

# INDEX

IRISH NATIONAL DIGITAL EXPERIENCE SURVEY

IMPLEMENTING THE INDEX SURVEY:  
A CHALLENGING AND REWARDING JOURNEY

## **Implementing the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey: A Challenging and Rewarding Journey**

*"When we begin listening to each other, and when we talk about things that matter to us, the world begins to change."*

**Margaret Wheatley**



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## Introduction

In autumn 2019, the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey, coordinated by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum), was completed by 24,484 students and 4,445 staff who teach at 32 higher education institutions in Ireland<sup>1</sup>. The aim of the INDEX Survey was to explore the digital experiences of students and staff who teach, highlighting what makes a difference to them and providing an evidence base to inform future decision-making and enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The National Forum coordinated the INDEX Survey in close partnership with all participating institutions and student and staff stakeholders. The survey was a success, and indeed made possible, due to focused, national, collaborative efforts.

In this briefing paper, we describe the process of collaboration and partnership behind the INDEX Survey. The paper shares the story behind the results that were published in May 2020 in the INDEX Survey Findings report<sup>2</sup>. The paper is designed for anyone who is interested in the INDEX Survey process overall, particularly those who may be considering running a similar survey in their own country or education system.

## Why a digital experience survey?

Teaching and Learning in a Digital World is one of four strategic priority areas of the National Forum for 2019-21; within this priority area, a central aim is to “re-articulate a national vision for digital teaching and learning which is collaborative, responsive and adaptable to institutional contexts”<sup>3</sup>. The current focus on digital has its origins in previous National Forum work in this space. Since its establishment by the Minister for Education and Skills in 2013, the National Forum has coordinated a range of digital national events and supported large-scale inter-institutional collaborative projects and local seminars. In addition, it has worked in partnership with the sector to conduct national reviews of technological infrastructure, digital policy, learner data, open educational resources and more. A foundational example of this work was the National Forum Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World, developed in 2015 through sectoral consultation and collaboration<sup>4</sup>. The Roadmap identified key drivers for capacity building and action-orientated ways in which digital learning and innovation could be fostered across the sector. Implementation of the Roadmap recommendations has informed and shaped advances in engagement with digital in Irish higher education, creating a sense of shared purpose and strategic coherence across the sector<sup>5</sup>.

- 1 These 32 institutions represent approximately 96% of the higher education sector in Ireland, in terms of student population. The INDEX Survey was completed by students and staff who teach at all universities, all technological higher education institutions, all specialised colleges, and most private and other higher education institutions in Ireland.
- 2 National Forum (2020). Irish National Digital Experience Survey: Findings from Students and Staff Who Teach in Higher Education. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/irish-national-digital-experience-index-survey-findings-from-students-and-staff-who-teach-in-higher-education/>
- 3 The four strategic priority areas of the National Forum for 2019-21 are: Teaching and Learning in a Digital World, Professional Development of All Those Who Teach, Teaching and Learning Within and Across Disciplines, and Student Success. See National Forum Strategy 2019-21 <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/strategy-2019-2021-leading-enhancement-and-innovation-in-teaching-and-learning/>
- 4 National Forum (2015). Teaching and Learning in Irish Higher Education: A Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-2017. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/teaching-and-learning-in-irish-higher-education-a-roadmap-for-enhancement-in-a-digital-world-2015-2017/>
- 5 See <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/building-digital-capacity-in-irish-higher-education-2013-18-national-developments-and-key-perspectives/>

The knowledge and understandings emerging from the Roadmap and other related work have interacted with policy development in real time. Action Plans for Education and Higher Education System Performance Frameworks published by the Department of Education and Skills<sup>6</sup>, as well as related national funding calls<sup>7</sup>, have responded to the evidence gathered and outputs produced and have encouraged engagement with resulting frameworks and structures that leverage the potential of digital technology to optimise learning and development for each student. Significantly, the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-20 recommended that all Irish higher education institutions have in place policies for digital teaching and learning. In turn, in 2019 initiatives that focused specifically on digital were included in over 100 teaching and learning enhancement initiatives which received funding from the Irish government's €5.57m Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) Fund, with the National Forum fulfilling an overall coordination role<sup>8</sup>. Two further cross-sectoral projects focusing specifically on developing digital skills and competences were funded by the Higher Education Authority's 2018 Innovation and Transformation Fund<sup>9</sup>.

In early 2019, the National Forum recognised that the convergence of many of these priorities meant that the timing was right for a large-scale national survey of digital experience to provide an evidence base for ongoing work. Before re-articulating a national vision for digital teaching and learning, it would be important to gather evidence on how those who teach and learn in higher education are currently engaging with and experiencing digital.

### Building on national structures and relationships

The work of the National Forum is informed through collaboration with policy partners and stakeholders across the Irish higher education sector. In relation to the INDEX Survey specifically, the National Forum engaged with, partnered with, and sought feedback from its partners and stakeholders in many different ways over the lifetime of the project, e.g., to gain formal approval, to build consensus and momentum, to implement the survey, to engage students and staff. Each country's higher education sector has its own unique constellation of national bodies and organisations. The National Forum relied heavily on its own sectoral structures and relationships in order to obtain the national reach and coordination required to run the INDEX Survey (see Appendix 1 for a summary of these national structures).

6 See the Action Plan for Education 2016-19: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Department-of-Education-and-Skills-Strategy-Statement-2016-2019.pdf> and the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-20: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/higher-education-system-performance-framework-2018-2020.pdf>

7 See, for example, the 2018 Innovation and Transformation Fund: <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/innovation-call/> and the 2019 Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement Funding in Higher Education: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/funding/strategic-alignment-of-teaching-and-learning-enhancement-funding-in-higher-education-2019/>

8 See <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2020/01/21/107-teaching-and-learning-enhancement-initiatives-now-active-across-22-irish-higher-education-institutions/>

9 Irish Universities Association 'Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning' project (EDTL): <https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/learning-teaching/digital-learning/> and Connaught Ulster Alliance 'Innovative Opportunities Transforming Education' project (iNOTE): <https://digitaled.ie>

## Outline of this paper

This paper describes the process of implementing the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey. It is divided into four sections: survey aims and instruments; planning and preparation; launching and running the survey; and analysing the national data. All of the key steps described in the paper are illustrated in the timeline shown in Figure 1.

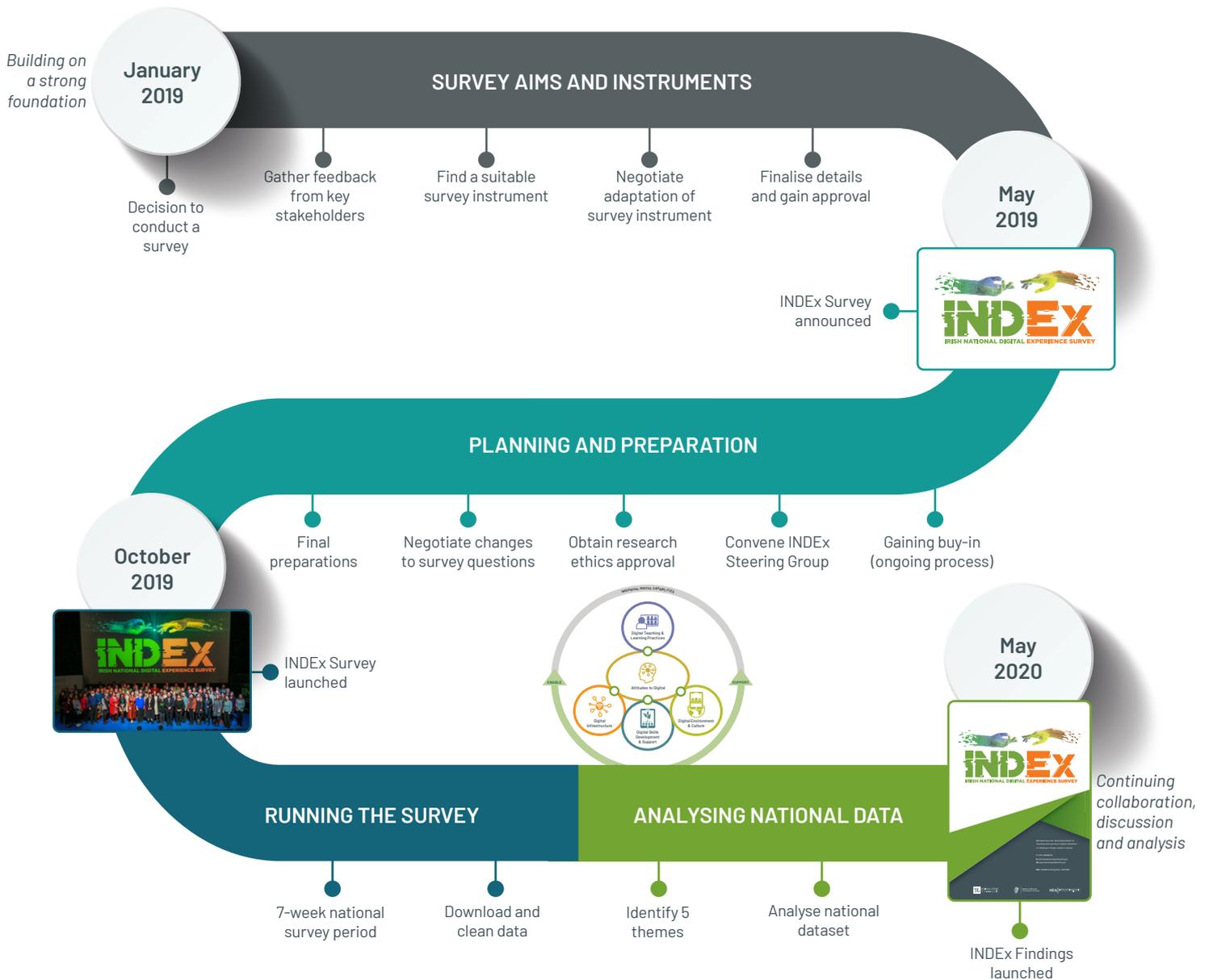


Figure 1. Timeline of INDEX Survey project

## Survey aims and instruments

At the start of 2019, the decision to conduct a digital experience survey focused initially on gathering evidence on how students engage with and experience digital in the context of teaching and learning. Very early on, the scope expanded to include both students and staff who teach. A survey of students and staff would provide the opportunity to build a coherent national understanding of the digital experience of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The aim was to conduct a survey specifically focused on people and their experiences of digital teaching and learning, rather than the use of specific digital tools and technologies. It was envisioned that such survey findings would support ongoing enhancement of digital teaching and learning, while also providing a foundation for the re-articulation of a national vision for digital in higher education. These intentions were captured in the tagline for the survey: “Let’s see where we are so we can build our future together”.

### Gathering feedback

With the kernel of the idea developing, the National Forum presented an outline proposal to run a national digital experience survey to various key stakeholders. The Digital Education Advisory Group and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI)<sup>10</sup> endorsed the proposal, affirming the value of gathering data to provide a basis for digital teaching and learning enhancement. The advisory group also provided practical feedback: noting the real effects of ‘survey fatigue’ within institutions, agreeing with the proposed timing (autumn 2019), and suggesting that forthcoming communications with institutions should highlight the potential for crossover with other institutional initiatives and the possibility for data triangulation and deeper understanding of digital issues. The National Forum also met with the team responsible for StudentSurvey.ie, to learn from their six years’ experience running Ireland’s national student engagement survey. The StudentSurvey.ie team highlighted the importance of local and regional coordination and, echoing the recommendations of the advisory group, emphasised careful consideration of the survey timing (i.e., ensuring that any national survey would support rather than conflict with existing institutional initiatives).

### Choosing a survey instrument

With a clearer idea of overall aims and how the survey would fit in the Irish higher education landscape, and the support of key stakeholders, the first major decision was whether to develop a new survey or use/adapt an existing survey. The latter was considered a preferable option, if a suitable survey could be identified, as it would enable the survey to be administered more quickly. The National Forum proceeded to explore existing student/staff digital experience surveys to determine whether any would meet the aims and be suitable for adaptation for the Irish higher education sector. Three possibilities were identified:

- EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) surveys. The ECAR Study on Undergraduate Students and IT explores students’ technology experiences and preferences; the ECAR Study on Faculty and IT explores how faculty use technology for teaching and research<sup>11</sup>. ECAR administers these surveys annually at higher education institutions in the US and several other countries<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 1 for further details about the Digital Education Advisory Group and the Union of Students in Ireland.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2018/10/2018-students-and-technology-research-study> and <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2017/10/ecar-study-of-faculty-and-information-technology-2017>

<sup>12</sup> At least one higher education institution in Ireland has run the ECAR student survey in recent years; see University College Dublin results for 2016: <https://www.ucd.ie/itservices/news/2017/title,357712,en.html>

- UCISA Digital Capabilities Survey. This survey explores how UK universities support staff and students to teach, learn and work in digital environments<sup>13</sup>.
- Jisc Digital Experience Insights (DEI) surveys. DEI surveys explore student and staff expectations and experiences of technology with respect to teaching and learning<sup>14</sup>. DEI surveys run annually at higher education institutions in the UK and have also run in Australia and New Zealand.

Upon initial review, the UCISA Digital Capabilities Survey was excluded from consideration as, rather than being completed by students and staff, it is designed to be completed by one individual at each institution on its behalf. Both the ECAR and DEI surveys comprised complementary student and staff surveys. While both surveys addressed diverse aspects of the use of digital technologies for teaching and learning, the ECAR surveys did not include certain aspects considered important for the Irish digital experience survey at this time, e.g., participants' experiences of data privacy, digital policies, online safety, health and wellbeing. The DEI surveys were found to meet the National Forum's overall aims most closely.

The Jisc DEI surveys are completed each year by about one-third of all higher education institutions in the UK; in addition, about one-third of all higher education institutions in Australia and New Zealand completed the DEI student survey in 2018. Using and adapting the DEI survey would thus provide the ability to benchmark findings from Irish higher education with similar findings from these three countries<sup>15</sup>. The ability to internationally benchmark Irish national findings was viewed as a significant advantage by many stakeholders in the sector, particularly senior managers, as was the fact that the DEI surveys had been piloted, optimised for accessibility and usability, and validated. The National Forum decided to proceed with negotiations with Jisc to determine whether the DEI surveys could be adapted to create a digital experience survey for Ireland. In order to facilitate decision-making, five key criteria were established in consultation. Each would need to be met if using and adapting the surveys:

- (i) the survey would be administered in autumn 2019, so as not to conflict with StudentSurvey.ie (conducted annually in the spring semester);
- (ii) each institution would have the option to add institution-specific questions (in addition to the core survey questions applying to all institutions nationally);
- (iii) the survey would have its own branding, making it identifiable as a digital experience survey for the Irish higher education sector;
- (iv) the core survey questions would be adaptable to suit the Irish higher education sector; and
- (v) the survey data would be co-owned and managed by each participating institution and the National Forum, rather than a third party, and fully meet GDPR requirements.

### Adapting the existing DEI survey for the Irish higher education sector

A team from the National Forum met with Jisc in April 2019. The National Forum presented its plan to run a national survey for the higher education sector in Ireland which it would coordinate in partnership with participating higher education institutions. Jisc's usual process for DEI surveys is to liaise with individual institutions and then to publish national-level findings. The proposed overall arrangements for the INDEX

13 See <https://www.ucisa.ac.uk/Groups/Digital-Capabilities-Group/DC-surveys#ucis-DEG>

14 See <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/digital-experience-insights>

15 All findings for these surveys are published openly by Jisc: <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/>

Survey were discussed and agreed, i.e., the National Forum as sole contact with Jisc for the duration of the project as well as author of the national report.

Further discussion led to an agreement on how each of the five key criteria would be met. The first three criteria were straightforward; the National Forum would choose its preferred survey timing, would add supplementary institution-specific questions if required, and would create unique branding for the survey. Detailed discussions followed about the two remaining criteria: changes to core survey questions and overall data ownership. A key question was how the DEI survey instruments could be adapted to meet the specific needs of the higher education sector in Ireland and yet retain the ability to internationally benchmark the findings. The National Forum anticipated that changes would be necessary due to differences in national terminology (e.g., course types, categories of disciplines, names of job roles), but predicted that other changes were also likely to arise. After consulting with all participating Irish institutions, it was agreed that the National Forum would summarise proposed amendments to core survey questions and the DEI team would categorise each proposed change as either affecting or not affecting the ability to benchmark that question. With this information, the National Forum could work with stakeholders to decide which changes to finally implement. This agreement proved critically important as negotiations over the core questions proceeded over the coming months.

### GDPR compliance and data ownership

Detailed discussions were held about data ownership and data management. The National Forum required that survey data be co-owned and managed by each participating institution and the National Forum, rather than a third party. This discussion was complicated by the impending exit of the UK from the European Union. However, with the DEI data server located in the EU (in Dublin, Ireland), there was no issue of data crossing borders. The National Forum would retain full ownership of the survey data, data analysis and all reporting.

It was essential that the INDEx Survey be fully GDPR compliant, ensuring data protection through survey design, even though the survey would be completed anonymously. Together, the original DEI survey design and all INDEx survey question adaptations would ensure that this requirement be met in three distinct ways. Firstly, survey questions that asked for personally descriptive information used generalisation<sup>16</sup> techniques to make it very unlikely that respondents could be identified (e.g., asking for general discipline area rather than discipline name, asking for age range rather than specific age, asking for staff role category rather than job title). Secondly, using *risk minimisation*, the survey limited the number of questions in which respondents could enter open data, and introductory statements on the INDEx surveys would specifically ask respondents not to disclose personal information in their open-field responses. Finally, using *anonymisation*<sup>17</sup>, upon the close of the survey period, any personal data that may have been entered into the surveys would be permanently deleted, irreversibly preventing identification of the individual to whom it related. In addition, no individuals or individual institutions would be mentioned in publications of findings by the National Forum, nor any characteristics that could reasonably lead to their identification.

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16 Generalisation is defined as “reducing the granularity of data, so that only less precise data is disclosed [making it] less likely that individuals can be singled out, as more people are likely to share the same values” (Data Protection Commission, 2019, Guidance Note: Guidance on Anonymisation and Pseudonymisation, p. 12) <https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/guidance-landing/anonymisation-and-pseudonymisation>

17 Anonymisation means processing data “with the aim of irreversibly preventing the identification of the individual to whom it relates... data which has been irreversibly anonymised ceases to be ‘personal data’” (Data Protection Commission, 2019, Guidance Note: Guidance on Anonymisation and Pseudonymisation, pp. 2-3) <https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/guidance-landing/anonymisation-and-pseudonymisation>

## INDEX Survey approved

With confirmation of all the key criteria, the National Forum presented a formal proposal to its Board to run a one-time digital experience survey in autumn 2019 for students and staff who teach in Irish higher education, with core survey questions to be adapted from the existing DEI surveys. In May 2019 the proposal was approved<sup>18</sup>. The survey was branded as the Irish National Digital Experience Survey, to be known as the INDEX Survey.

## Planning and preparation

The INDEX Survey team at the National Forum comprised the project lead, communications manager, technologist, and research assistant, all working in close collaboration with the National Forum Director and executive team. Each of these roles was vital, as it was clear from the start that detailed planning and preparation would be essential to the INDEX Survey's success. The planning and preparation stage of the project spanned six months, from initial meetings and conversations to full-time efforts in the final weeks before the survey launch. Important activities included gaining buy-in from the sector, obtaining research ethics approval, convening a national steering group and working with them to finalise survey questions and prepare for the survey rollout, and communicating regularly and actively with students and staff across the sector.

### Gaining buy-in from the sector

With the decision made to run the INDEX Survey, efforts turned immediately to building on the initial interest and commitment, to gaining buy-in across the sector. The National Forum engaged in discussions with the main representative bodies, i.e., Irish Universities Association (IUA), Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA), Union of Students in Ireland (USI), as well as senior management from each institution and communications and press offices. In each case, members of the INDEX Survey team at the National Forum met with key stakeholder groups to describe the aims of the survey and the potential benefits for students, staff and the sector, as well as to engage in discussion and answer questions.

Undertaking these early communications was essential, as they provided opportunities for key individuals and groups to engage with the project at an early stage and to have their questions and concerns addressed. These discussions fed into the overall organisation and framing of the project in subsequent communications. For example, the fact that the survey would be a one-time rather than an annual survey was important in gaining buy-in. The need for a short survey period (in order to maximise attention and resources nationally) was balanced with individual institutions' needs to select their own survey periods, based on their particular priorities, initiatives and term calendars. Thus, it was decided that the national survey period would be seven weeks in autumn 2019 (so as not to conflict with StudentSurvey.ie), with each institution choosing their own three-week survey window within this.

A short FAQ document was prepared and continually updated. This served an important role in communications with stakeholders and participants from the time the survey was agreed to the final preparation stage when the INDEX website was launched. The FAQ document included: the strategic rationale of the INDEX Survey; intended student and staff participants; the fact that INDEX would be a

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<sup>18</sup> The contract included the proviso that it could be decided to run the survey again at some time in the future, but not in 2020-21.

one-time rather than annual survey; survey timing, including the ability for institutions to select their own survey window; and the role and responsibilities of participating institutions and the National Forum. The FAQ document also included operational details such as: how the survey would be administered; the ability for institutions to add institution-specific questions; data ownership and management; research ethics approval; how the INDEx Survey related to StudentSurvey.ie; and a list of participating institutions.

Overall, plans to run the INDEx Survey received a positive response. The Chair of the National Forum Board wrote to the registrar at each higher education institution in Ireland outlining the aims and details of the survey, including the detailed FAQ document, and noting the aspirations of the work: “We believe that the INDEx Survey will provide evidence upon which strategic and investment decisions about digital interventions can be based and will provide an international benchmark for Irish higher education.” The Chair highlighted the partnership aspects of the project, inviting each institution to participate – and if so, to nominate an ‘institution lead’ to sit on the INDEx Steering Group. Several institutions agreed to participate right away. The National Forum reached out to institutions who did not reply to specifically invite their participation. This initial round resulted in 24 positive responses from institutions to participate in the survey, comprising a majority of higher education institutions in Ireland.

### The INDEx Steering Group

A key decision in the project was to convene an INDEx Survey Steering Group to act as the central planning and decision-making body. Members of the INDEx Steering Group included institution leads from each of the participating institutions and key members of student and staff representative groups<sup>19</sup>. With the endorsement of their senior management, each institution lead serving on the INDEx Steering Group had the authority to make decisions on behalf of their institution. Steering group members not only represented their institutions/groups, they also brought institutional, national and in some cases international expertise in the area of digital education; this meant that the Steering Group brought significant experience, substantial practice wisdom and particular insightfulness to the INDEx project.

The first meeting of the INDEx Steering Group was held in June 2019. Before the meeting, institution leads were asked to review the existing DEI student and staff surveys, and to bring their ideas as to how these survey instruments could be adapted for the Irish higher education sector. At the meeting, the INDEx project lead and the National Forum Director outlined the aims of the survey, building on familiarity with StudentSurvey.ie. The focus was on the timing of the survey (including selecting the most appropriate three-week window within the national seven-week survey period), the agency of individual institutions in adding supplementary questions to suit their needs, and the obtaining of institutional data in real-time, both during and immediately after the survey period. The meeting also provided ample opportunity to discuss and define the role the National Forum would play and the role of each institution (and institution lead). The following overall parameters of the INDEx Survey project were agreed at the first Steering Group meeting:

- The Irish National Digital Experience Survey (INDEx) to run between mid-October and end of November 2019; each participating institution to choose their own three-week window within this period to run the survey
- The INDEx Survey to comprise two separate and complementary survey instruments, one for students and one for staff who teach; all student and staff respondents to be invited to complete the survey anonymously

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19 Union of Students in Ireland (USI), National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), and IUA Enhancement of Digital Teaching and Learning project

- In addition to core survey questions for all participating institutions, each institution to have the option of adding up to four supplementary questions to each survey
- The data collected in the INDEx Survey to be jointly owned by each participating institution and the National Forum; the National Forum would hold all institutional data in confidence and would not report findings for individual institutions but only for institution types and for the sector as a whole

The specific role of the National Forum in the INDEx Survey project was discussed and agreed; the National Forum would:

- Provide national coordination of the INDEx Survey, liaising with all participating institutions (via one institution lead), student organisations and other stakeholders
- Cover the costs of developing and coordinating the survey at a national level
- Work to obtain national ethics approval for the INDEx Survey; draft of the ethics application to be shared with the INDEx Steering Group
- Create and coordinate a national communications campaign to promote and support engagement by both students and staff who teach
- Make survey data available to institutions in real time and immediately following the close of the survey
- Conduct national-level analysis of INDEx Survey data for both students and staff who teach (based on core survey questions only, not on any supplementary questions which might be added by institutions) making this available openly and to all institutions in a timely manner

Finally, responsibilities of each institution lead (one per institution) were discussed. Each institution lead would:

- Convene an institutional working group with broad representation, seeking to align the INDEx Survey with existing institutional initiatives and strategies
- Cover any costs of coordinating the survey at the institution level
- Prepare for the process of obtaining institutional ethics approval, where required, to cover local data ownership/management and any supplementary survey questions
- Coordinate an institutional campaign to engage students and staff who teach
- Liaise with the National Forum (including national steering group meetings)
- Analyse, report and communicate institutional findings

The first INDEx Steering Group meeting concluded with great enthusiasm for the project and the agreement that the National Forum would draw up a contractual agreement with each institution outlining the deliverables and responsibilities of all parties.

## Obtaining research ethics approval

At the end of June, an application for ethics approval of the INDEx Survey was submitted to the National Forum Research Ethics Committee. The initial application included the aims of the INDEx Survey, the survey instruments, the proposed research methodology, data collection and analysis, identification and selection of research participants, gaining informed consent, data protection arrangements, publication of findings, and communication with participants.

The target groups for the INDEx survey were students and staff who teach. For the purposes of the INDEx Survey, 'students' were defined as all enrolled in taught programmes of study in Irish higher education, both undergraduate and postgraduate, who are above the age of 18<sup>20</sup>. 'Staff who teach' were defined as all who teach students and staff directly, but also all who support teaching and learning, e.g., lecturers, tutors, librarians, educational developers, learning technologists, instructional designers, deans, etc.

Data storage protocols were designed to be in accordance with British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) and the Irish Data Protection Act (2018)<sup>21</sup>. While the survey was live, data would be stored on the DEI server (located in Dublin). This server is managed in conformance with the requirements of ISO 27001 and all survey responses would be transmitted securely. Data was backed up daily and backups held for three months after which they were deleted and destroyed.

The National Forum received ethics approval for the INDEx Survey in late July 2019 and liaised closely with institutions to support them in their applications for institutional ethics approval, where required.

## The heart of the project: communication and collaboration

The INDEx Survey was launched in early October 2019. The two months immediately preceding the launch were a critical period of collaboration, coordination, planning and preparation. During this period, several new institutions came on board, bringing the total number of participating institutions to 32, representing approximately 96% of the higher education sector in Ireland in terms of student population<sup>22</sup>. Additional institutions had to be introduced to the detail of the survey process and project requirements, which entailed a great deal of communications work in the final weeks before the survey launch. In addition, as institutions became increasingly engaged in survey planning, many issues arose, the most significant of which are noted here.

## Negotiating changes to survey questions

The key task for the INDEx Steering Group and National Forum team at this stage was agreement on the core questions for both survey instruments: INDEx Student Survey and INDEx Survey of Staff Who Teach. This was possibly the most challenging task during the planning phase. The tension to be managed was adapting the survey questions to fit the needs of the Irish higher education sector while maintaining the ability to benchmark INDEx survey findings with DEI survey findings from the UK, Australia and

20 The minimum age limit of 18 was determined because, according to research ethics guidelines, students under age 18 are considered to be a vulnerable group. While including this group would have been preferable, the timeframe did not allow for the added complexity of gaining consent from parents/guardians. A filtering question at the start of the INDEx Student Survey asked students to enter their age as '18 or older' or 'under 18'. Respondents who replied that they were under 18 were prevented from completing the survey, with a message explaining the reason for the age limit.

21 See British Educational Research Association. (2018). Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, 4th edition. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018> and Irish Data Protection Act 2018 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/7/enacted/en/print.html>

22 This final number of participating institutions included all universities, all technological higher education institutions, all specialised colleges, and most private and other higher education institutions in Ireland.

New Zealand. The institutions participating in the INDEx Survey ranged widely by size (28,000 to 200 students) and type (universities, technological higher education institutions, specialised colleges and private colleges). Every aspect of the existing DEI surveys was discussed and debated: terminology; use of language; use of specific scales for responses; etc. In these discussions, each institution lead represented the needs and aims of their own institution and institutional communities, but also recognised the importance of achieving national consensus.

The process of institution leads suggesting changes to the wording of core survey questions, review of all changes by the INDEx Steering Group, and assessment of the benchmarking impact of such changes (by the DEI team) took a great deal of time and negotiation. Some changes were easy to agree. For example, it was mutually agreed that the INDEx Student Survey would include questions allowing respondents to specify their discipline area using ISCED codes (as in StudentSurvey.ie) and to specify whether they were studying full-time/part-time and online/on-campus/blended. As the INDEx Survey of Staff Who Teach was designed to be completed by all who teach and all who support teaching and learning, this survey would include a question allowing respondents to specify the category of their job role, e.g., academic, professional services, etc. Other changes were more challenging to resolve. These included the question on gender and engagement with trade union representatives.

- One objective of the INDEx Survey was to gather data about gender so that this could be included as a category of analysis. The DEI survey included a question on the student and staff surveys asking respondents to specify their gender: response options were Male/Female/Other. Equivalent response options for the gender question in the annual student engagement survey in Ireland were Male/Female<sup>23</sup>. Some institution leads and members of the INDEx Survey team suggested that additional response options should be included. A review of similar questions in other higher education surveys (undertaken in July 2019) showed a variety of options, e.g., ECAR Student Survey (Male/Female/Other/Prefer not to answer); UK Engagement Survey (Male/Female/Other/Prefer not to answer); Athena SWAN Survey (Female/Male/Non-binary/Other, with a follow-on question regarding sex assignment at birth). Different surveys also worded the question differently, e.g., 'what is your gender?', 'how do you identify?'. In order to retain the ability to benchmark student/staff INDEx Survey findings with the equivalent international DEI findings, it was collectively decided to leave the question and the response options unchanged as 'Male/Female/Other'.
- The planning for the INDEx Survey, nationally and within each institution, entailed a great deal of collaboration and negotiation. Institution leads were asked to ensure diverse representation on their institutional working groups, e.g., student representatives, staff responsible for various functions (digital environment, technology enhanced learning, human resources, student experience, etc.), academic staff representatives, library staff representatives, student services staff, and trade union representatives. Some members of the INDEx Steering Group suggested that trade union representatives could be approached on a national level also. This was discussed within the Steering Group and within the National Forum. Ultimately, due to the diversity of relationships and range of unions across the 32 participating institutions, it was agreed that best practice would be for institutions to do this locally, building on existing relationships and structures.

<sup>23</sup> The response options for the gender question in StudentSurvey.ie 2018 were Male/Female; in StudentSurvey.ie 2019 the response options were changed to Male/Female/Undeclared. See <https://studentsurvey.ie/> for more information.

The INDEx project lead and National Forum director worked closely with the INDEx Steering Group to finalise the wording of the core questions on both surveys, with the overall goal of preserving international benchmarking wherever possible. At the second Steering Group meeting, five weeks before the INDEx Survey launch, a consensus was achieved and the final set of survey questions agreed by the entire group. A research ethics addendum noting any minor final edits to the survey was then approved by the Chair of the National Forum Research Ethics Committee prior to the launch date.

### Supplementary survey questions

Each institution had the option of adding up to four supplementary questions to each survey. In order to encourage discussion and collaboration regarding these questions, the National Forum created a secure online space on our website enabling institutions to share drafts of their supplementary questions. This process was in place for approximately three weeks, after which all institutions submitted the final version of their supplementary questions. In the case of the seven universities, already collaborating as part of the Irish Universities Association 'Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning' project, all seven agreed to share one common supplementary question on each of the student and staff surveys.

### INDEx Survey communications

The National Forum INDEx team and INDEx Steering Group worked closely together to create national awareness of the survey in order to support engagement. An outside designer was contracted to design the INDEx logo (see Figure 2) and promotional materials, illustrating the focus on people rather than technology, and including the main aim and tagline of the survey: "Let's see where we are so we can build our future together".



Figure 2. INDEx logo

The INDEx communications manager led a range of activities related to publicity and communications: communicating with 32 institutional press offices; sending draft institutional press releases; ordering promotional materials for each institution; planning the launch event; inviting participants from across the higher education sector; liaising with invited speakers (including a government minister); and writing and sending national press releases about the upcoming launch. In addition, time was set aside before and after the second Steering Group meeting so that institution leads could record short promotional videos for use within their institutions and on social media to encourage engagement.

The National Forum technologist designed and developed the INDEx Survey website ([www.teachingandlearning.ie/index](http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/index)) and set up a Twitter account (@INDExSurvey), both of which were used for sharing information before the survey launch, encouraging engagement during the survey, and sharing results after the survey. The website contained a 'Resources & Media' page with a range of awareness-

raising information including short videos, FAQs, and a complete media pack for institutions with logos, posters and inserts for stands. The National Forum also purchased and sent a full set of promotion packs to each institution to help in their institutional campaigns, containing INDEx sweatshirts, INDEx pens, and a range of INDEx flyers.

### Final preparations

In the final weeks, the National Forum prepared templates for each institution of (i) participant information sheets for each survey, and (ii) invitation emails for the registrar to send to all eligible students and staff who teach, inviting them to participate in the INDEx Survey. In addition, support information was sent to institution leads about maximising engagement with the student and staff surveys. Test versions of each survey (containing institutional logos) were created and sent to each institution lead for review. After review and final edits, the agreed version of each survey was created, with bit.ly links to tailor the surveys for each institution. These two steps took place for 68 different surveys (34 campuses across 32 institutions, 2 surveys each).

## Launching and running the survey

### Launching the INDEx Survey

The launch of the INDEx Survey took place on 14 October 2019. Student and staff representatives from all participating higher education institutions, as well as representatives of the Department of Education and Skills, the Higher Education Authority, the Union of Students in Ireland, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, the Higher Education Colleges Association, the Technological Higher Education Association and the Irish Universities Association attended the launch. The Minister of State for Higher Education officially launched the survey, noting that “all those who share their digital experience by contributing to the INDEx Survey will help to shape the future.” With 32 participating higher education institutions (nearly every HEI in Ireland), the survey would be available to over 230,000 students and more than 24,000 staff who teach.



Figure 3. INDEx launch event (14 October 2019)

The launch included a journey through the decades of technology in higher education, with students from the 1960s, 70s, 80s, 90s, 2000s and 2010s sharing their experiences of the latest technologies when they were in college. Students, staff, senior managers and representatives from around Ireland who were in attendance at the launch explained why the INDEx Survey was important. Their inputs were complemented by a series of videos which captured and conveyed the voices of staff and students from across the sector. The Director of the National Forum noted the remarkable response from institutions to the invitation to take part in the survey, reflecting the strong commitment of higher education leaders to enhancing the digital experiences of their staff and students. She highlighted that “digital is a key medium of teaching and learning and, thanks to the INDEx Survey, Ireland will soon be better positioned to nurture the potential of its current and future students and to assist those who teach them.”<sup>24</sup>

### Running the INDEx Survey

On 14 October, the national launch day, the first group of institutions launched the survey at their institutions. Over the course of the next five weeks, all institutions launched the survey, with each institution running the survey for exactly three weeks.

Engagement and communications activities within each institution were instrumental in the success of the project. Institution leads and press offices, together with many staff and students made concerted efforts to boost engagement with the survey in their institutions. The National Forum supported these activities with promotion packs and a suite of digital materials made available via the INDEx website for use by institutions.

Engagement with students and student organisations was critical during the survey period. The USI Vice President for Academic Affairs worked closely with the National Forum to identify how the USI could take a lead role in gaining the support of individual Students’ Unions and working with students across all participating institution. As the INDEx Survey had not been part of the planned USI motions (at the annual USI Congress) for the academic year, there was no funding in place to support this work. Working with their unions, as well as unaffiliated student groups, the USI identified what unions needed in order to lead local, student-led campaigns during the survey period. The National Forum provided some funding to enable the USI to lead on student promotion nationally and at each institution.

In addition, the National Forum’s two Student Associate Interns<sup>25</sup> worked with local Students’ Unions and student organisations to support engagement activities, travelling to many institutions to engage with students and staff directly. Student Associate Interns also created their own targeted student communications, designing social media posts, stories, videos and animations in efforts to boost engagement. Students’ Unions and other student organisations at each participating institution were instrumental in helping to achieve high response rates for the student survey.

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24 See <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2019/10/14/national-launch-of-irish-national-digital-experience-index-survey/>

25 Since 2018, the National Forum’s Student Associate Intern initiative has offered students from across the sector an opportunity to spend a period of time working within the National Forum to help enhance and develop its partnership approach, ensuring that students continue to play a central role in shaping the future landscape of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. For further information, see: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2019/09/09/new-student-associate-interns-join-the-national-forum/>

## Providing data in real time

As noted earlier, the National Forum had committed to providing survey data in real time to institutions. The INDEx postdoctoral research assistant played a pivotal role during the seven-week national survey period, setting up a system of regular communications and data updates with participating institutions. Three times per week, during the live three-week survey period at each institution, institution leads received updates on the number of survey responses to both surveys. At the end of the first and second weeks, they were sent a detailed report of survey returns, including demographic data. Institutions with low response rates were contacted by the INDEx project lead to see if further support would be helpful in improving engagement. Overall, hands-on, data-enabled project management and regular communication with all institutions over the course of the seven-week national survey period, as well as commitment within and across each institution, helped to ensure that the survey response rate was as high as possible.

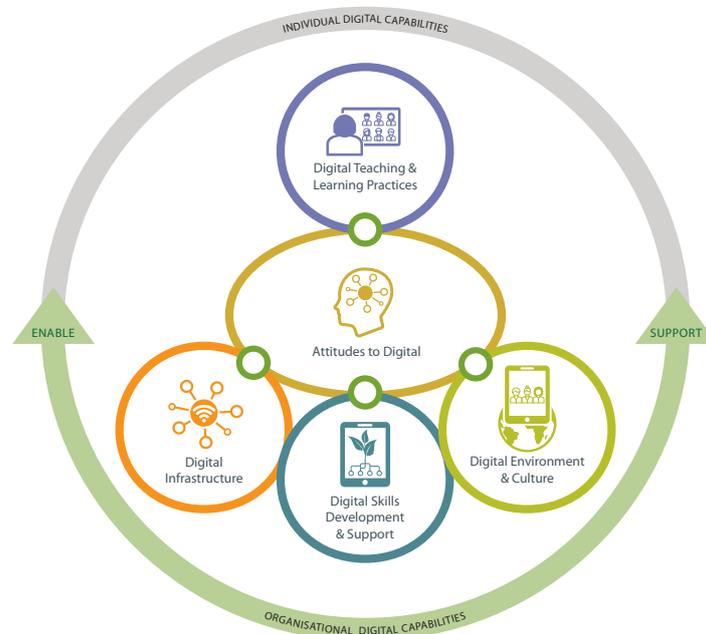
Upon the close of the INDEx Survey period on 1 December, the national dataset was downloaded securely by the National Forum: 25,484 responses from students and 4,445 responses from staff who teach (representing 11% and 25% response rates, respectively). The INDEx research assistant sent institutional datasets to each institution lead along with a template on which they could identify the data records to be cleaned. After completing cleaning of the national dataset, the National Forum sent each institution lead a set of templates for analysing their data, including Excel spreadsheet templates, SPSS templates and PowerPoint presentation templates. From late December 2019, each institution had their own institutional datasets to use as a basis for analysis, discussion and decision-making.

## Analysing the national data

### Initial analysis

The national analysis phase of the INDEx Survey project began in January 2020. The National Forum committed to publishing and launching an initial report of INDEx Survey findings in early May 2020 to include a summary of the national findings as well as international benchmarking, enabling institutions to benchmark their own data. The goal was to release the national dataset within the same academic year in which the survey had been completed, while it still had currency, acknowledging that more in-depth analysis would be completed on a phased basis after the main report was published. During all stages of analysis of the national dataset, the National Forum liaised closely with the INDEx Steering Group, the Digital Education Advisory Group and other partners.

The interrogation of the substantial INDEx dataset resulted in the identification of five themes which offer specific lenses through which to view and understand the data collected: digital teaching and learning practices; digital infrastructure; digital skills development and support; digital environment and culture; and attitudes to digital. This thematic framework was used for analysing and presenting the survey results, enabling student and staff results to be considered both individually and together (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Five themes of INDEx Survey findings**

Initial overall results were shared with the National Forum Board to invite their questions and feedback. As analysis proceeded, specific feedback was also invited from other key partners. Institution leads were asked to share their top five findings from each survey, based on their institutional datasets. All members of the INDEx Steering Group, staff and students, were invited to provide feedback on what would be most useful to them, in terms of analysis of national results. The Digital Education Advisory Group was asked to provide feedback on early drafts of the thematic framework, and later the overall conclusions of the findings report. Substantive feedback from each of these groups helped to shape the analysis and the overall findings report, which was completed and published in May 2020<sup>26</sup>.

On 12 March 2020, in the middle of the period of analysis of the INDEx data, all higher education institutions were closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teaching and learning and lives were disrupted across Ireland, as they were globally. In this context, INDEx survey findings were seen to represent a unique and timely pre-pandemic record of the digital engagement, experiences and expectations of those who teach and learn in higher education nationally and an important benchmark for the sector nationally and internationally. The *Irish National Digital Experience Survey: Findings from Students and Staff Who Teach in Higher Education* report (full and summary versions) was published and launched on 7 May 2020<sup>27</sup>. Students and staff from across Irish higher education participated in the online launch event which was viewed widely in Ireland and internationally<sup>28</sup>.

26 National Forum (2020). *Irish National Digital Experience Survey: Findings from Students and Staff Who Teach in Higher Education*. <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/irish-national-digital-experience-index-survey-findings-from-students-and-staff-who-teach-in-higher-education/>

27 See <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/index/>

28 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=VCFTiIEHVbw&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=VCFTiIEHVbw&feature=emb_logo)

By June 2020, institutional and national results had been shared with students and staff at all participating institutions. All institutions had either completed a mapping of institutional data to national and international benchmarks or planned to do so, enabling identification of institutional strengths and weaknesses.

Feedback from institutions attests to the fact that INDEx findings provided much-needed and timely information allowing institutions to assist students, particularly in response to the pandemic. Overall, INDEx findings created a greater awareness of the baseline student and staff experiences of digital teaching and learning prior to the emergency move to online/remote teaching and learning. Feedback from INDEx Steering Group members in June 2020 provided a good indication of the reach and specific impact of the INDEx data and findings across institutions:

- Many institutions planned to publish their own INDEx reports and infographics, as well as to conduct additional qualitative and quantitative analyses of findings.
- Actions some institutions reported taking in response to INDEx findings include: conducting student focus groups to delve deeper into the data; communicating with all students regarding opportunities to influence decision-making related to digital learning approaches; enhancing communication with students regarding data privacy policies; altering some questions on end-of-module surveys to understand better which digital resources students found helpful; and enhancing staff induction processes.
- INDEx findings also have proven useful within institutions with respect to future planning. Some institutions noted that INDEx findings have been helpful in informing digital strategies and staff development initiatives and supports, as well as policy, curriculum and other preparations for the upcoming academic year.

These findings, together with lessons learned through the experience of teaching and learning at a distance<sup>29</sup>, provide a rich base from which to plan for the future. The National Forum is continuing to analyse, share and consult with partners and stakeholders across the sector regarding the INDEx findings. A series of infographics has been produced, providing visual summaries of findings to facilitate ongoing discussion<sup>30</sup>. Further analysis of student and staff qualitative data was completed in September 2020. Plans for autumn 2020 include two webinars, one exploring findings in relation to student data privacy and data protection, and one summarising the contents of this briefing paper on the overall INDEx survey project. News of INDEx events, reports, papers and further analysis is continually updated on the INDEx website ([www.teachingandlearning.ie/index](http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/index)).

29 National Forum (2020). Reflecting and learning: The move to remote/online teaching and learning in Irish higher education: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/reflecting-and-learning-the-move-to-remote-online-teaching-and-learning-in-irish-higher-education/>

30 See <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/index/resources-media/>

## Conclusions and key learnings

Four months on from the launch of the national INDEx report, the consensus has been that the INDEx findings are already supporting data-informed decision-making, providing a crucial source of evidence for the response to the current crisis, and establishing an important baseline for pre-COVID teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The INDEx findings mean that national-level developments can be well informed so that Ireland continues to lead in digital teaching and learning within the European higher education context. They can also be used to underpin cross-sectoral innovation projects such as the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project currently ongoing across Irish universities and the Innovative Opportunities Transforming Education (iNOTE) project being undertaken across institutions in the Connaught Ulster Alliance. At institutional level, collaborative interrogation of the findings and consideration of their meaning will continue to ensure that future policy and practice decisions at individual/departmental/institutional levels that impact on teaching approaches and student learning experiences are grounded in what is known to be true. To build a future together, we must first know where we are.

## Ten Things We Learned

### Five important foundations:

- Common goal: All project partners –the National Forum, participating institutions and key stakeholder groups– shared an understanding of the value of conducting a national digital experience survey for students and staff who teach; this helped immensely in sharing the considerable effort and collaboration required to complete this goal.
- Student-staff partnership: Genuine partnership between staff and students was integral to the project’s success, from the first seeds of the idea to interpreting the findings, and at each stage along the way.
- Trust and respect: A core value of the project was to build and maintain relationships of trust and respect with all project partners.
- Communication: Clear and regular communication with project partners (both proactive and responsive) was the most important characteristic of the project throughout its lifetime.
- Building on a foundation: Although the INDEx Survey project began in January 2019, it was built on a strong foundation of expertise and experience on the part of all individuals involved, as well as relationships, structures, shared values and commitments that the National Forum and the sector have developed over the previous seven years.

### Five things we learned by leading and coordinating the INDEx Survey project:

- Adapting an existing, validated survey: While adapting an existing survey instrument had its challenges, we saved a great deal of time and effort by doing this; it would have been impossible to complete the project within such a tight timeframe otherwise.
- Gaining buy-in early: Spending time in the early days of the project gaining buy-in, including building a vision of mutual success, was vital; it ensured that many institutions got on board early and this momentum helped encourage other institutions to join as the project progressed.
- Allowing the survey to be contextually nuanced: Enabling individual institutions to add institution-specific questions to the survey was important in gaining buy-in, particularly as the survey required institutional commitment and resources.
- Work to plan; work beyond the plan: In a national campaign, no matter how much early planning and communication is done, new partners will find out about the project and want to join right up until the launch date. This must be seen as a plus. It means that the value of the project is understood and the reach is widening. We found it important to set boundaries and deadlines, but also to build in capacity so that newcomers could be welcomed and brought onstream as quickly as possible.
- Expect challenges: Despite all the detailed planning, we encountered various challenges during the project. Reaching consensus in a national project is never straightforward. Busy individuals sometimes could not meet set deadlines, negotiations within institutions sometimes took longer than expected, and despite the overall agreement on our goal, differences of opinion arose from time to time. However, the willingness of the participants to collaborate, to work towards the larger national goal and negotiate for consensus, ensured that the project succeeded.

## Appendix 1.

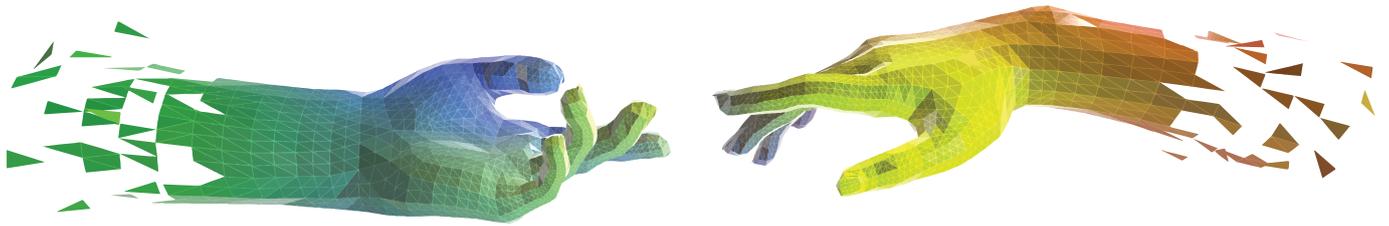
### Summary of pre-existing national structures that underpinned the INDEx Survey

Organisation/body	Overall function	INDEx Survey role
National Forum Board	The National Forum is overseen by an academically led Board comprising fifteen members, one of whom is a non-executive chair. The Board includes representatives from the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Irish Universities Association (IUA), Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA), Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Department of Education and Skills (DES).	Provided strategic oversight for the INDEx Survey; provided approval at two key stages, one year apart: choosing to run the survey and publishing the main findings report
National Forum Associates	Each higher education institution working with the National Forum nominates up to two members of staff (typically middle/senior manager and teaching and learning lead) as a National Forum Associate. Associates provide crucial institutional perspectives to the National Forum to inform strategic developments and ensure that National Forum initiatives serve to inform policy and practice at a local level.	Ensured direct linkages to each institution; built consensus from institutional perspectives
Union of Students in Ireland (USI)	The USI is the national representative body for third-level students' unions on the island of Ireland. The National Forum works in close partnership with the USI across all of its strategic activities, programmes and initiatives.	Partner at all stages: contributed to initial design of the project; engaged in vital communications and outreach; partnered in sharing and interpreting national findings

Organisation/body	Overall function	INDEX Survey role
National Forum Student Associate Interns	As part of the National Forum team, Student Associate Interns help to ensure that students play a central role in shaping the landscape of teaching and learning in Irish higher education, consulting with students and championing initiatives that support teaching and learning enhancement from a student perspective.	Ensured student focus for INDEX communications; designed and developed specific student-focused communications; engaged with students across institutions nationally
Digital Education Advisory Group	The Digital Education Advisory Group was one of four advisory groups set up by the National Forum in early 2019 (one for each of our four strategic priority areas) in order to advise, guide and support the National Forum's work in these critical areas <sup>31</sup> . Advisory Group members consult with the National Forum not strictly from their institutional perspectives, but as experts in their respective areas.	Reviewed INDEX Survey plans; provided feedback, advice and support at each key stage of the project
National Forum Research Ethics Committee	This sub-committee of the Board is part of the overall governance structure of the National Forum. The ethics committee is responsible for developing ethics processes in line with international good practice and for developing, implementing and enhancing ethics arrangements for all research conducted in the name of the National Forum.	Reviewed and approved the project (research methodology, survey instruments, and plans for engaging participants, administering the survey, data protection, data analysis and communications)

31 During 2019, the four strategic priority areas (and Advisory Groups) were: Teaching and Learning in a Digital World, Professional Development of All Those Who Teach, Teaching and Learning Within and Across Disciplines, and Student Success. See National Forum Strategy 2019-21 <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/strategy-2019-2021-leading-enhancement-and-innovation-in-teaching-and-learning/>

Organisation/body	Overall function	INDEx Survey role
National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)	<p>NStEP seeks to champion a strong culture of partnership between students and staff in Irish higher education through practice-based projects, training and capacity building, and informing policy developments. The National Forum works closely with NStEP on numerous projects and initiatives.</p>	<p>Provided consultation and feedback; represented on INDEx Steering Group</p>
StudentSurvey.ie	<p>StudentSurvey.ie is the national student engagement survey for first year and final year students in Irish higher education. The survey, run annually since 2013, focuses on student engagement, i.e., time and effort that students put into meaningful and purposeful educational activities, and the extent to which institutions provide such opportunities and encourage students to engage with them. Beginning in 2019, StudentSurvey.ie also includes postgraduate students.</p>	<p>Shared their experience of running a national survey</p>



# INDEX

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