THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ALL THOSE WHO TEACH

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

TEACHING AND LEARNING ENHANCEMENT WITHIN AND ACROSS DISCIPLINES

STUDENT SUCCESS

REFLECTING AND LEARNING:
THE MOVE TO REMOTE/ONLINE TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION
Reflecting and Learning: The move to remote/online teaching and learning in Irish higher education

Following the closure of higher education institutions across Ireland on 12 March 2020, the entire higher education community mobilised at speed to ensure student learning could continue through online/remote teaching and assessment approaches. With a view to capturing what had been learned from this extraordinary semester, the National Forum reached out to key contacts across the sector. This briefing paper summarises the insights they shared and considers what their insights mean for the enhancement of teaching and learning in the near and longer-term future.
Introduction

Reflecting on the response by the higher education community to the challenges involved in the sudden relocation of teaching and learning away from their on-campus contexts in March 2020, one senior manager noted: ‘In many respects the response was not characterised by big institutional or sectoral leading pronouncements or initiatives but by an army of individual actions where the sum of the parts has exceeded the whole. This is not a systemic response leading the charge – but individuals and teams motivated by a desire to help – capturing the true essence of a public service.’

The enormity of what was achieved through dedication, collaboration and innovation in moving teaching, learning and assessment online, without warning, is remarkable. Extraordinary goodwill was demonstrated by those who learn, teach, support and lead across higher education and much was learned for the future. In an effort to capture and share this learning, in May 2020, the National Forum invited key contacts across institutions to respond to one simple question:

What do you know now, with respect to teaching and learning, that you wish you had known before this all began?

The question was asked of the following sectoral representatives, many of whom were in a position to give departmental or institutional perspectives:

- **National Forum Associates**
  (including two representatives from each higher education institution across the country)

- **National Forum Advisory Groups**
  (four groups convened in 2019, each guiding one National Forum strategic priority)

- **INDEx Steering Group**
  (including a representative from each of the higher education institutions who participated in the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey)

- **National Forum Panel**
  (members of the higher education community who have expressed interest in becoming more actively involved in the work of the National Forum)

Individual and collective responses were received from across 28 higher education institutions, and from the Union of Students in Ireland and the National Student Engagement Programme. Responses took various forms, including extensive documents, brief reflective paragraphs, recorded conversational dialogues, bullet lists and, in one case, a spreadsheet of responses from multiple colleagues.

A note on the responses and insights

The responses were synthesised into ten cross-cutting insights and are represented under these insights using, as far as possible, the original language and phrasing of the respondents (in some cases direct quotes are included). Although the detail of each response could not be captured in this brief document,
and the list of insights is not intended to be viewed as exhaustive, every effort has been made to represent the key learnings that came through the totality of responses. It is also worth noting that many respondents framed their responses with the caveat that, as the move to online/remote learning was still so recent and they were still ‘in the thick of it’, there had not yet been time for the deeper reflection and learning that they anticipated would occur over the coming months and years.
Key Insights

1  In the right circumstances, the impossible can become possible

Perhaps the most common sentiment echoing through the responses was a sense of wonder at what had been achieved in a very short time within a remarkably difficult context. Since March 2020, things that seemed impossible became not only possible but necessary. The contributions from across the sector gave an indication of what facilitates effective responses to change:

- A whole-institution approach, with clear leadership and lines of responsibility is fundamental.
- Institutional processes and structures need to be flexible and adaptable enough to allow for unforeseen circumstances.
- Team-based collaborative cultures provide the best platform from which to respond to changing needs.
- A solid base of expertise and knowledge, accompanied by collaborative structures within and across institutions for sharing resources and good practice, is key to the rapid upskilling of students and staff.
- Consistent, coherent, co-ordinated and considered communication is critical to successful collaboration and important for reducing stress among students and staff in times of uncertainty.
- Where communication to students is developed in partnership between the institution and the students’ union, there is greater clarity in the messaging.

2  Teaching and learning was relatively well positioned to respond to this crisis

Although institutional closures were unforeseen, much of the work of the sector in the years leading to 2020 enabled and empowered the higher education community to respond in an informed and cohesive manner to the unexpected situation in which it found itself. Robust and relevant knowledge and experience had been developed which was transferred, re-purposed and re-imagined as necessary when the context of teaching and learning was suddenly transformed:

- The sector was in a far more advanced state with respect to assessment and technology-enhanced learning than it would have been had the crisis taken place some years previously. Local and national knowledge and understanding on these key topics had been built, informed by research and by the sharing of practice and expertise.
- Community and collaborative approaches which had infused teaching and learning enhancement in recent years were found to be especially valuable. The sector was particularly well positioned to intuitively and confidently draw on the efficacy and validation which combined approaches offer.
- Recent efforts at national and institutional level focused on the professional development of all staff who teach contributed to many staff across Irish higher education already being in the habit of interrogating their knowledge, skills and understandings and adapting to the evolving needs of their students and educational contexts.
3 Assumptions, expectations and perceptions have been disrupted

The shift to online/remote teaching and learning resulted in a number of assumptions and expectations being confronted and perceptions being altered:

- It was rapidly discovered that many students and staff do not have consistent access to reliable wifi and/or suitable devices or learning environments for working/studying from home.

- Much fear and reluctance surrounding the use of technology in teaching and learning was diminished. A number of people reflected that their prior resistance to online/remote delivery has been overcome rapidly, with many finding that the perceived challenges were not really challenges at all. As one senior manager put it: ‘fear of innovation will be a welcome casualty of the current crisis’.

- Those who had not previously had cause to teach or assess at a distance soon became aware that moving to online/remote teaching and assessment does not simply involve switching from an in-person lecture to a recorded lecture or from an in-person exam to an online exam. The complexities of online/remote learning came to be more widely acknowledged as requiring technical skill, conscious facilitation techniques and reflective approaches.

- Reflecting on the expectations of learners, a number of people pointed out that many of those engaged in online/remote learning in recent months did not ‘sign up’ for this form of delivery and their motivation and engagement may have been impacted as a result.

- Through increased collaboration, staff came to understand the work of staff in other roles or units more clearly and to appreciate the pressures and expectations their colleagues experienced, and the value of their work. Similarly, students and staff came to understand each other’s work and lives better; there was a general appreciation for the fact that ‘not everything is about college’.

4 Online/remote teaching and learning poses challenges for particular fields of study

The field of study itself was found to either lend itself to online/remote delivery in a compatible way or push the boundaries of delivery. Some aspects of learning design, such as demonstrations and teaching particular techniques or processes, did not translate well at a distance. Similarly, authentic assessment in some subject areas, such as medicine, teaching, sport science, and design, suffered as a result of the move to online/remote learning, while authentic assessment in other subject areas, such as computing and communications, were less impacted. Particular elements of curricula, including work placements and study abroad periods, became deeply disrupted by the crisis and developing flexible alternative routes to the achievement of related learning outcomes, in consultation with staff and students, will be essential to future planning.

5 In-person interaction matters greatly to both staff and students

The absence of in-person interaction was keenly felt by many across the higher education community, reflecting the human component that enhances so many facets of education:

- Staff noted that while collaboration is possible at a distance, and can even be more efficient, a lot is lost in the absence of face-to-face interaction. As one respondent explained: ‘while collaboration and partnership are central, they are redundant without meaningful, functional relationships and these
relationships depend on shared knowledge of the reality of our lives, both professional and personal, which are so easily cultivated in shared workspaces’.

- Similarly, prior relationships with peers and lecturers were viewed as very important in allowing students to collaborate and engage successfully online/at a distance: ‘I believe that having solid relationships with students before the Covid-19 crisis was critical to the successful transition to online delivery and engagement’.

- Concerns were voiced with regard to identifying students who may be at risk and fall behind; this was felt to be more difficult in the absence of regular in-person contact. As one staff member explained: ‘I miss the chats in the corridor with students – the social interaction and finding out what’s working and what’s not in student’s programmes. Sometimes having a quick chat with students and finding out small challenges early on can save a lot of time down the road!’

- In-person interaction was also seen as important in creating a sense of belonging and community and inducting students and staff into their institution and its ways: ‘Being able to talk stuff out loud, ask those questions which may seem ‘stupid’, be accompanied to places and events (canteen; library; student services; chaplaincy, etc.), explain how things work – essentially giving the student a confidence to navigate the language, landscape and nuances of third level is critically important’.

- In-person interaction was also seen as central to student and staff wellbeing. As one person noted: ‘The taken-for-granted little human interactions that occur in normal circumstances in our colleges are so important for our wellbeing and how we cope’.

6 Teaching and learning staff became the frontline workers of higher education

It is now clear that the development of high-quality remote/online teaching, learning and assessment is not only possible but essential and that time invested in the preparation of related structures, processes, policies, resources and professional development opportunities will have significant long-term benefits. The vital role of teaching and learning units and departmental teaching and learning leaders, and the importance of teaching and learning itself, has never been more evident in higher education. How well individual departments and institutions were positioned to support students and staff through this crisis was noted to have been influenced by the investment of time and resources in digital (and non-digital) teaching and learning structures, resources, communities and leaders that had already taken place.

7 Between in-person and online/remote teaching and learning there are differing pedagogical considerations

While it was repeatedly recognised that teaching and learning, whether in person or mediated by a device, is always centred on people and pedagogy, the affordances of different modes of delivery are now better understood by a higher proportion of the higher education community. It was mentioned that neither in-person nor remote/online is inferior or superior in and of itself; both can be harnessed well to achieve successful outcomes, but their benefits and shortcomings differ. Some examples were given as follows:

- A number of staff who had spent many years honing their teaching craft in the classroom found their ability to teach successfully curtailed by the new medium. As one staff member explained: ‘our
conversations are overwhelmingly verbal, we cannot rely at all on our presence, movement and embodied communications as part of our pedagogic toolkits’.

- Engagement patterns were seen to differ. Within the online environment, some staff found that it can be harder to engage students or know if they are engaged, while some observed that patterns of engagement reversed; those students who were less actively engaged during in-person scenarios were more engaged online, and vice versa.

- The affordances and drawbacks of particular technologies became clearer. For example, while lecture capture was seen to allow students the control of pausing and/or repeating recorded lectures and the flexibility to study at their own pace at a time that suited them, it was also seen to miss the advantages of interactive pedagogies and collaborative learning that are so important to deep learning experiences.

- A number of people noted that designing assessments for the online environment takes more time, and more student preparation, and that instructions for such assessment need to be more detailed and explicit than when there is an opportunity to explain and discuss in person. On the other hand, there were also efficiencies associated with online/remote assessment methods which were appreciated.

Overall, it was acknowledged that the more knowledge and experience teachers and students have of related tools and approaches, the more choices are available to tailor the teaching and learning experience for student success. Respondents advocated a blended approach to teaching, learning and assessment, leveraging the strengths of different modes, while attending to the needs of discipline and context.

8  There is an increased appetite to re-think traditional assessment practices

Online/remote assessment was a key element of the move to online/remote teaching and learning and the experience of selecting and designing alternative assessments had a number of impacts on attitudes and intentions for the future:

- Having to detail more clearly the marking schemes and processes involved in the alternative assessments, due to them being new to many students, made some staff more aware of the value of such transparency in designing assessments as it resulted in fewer issues or questions when the assessments took place.

- In seeking support to design alternative assessments, staff particularly valued support in ensuring academic integrity and in designing alternative assessments that were tailored to the online space while still meeting the learning outcomes of the given module. This learning will now be carried forward as new modules and assessments are designed.

- While many have advocated the use of a broader range of assessments for some time, the sudden move to online/remote assessment meant that the experience of designing for different assessment methods became more widespread, and their value for student learning was better understood. A typical comment was: ‘I feel some of my students actually learned more by reading around their topic vs writing about specific aspects in a two-hour exam. They found out more and went ‘deeper’ to understand more.’
In general, many mentioned an intention to re-think their assessment strategies as a result of the learnings they had gained through looking afresh at their existing practices. The prevalence of exams, in particular, was seen as something that is likely to be given more consideration in the future. As one respondent stated: ‘I hope that a silver lining of this pandemic is that we will review how/why we do assessment and look at how assessment can be more meaningful and can be used to support student learning’.

9 Lines of disadvantage were re-drawn or deepened

The barriers to learning experienced by some students were further exacerbated by the move to online/remote teaching and learning, while some students found that barriers to learning were fewer:

- As one respondent noted: ‘Students from areas of disadvantage, for example, rely almost exclusively on services that they can access on campus . . . These students are also the least powerful in insisting that their needs are met and are the most dependent on schools/college for their educational resources’.

- Some students with disabilities found it easier to learn remotely. Similarly, many students found that the alternative assessment methods being provided during the time of campus closures suited their individual learning preferences.

Overall, it was pointed out that online/remote learning has great potential to mitigate educational disadvantage in the context of creating opportunities for equitable access and participation for all students. A number of people commented that programmes of study underpinned by the inclusive principles of Universal Design for Learning may offer greater equity of opportunity, participation, and outcome for all students. As one response stated: ‘designing curriculum with the needs of the most vulnerable learners in mind will ensure that learning is accessible to all’.

10 Policies came to the fore

Policies related to assessment and digital teaching and learning, which had been written and consulted on in a different context, were suddenly road-tested by whole institutional communities. Topics such as copyright, intellectual property rights, data protection, data privacy and digital wellbeing were no longer of interest only to a small proportion of the institutional community; they were questioned by many. There is now an opportunity for revisions to related policies to be informed by the recent experience of students and staff through consultation and collaborative policy discussions.

In response to the crisis, new policies were also developed, such as those that sought to implement measures to mitigate against potential disadvantage including removing academic and financial penalties for resit assessments, enhancing extenuating circumstances policies and affording additional powers of discretion to examination boards. It was suggested that there may be merit in reviewing institutional risk strategies, or equivalent, in the future to ensure that effective mitigation against academic disadvantage is included within this.
Considering Related Evidence

Contextualising the presented insights in relation to evidence gathered through surveys, reviews and consultations completed in recent years may provide further and deeper learning from the move to remote/online teaching and learning:

Evidence on building digital capacity across the sector

A recent overview of developments in building digital capacity and capabilities across the sector in the years since 2014 provides a comprehensive picture of the significant advances that have resulted from the investment of time and energy by students and staff, and of public finances. Similarly, a review of the impact of large-scale collaborative projects conducted by teams of staff and students across the sector in recent years revealed that staff confidence in engaging with digital technology had been enhanced and a more sophisticated understanding of the application of digital technology to teaching and learning had emerged. Work ongoing on a number of projects funded recently by the National Forum and other projects funded under the HEA’s 2018 Innovation and Transformation Fund also did much to underpin Ireland’s robust response to the unexpected move to online learning.

The Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey

In autumn 2019, as part of the Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey, 25,484 students and 4,445 staff who teach across 32 Irish higher education institutions took the time to inform and influence the future enhancement of digital teaching and learning in Irish higher education. This survey, which took place before the move to online/remote teaching and learning, provides valuable insights regarding digital teaching and learning practices, digital infrastructure, digital skills development and support, digital environment and culture and attitudes to digital. It highlights what makes a difference to students and staff who teach in Irish higher education, providing an evidence base to inform decision-making and future enhancement of digital teaching and learning.

Evidence and practice related to digital policy development

The National Forum’s Enabling Policies for Digital Teaching and Learning project (2017–18) aimed to build awareness and capacity in policy development for digital teaching and learning across Irish higher education. Following extensive research and consultation across the sector, the project resulted in a review of the existing higher education policy landscape for digital teaching and learning in Ireland and a guide to developing enabling policies for digital teaching and learning. Both resources are designed to assist those developing policies to do so in a way that is mindful of what is important to students.

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7 Examples include the Irish Universities Association ‘Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning’ project (IUADigED) https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/learning-teaching/digital-learning/ and the Connaught Ulster Alliance ‘Innovative Opportunities Transforming Education’ project (iNOTE) https://digitaled.ie/

8 For more information see www.teachingandlearning.ie/index
those who teach, and the institution, and also what is achievable in practice. Bringing this work forward in 2019, a series of regional policy workshops was held in order to provide fora for those engaged in institutional policy development with respect to digital and open teaching and learning to discuss and share challenges and aims, to explore resources, and to consider approaches relevant to their own contexts. This evidence and support related to digital policy development will be useful as institutions consider how well their policies supported the move to online/remote teaching and learning and where development work may be needed.

Evidence on what enables student success

As part of the development of a national understanding of student success, in 2019, a report was published by the National Forum which explored the concept of student success through an examination of national policy, institutional strategic plans and graduate attributes, student perspectives and international literature. The report identified themes that are pivotal to our understanding of student success and how it can be supported, many of which resonate with the priorities emerging through the insights shared by respondents in this briefing paper. These themes included: engagement and student partnership, enabling policies and practices, professional development and the centrality of staff who teach, evidence-based decision-making, supporting transitions and cultivating belonging, and assessment and feedback.

Lessons learned about transitions

The ability of learners to make successful transitions at key points in their education is crucial for their development and for enabling their success in and through higher education. There are many important transitions that learners have to navigate: the transition from post-primary to higher education, from undergraduate education to employment or to postgraduate research and learning. The National Forum facilitated a national focus on teaching for transitions over a two-year period (2013-15), involving focused research projects, consultations, and sharing of good practice. Ten overarching lessons were learned from this work which may now be helpful to consider again in the context of the transformed teaching and learning experiences that currently characterise Irish higher education.

Evidence related to assessment in higher education

A national focus on assessment of/for/as learning, facilitated by the National Forum in 2016-18, involved gathering evidence, building capacity and sharing good practice, with the aim of seeing Ireland adopt and promote innovative, engaging, collaborative, learner-oriented and integrated approaches to assessment that take account of the complex dynamics and requirements of higher education. A national understanding of assessment of/for/as learning was developed, along with a set of principles to underpin assessment in Irish higher education and supporting resources. These principles, understanding and associated resources will be very useful to those looking to re-design their assessment approaches as a consequence of insights gained through the shift to online/remote assessment.

9 For more information, see here: https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/our-priorities/digital-transformation/enabling-policies-for-digital-and-open-teaching-and-learning/
11 For more information, see here: https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/our-priorities/student-success/teaching-for-transitions/
12 For more information, see here: https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/our-priorities/student-success/assessment-of-for-as-learning/
Building on Learnings as We Look to the Future

The response of the higher education community to the crisis demonstrated what is possible and how quickly things can be achieved with the right combination of structures, expertise, attitudes and approaches. During a recent meeting of National Forum Associates, it was suggested that the higher education community would be well advised to ‘return with a sense of questioning’ in autumn 2020. This suggestion reflected a feeling that old approaches, structures and conventions can now be usefully viewed through new eyes.

In planning for a new semester like no other, many respondents felt that we would do well to retain certain practices and outlooks from recent months, such as the following:

- the sense of trust and empathy developed amongst and between students, staff and senior managers
- the more widespread consideration, in all aspects of higher education, of the personal contexts and circumstances within which people learn, teach, support and lead and the barriers that some must overcome to succeed
- the openness to change evident across the sector and related flexibility of attitude and process – no longer seeing conventions and traditions as unbreakable rules
- the collaborative ethos that allowed so much to be achieved during a constrained and difficult time

There were also issues highlighted that many felt need to be resolved if the increase in online/remote teaching and learning is to be sustained, even partially, over the longer term. These included, for example:

- A need to ensure, as far as possible, that a sense of belonging to the institutional and discipline community, so crucial to student success, is fostered among incoming students, who have not yet developed in-person relationships with lecturers and peers
- A need to ensure, as far as possible, that the ability of students to learn and staff to teach is not compromised by lack of access to suitable devices or reliable wifi
- A need to ensure that technology-enhanced learning, and teaching and learning more broadly, are appropriately supported within every institution and that institutional decision making continues to be informed by those with teaching and learning knowledge and expertise
- A need for clear understanding, and consistent use, of the language of teaching and learning in a digital world
- A need to ensure that the induction of new staff and students into the higher education community includes a signposting of digital skills supports, a clarification of key terms related to digital teaching and learning and an induction into the institutional virtual learning environment and related online/remote tools and supports
- A need to look carefully at elements of curricula for which online/remote alternatives were not available (such as some work-based learning, practical assessments, and study abroad periods) and how their learning outcomes might be achieved in the event of future travel restrictions, physical distance restrictions and/or campus closures
- A need to consider the workload models of staff who teach to ensure that the time and effort involved in teaching and assessing online/remotely is accurately reflected and staff wellbeing is prioritised
• A need to consider the workload of students to ensure that the time and effort involved in engaging with learning online/remotely is accurately reflected and student wellbeing is prioritised

If in-person teaching and learning is to be limited in the near future, it becomes more important than ever that its affordances and drawbacks are well understood so that it can be timetabled to best effect for elements of the curriculum for which it is most necessary. Similarly, if online/remote teaching and learning is to become more prevalent, it is crucial that its design, and the understanding, professional development and supports that underpin it, are carefully informed, discussed and collaboratively agreed. As the senior manager quoted at the beginning of this document concluded: ‘The vaccine needed to battle the Corona virus lies within the disease itself – similarly our collective and individual responses to combat the impact of Covid 19 on our education system will in time prove to hold the answers that will enable us to design a better system for all’.
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