



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:
Moving Forward Together



All those who teach

Part 2 - Practice in the Future



Introduction

In this Next Steps Insight, we trace ideas for the future from those who teach in higher education. These are the voices of staff as reflected in the Next Steps partner contributions. This Insight has referenced the submissions from IUA, HECA, THEA and QQI. We have also drawn from previous National Forum research and consultations with National Forum Associates (NFAs), our Advisory Groups, and the Networks and Disciplines. We include priorities identified across consultations with students which have specific implications for teaching.

What could happen next?

Continuing to navigate as the storm subsides

There is widespread expectation that teaching, learning and assessment will continue to be blended to a varying extent for the foreseeable future. This will be dependent on public health guidelines, institutional arrangements, the requirements of different disciplines, and the extent to which individuals can attend the physical campus. The traditional view of online vs. face-to-face no longer pertains. We need to look now to customising approaches for disciplines, designing in interactions and developing subject-specific blended pedagogies.

The pivot online presented advantages and challenges. Improvements to the learning experience have been documented and could be retained (Part 1). The renewed emphasis on universal design for learning (UDL) means that UDL principles could now be adopted widely in teaching and learning practices, and at an accelerated rate. Regular feedback from students on their learning and well-being was very helpful. We can build on the increased confidence and capability of staff using technology for learning and teaching. People want to continue sharing resources, approaches and experiences.

However, significant challenges have also arisen. It was difficult to nurture relationships and belonging, and disciplinary difficulties arose (e.g. practicals). Staff and students have missed feedback, informal interactions, and are fatigued from constant work online. We need to develop and evaluate strategies for blended learning within the disciplines. Extra social opportunities need to be provided to students, not least to address the development of social and cultural capital, community, and a sense of belonging. Greater collaboration between programme teams and professional services staff needs to continue. The potential of hybrid/hyflex teaching is also being considered. The fitness for purpose of video conferencing tools as virtual classrooms needs further consideration. Staff need support in finding suitable resources, getting more video-based help, and more flexible support. Students and staff may have different perspectives on practical matters such as the recording of classes. Listening, empathising and negotiating as part of a partnership-oriented approach will be necessary. Changes to assessment (discussed in further Next Steps Insights) will require dedicated time and support. All such changes must be situated and sensitive to the institutional context and community.

Staying closer to centre stage

An important effect of the closure of campuses was the foregrounding of teaching, learning and assessment activities. Sustaining and continuing teaching, learning and assessment became a unifying mission for institutions. Senior leaders, professional services, functions and academic departments worked closely together and there is now a renewed awareness of what other people do in institutions. The importance of teaching, and the relationship with learners, has been central: many practitioners wish for that to continue. Leaders convened new groups to support rapid decision-making, and in many cases these were more diverse than existing committees. Staff have praised leaders for their response to the emergency. People and relationships have been recognised as centrally important to the functions of the organisations. There is a strong desire to retain these valuable outcomes of the closure.

Staff want to see more recognition at senior level for teaching, and for it to be valued, potentially in promotion and progression. There is potential for the pandemic to change the tone of the discourse and parity of esteem with research should be the aim. This could further be demonstrated by more sustainable funding. Professional services staff have a sense that their work is newly understood and valued. However, there are concerns about the ongoing resourcing of services, particularly those introduced or expanded during the pandemic. Many aspects of core business have experienced digital transformation, but for this to continue funding is needed. It also needs to be secure: cybersecurity needs to be a priority across the sector.

There is the possibility to redefine the working environment in higher education. Professional roles changed and some staff wish to maintain the evolution of their roles. Staff also want to continue working flexibly. Team-building and support are needed as relationships have been eroded through the lack of informal, social contact. Adjustments to timetabling and the academic calendar could support flexible working and new forms of assessment, or more flexible modes of attendance by students. Staff still wanted to build a meaningful on-campus experience for students and to improve online support for students (e.g. with partnership approaches to institutional website design). More support for digital literacies is needed to build on the increased confidence and competence of staff and students. The value of learning analytics has emerged strongly during this period and effective data management strategies need to be continued and further developed. Improved access to technologies and wifi are needed.

Recognising that CPD is essential

Some changes arising from the pivot online during the pandemic have been welcomed, and there is potential for much further positive change in teaching, learning and assessment. However, continuous professional development (CPD) for staff is critical for future success, particularly in relation to blended and hybrid learning. Those institutions which had invested in CPD reaped the dividends during the closure period. Cascade models were developed elsewhere which worked effectively. The lack of time



for CPD during the emergency phases of the pandemic was highlighted, along with the lack of CPD opportunities for those in part-time/adjunct roles. Designated and protected time for CPD and further development of digital literacies for both staff and students is needed.

Shifting our perspective from campus to people

Changed working practices and changed modes of learning, teaching and assessment since March 2020 have important implications for how we use the physical campus. Staff have framed this as “reimagining” both physical and digital spaces. As the return to campus continues, we need to consider alternative uses of space. Smaller spaces are needed to support interactions online and conversations between people. Quiet spaces are needed for lecturers to teach online or to record lectures. Collaborative spaces are needed for small groups. More innovation in the uses of space may be possible, and libraries in particular were highlighted here. Digital spaces such as the virtual learning environment (VLE) need to be used optimally and consistently. Support and CPD for staff is needed along with new recognition of the campus as digital as well as physical. This echoes recent work calling for parity of esteem between face-to-face and online learning, that the campus is its people rather than its buildings.

Staff who teach have a renewed awareness and focus on equality, diversity and inclusion following the pivot to online learning, teaching and assessment. Redesigning for online has highlighted issues of access and inclusion, and the importance of UDL principles. We have seen extraordinary demand for training and CPD in UDL. But there has been evidence that the pandemic showed areas of educational disadvantage, digital poverty, and highlighted the ongoing accommodation crisis for students.

Conclusions

As we move tentatively towards a post-pandemic future, there is recognition that higher education has changed and students' expectations have also changed. Staff are open to continuing to innovate, with the right supports in place. Partnership with students is crucial in redesigning core areas of practice, and ensuring equity and inclusion. It is a priority for us to consider what needs to happen face-to-face and what happens online. We need a shared language for understanding learning and teaching including learning and teaching which is digitally inflected. Different pedagogies and different sets of challenges exist here, with discipline-specific challenges particularly online for some subjects. This period of time has forced us to think much more about how the student can be engaged and supported: how do we continue to keep this focus and use it to design better learning experiences in the future?

Staff need ongoing, integrated support and CPD. There is renewed discussion of academic integrity and authentic assessment. Robust quality assurance processes are needed to underpin the changes emerging here. Strategic planning and educational leadership is needed in institutions to demonstrate that teaching and learning is valued, and to support staff and students in processing the shock of the past 18 months. People-centred, inclusive decision-making is called for. Staff have indicated that at national level, groups like the National Forum can support the gradual return to campus and provide resources and supports for the evolving modes of learning and teaching we will now have. There is the potential to improve but also

to future-proof: we can be ready to go online again rapidly if necessary. People have innovated and will be willing to innovate further.

Encouraging students as well as staff to return to campus will depend on an ‘offer’ of what is valuable and what can be positive, productive and joyful about being there. Technology has a new importance but people need to be placed before technology. Connectedness is not only online and human contact is essential. Equity of access for both staff and students is essential. An enabling institutional culture will be essential and will demonstrate goodwill, collaboration, innovation, dedication, clear leadership, flexibility, sharing good practice, communication, partnership, empathy and trust, openness to change.