach, and providing an evidence base to inform decision-making and future enhancement of digital teaching and learning.

This report outlines specific ways that INDEX findings have been useful in enhancing practice, policy and strategy in Irish higher education, both within individual institutions and sector-wide.

Institutional use of INDEX Survey findings

Working in partnership with the National Forum, the INDEX Steering Group was the central planning and decision-making body in the INDEX Survey project. Members of the INDEX Steering Group included institution leads from each of the participating institutions and key members of student and staff representative groups. INDEX Steering Group members reviewed and approved all aspects of the INDEX Survey (including the survey questions), facilitated communications and engagement efforts, and coordinated the analysis and communication of findings at their respective institutions.

In describing the use and impact of INDEX findings within their institutions, members of the INDEX Steering Group reported that the findings had been useful in three main ways:

1. Helping to inform initial institutional COVID responses and the move to emergency remote teaching and learning.
2. Improving access to, experience of, and support for digital teaching and learning by addressing specific aspects of student and staff findings (see Table 1).

¹ The INDEX Survey was completed by 24,484 students and 4,445 staff who teach. The 32 participating institutions represent approximately 96% of the higher education sector in Ireland, in terms of student population.

² INDEX Survey Findings Report: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/irish-national-digital-experience-index-survey-findings-from-students-and-staff-who-teach-in-higher-education/>

- Incorporating broader conversations about INDEx findings into existing strategy, policy and development work as a means of enhancing overall institutional digital capabilities. This included development of Teaching and Learning strategies, overall academic planning, and various professional development activities.

At institutional level, INDEx Steering Group members reported that collaborative analysis of the findings and consideration of their meaning have helped to ensure that policy and practice decisions at individual, departmental and institutional levels that impact on teaching approaches and student learning experiences have been informed by evidence.

Table 1. Specific INDEx findings addressed within individual institutions

INDEx findings addressed (with reference to INDEx Survey Findings Report ³)	Action taken
More than one in twelve students (8%) reported that they did not use a personally-owned laptop to support their learning (p. 52); over one-quarter (27%) said 'more laptops/tablets available on long-term loan' would be most useful to them as learners (p. 82)	Purchased additional laptops for laptop rental schemes
In qualitative responses, many students said they would like courses in the VLE to be structured to facilitate navigation, particularly where there are many learning and assessment resources (p. 86)	Redesigned VLE with improved navigation approach; created additional VLE tutorials for students and VLE courses for staff who teach
Half of all students (52%) agreed that their institution protected their data privacy, fewer than a third (30%) agreed that they were informed about how their personal data was stored and used (pp. 72-74) Half of all staff who teach (52%) agreed that they were informed about their responsibilities with regard to managing learner data securely (pp. 72-74)	Created and communicated resources for students and staff addressing data privacy, digital safety and digital wellbeing, including resources on GDPR and data literacy
Approximately one-third of staff who teach (37%) agreed that they were informed about their responsibilities regarding digital copyright and licensing (p. 74)	Developed and disseminated online guide for staff who teach to address copyright in the online context
Only 27% of students, and 14% of staff who teach, agreed that their institution provided them with the opportunity to be involved in decisions about digital services at their institution (p. 78)	Implemented new mechanisms to involve students in decision-making about digital learning beyond traditional surveys and class rep forums
Nearly one in five students (18%) used assistive technologies; 9% reported that these were vital to meet their learning needs; 70% agreed that their institution provided them with support (p. 54) Regarding staff who teach, 14% used assistive technologies; 5% reported that these were vital to their work; 17% agreed	Reorganised orientation material to include more detail regarding assistive technologies

³ INDEx Survey Findings Report <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/irish-national-digital-experience-index-survey-findings-from-students-and-staff-who-teach-in-higher-education/>.

that they were informed about their responsibilities with regard to assistive and adaptive technologies (p. 54)	
20% of students said course-related videos would be useful to them as a learner (p. 82)	Currently offering more online resources and more video resources
Approximately two-thirds of students (65%) said they had access to e-books and e-journals whenever they needed them, indicating that many were not aware of the range of library resources available to them (p. 50)	Library developed new online information skills training

National use of INDEx Survey findings

Following publication of the INDEx Survey Findings Report in May 2020, the National Forum further interrogated and analysed the national dataset to support continued understanding and application of the findings across the sector. These additional publications (available at www.teachingandlearning.ie/index) include:

- INDEx infographics series: illustrating key sector-wide INDEx findings
- Appendix A. Qualitative analysis of survey responses regarding Student Digital Activities
- Appendix B. Qualitative analysis of survey responses regarding Staff Digital Tools
- Appendix C. Survey results by Programme of Study (Students)
- Appendix D. Survey results by Staff Roles (Staff Who Teach)
- INDEx Briefing Paper: describing the process of national collaboration and partnership

The analysis of national survey findings represented in these infographics and appendices emerged from ongoing conversations across the sector; Steering Group members and other stakeholders requested specific types of analysis to support their ongoing work.

Development of the INDEx Briefing Paper emerged from expressions of interest from individuals outside the Irish higher education sector regarding how the national survey had been organised and implemented, particularly the INDEx Survey emphasis on partnership. Follow-on discussions have taken place with representatives from the EC and the OECD.

Conclusions and next steps

Apart from the analysis and reports cited above, one aspect of the INDEx Survey has arisen consistently in discussing its overall impact. That aspect is the underlying values and framework i.e. staff and students working in partnership throughout the project. The INDEx Steering Group emphasised that such national partnership frameworks should continue.

Currently, the higher education community is planning for emergence from the pandemic and considering next steps for teaching and learning. This requires drawing on what has been learned from our recent experiences of the shift to fully online/remote learning as well as what was known about enhancing teaching and learning prior to the pandemic. INDEx findings represent an important source of evidence for the latter. The holistic nature of the INDEx findings identified diverse aspects of digital teaching and learning that were, and may likely continue to be, important to staff and students. For example, findings showed that students valued consistent use of the VLE, availability of lecture recordings and interactivity in teaching, and that staff wanted more time, support and recognition to develop digital teaching and learning. INDEx findings also highlighted important institution-level aspects of digital experience e.g. level of engagement by staff and students in digital decision-making, quality of communication regarding data privacy policies, and the interdependence of student, staff and institutional digital capabilities.

Many people within and outside the sector have asked whether (and when) the INDEx Survey may be run again. For 2021, at least, our focus is on planning for emergence from the pandemic and considering next steps for teaching and learning. As we move into a post-pandemic period, we expect that there will be an opportune time to re-run the survey. As with the initial implementation of the INDEx Survey in 2019, we know that the timing must be right, taking into account all developments and priorities across the sector. We look forward to those conversations in 2022 and beyond.