



Towards a National Understanding of Student Success

The purpose of this *Forum Insight* is to give a concise overview of the development of a national understanding of student success in Irish higher education. This development is charted through national policy, institutional strategic priorities, insights from students and through ongoing discussions that capture the growing focus on student success as a driver of higher education over recent years. The overview is underpinned by a review of the current literature.

Part One: Understanding Success

The National Policy Perspective

National policy frames all of the priorities and drivers of higher education in Ireland. Consequently, any national understanding of student success must consider how it is articulated in national policy. Although the term 'student success' does not frequently arise explicitly in policy documents, the priorities listed give a clear indication of the perceived role and value of higher education, through which the expected results of a successful student experience can be inferred. The key themes emerging from national policy include:

- The power of higher education to be a **transformative experience** that can fundamentally change the lives of students and help them to recognise and achieve their full potential.
- The pivotal role played by higher education in **developing the skills** that are valued by employers and are at the heart of our national economic strategy.
- The need for higher education to be **available to all students** and to be representative of the diversity that exists across the national population.
- The recognition that effective, informed **teaching and learning** approaches are fundamental to enabling student success.
- The requirement for a **quality higher education experience** that gives students the opportunity to meet new people, discover new talents and expand their understanding of the world as a core element of success.
- **Successful transitions** are a key consideration. The policies recognise the need to support students as they make the move from post-primary education or further education and training (FET) and to ensure that a quality first year experience is available to all.
- The provision of effective, **aligned funding models** for both students and institutions as a critical enabler of student success.
- Given the importance of research to Ireland's economic strategy, **progression to postgraduate research** programmes is a characteristic of success from the perspective of national policy.

Students' Perspectives

It is self-evident that students and their education are indivisible. Students' perspectives are, therefore, critical to the development of an informed understanding of the values and goals that underpin success. In 2018, as part of its strategic consultation process, a National Forum consultation with Irish higher education students elicited 887 responses that give some insight into what 'success' means to students.

Three primary themes were identified by students, namely employability, academic attainment and degree completion (Table 1). It is noteworthy, however, that the majority of students cited more than one theme (with 30% citing three or more themes) indicating that success often exceeds simple definitions. This is also reflected in the broad range of themes that were identified.

There was also some variation between the response patterns of students from differing demographic cohorts. Female students, for example, were more likely to prioritise doing their best than their male counterparts (23% vs 13%) who were, in turn, more likely to cite employability as a key aspect of success (44% vs 32%). Students from institutes of technology were more likely to identify employability (40% vs 31%), whereas university students were more likely to list academic attainment (48% vs 34%). Final year students were considerably more likely to list academic attainment than first year students (45% vs 32%). These findings indicate that the concept of success is highly variable among students and that students may often have different priorities at differing points in their college experience.

Table 1 Themes identified by students

Theme	Response Percent
Developing skills to maximise employability	37%
Achieving high academic attainment	36%
Competing award, graduating	31%
Deepening learning/understanding	21%
Doing your best, achieving personal potential	18%
Socialising and making friends	18%
Developing personal attributes	13%
Engaging with the full college experience	13%
Being happy/satisfied	12%
Contributing to society	3%
Progressing to a postgraduate programme	1%

A National Understanding

Given this shifting national context, and the wealth of contributions from the discussions that have gone before and informed it, the National Forum's Student Success Advisory Group has identified a set of recurring tenets that underpin the understanding of success that is emerging in Irish higher education:

- Success means empowering students to recognise and achieve their own potential.
- Success is too highly nuanced and individualised to be concisely defined. This does not prohibit it, however, from being understood and facilitated.
- Success can only be facilitated through meaningful partnership and engagement between students, staff and the wider community and between all levels of the higher education sector.
- It is the responsibility of those working across higher education to identify and remove any obstacles that may hinder students from achieving their own benchmark of success.
- Success is not binary and cannot be fully encapsulated in metrics such as retention and progression rates. It reframes the perspective from product to process, from an approach driven by output metrics to one that is enabled by ongoing quality enhancement.
- Success requires whole-of-institution approaches.

Informed by these tenets, the Advisory Group has developed the following shared understanding of student success:

Student success optimises the learning and development opportunities for each student to recognise and fulfil their potential to contribute to, and flourish in, society.

To be achieved, this requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community.

This understanding is intended to form a foundation for a shared sectoral common language and purpose to help inform institutional student success strategies under development in line with the System Performance Framework 2018-2020. Given the many nuances of success, this understanding serves as a common platform upon which the sector can continue to build its shared understanding and enhancement of student success.

Part Two: Enabling Success

Enabling student success means ensuring the iterative quality of every aspect of institutional life for all students. Key enablers of success that are essential for fostering and maintaining the engagement between students and their institutions that drives student success include:

Engagement and Student Partnership

Engagement and partnership are recognised throughout the literature as being fundamental conditions for student success. Engagement has been defined as "the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their

institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution' (Trowler & Trowler, 2011, p.3). The embedding of the ISSE and NStEP programmes into the national landscape demonstrates the recognition at system level of the criticality of meaningful engagement and partnership.

Driven in the classroom and curriculum and enabled through interpersonal connectedness, institutional cultures and meaningful partnerships, engagement has been positively linked with deepened learning, academic achievement and student persistence.

Assessment and Feedback

'Assessment is at the heart of teaching and learning. Assessment methods, content and strategies reflect many of the key features and values of a programme, and have a fundamental influence on student learning experiences' (National Forum, 2017, p. 3).

Assessment is pivotal for driving learning and keeping students and staff who teach aware of their progress, yet a reliance on high stakes, summative assessment persists as a major part of the higher education landscape (National Forum, 2017). Student success is best fostered in institutions and by staff who understand the difference between assessment of, for and as learning, and who can apply appropriate assessment techniques judiciously. Alignment of assessment at a programme level is also essential to minimise the risk of assessment overload. The centrality of assessment to the student experience is emphasised by the fact that it was identified, through sectoral consultation, as a national enhancement theme for Irish higher education for the period 2016-2018.

Professional Development and the Centrality of Teachers

Good teaching is fundamental to success. Effective teaching and learning should be underpinned by evidence-based and sound pedagogical practice such as that embedded within Ireland's National Professional Development Framework. The professional development of staff who teach is a key priority of institutions that maximise student success (Felten et al., 2016). Authentic engagement is most likely to be fully realised in institutions that recognise, in tangible terms, the scale of time and commitment required to engage in impactful practices such as understanding and embracing new pedagogies and developing engaging approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

Transitions and Cultivating Belonging

Supporting effective transitions is so central to student success that it was prioritised by the Irish sector as the National Forum's inaugural national enhancement theme.

Making the transition to, and through, the unfamiliar environment of higher education can be a significant challenge for students. Many struggle with feelings of not belonging, of being out of their depth or being overwhelmed. Such affective factors can have a detrimental effect on students' mental wellbeing and capacity to be successful.

