



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:

Moving Forward Together



Sharing SAI Members' Learning from Covid-19 Student Affairs Ireland



The challenges of the Covid pandemic prompted the launch or expansion of many student-supporting initiatives. The unprecedented conditions prompted student affairs professionals to ensure that learners continued to find the services and supports needed to successfully navigate the student journey. In doing so, new resources and processes have arisen and novel collaborations have taken place between student support services and academic programmes. Together, these innovations have brought the contribution of student affairs professionals closer to the mainstream of the higher education experience.

Student Affairs Ireland (SAI) consulted with over 100 professionals across the higher education sector in 2021 about how they had supported students during the pandemic and explored with them the lessons and resources that can be brought forward on a sustainable basis. Following participatory meetings and follow up interviews, four key topics were highlighted as holding particular importance in linking professional support services to student success:

- Belonging, social support and engagement
- Academic and learning support
- Health and well-being
- Digital and administrative support

Participants at the SAI sessions spoke about having shared needs and openness to collaboration to tackle these areas of concern and opportunity for the student experience. This project has enabled SAI members to share their learning as a resource for student affairs colleagues but also to raise the profile of their work with the academic community. Moreover, the participants described continuing concerns and gaps in knowledge about how students can be best supported in a post-Covid-19 HE sector.

Here we describe the four key topic areas and review suggestions for how concerns and knowledge gaps can be addressed.

Belonging, social support and engagement

This topic highlights student affairs staff leading on addressing a 'belongingness gap' that was experienced by many students in relationship to their college and peers during the pandemic, and which may persist in a more flexible, hybrid model of academic programme delivery.

Area of concern and gaps identified

Many students found distance learning advantageous, especially in the context of caring or work responsibilities. It may be challenging to convince students to commit to an on-campus learning model for the full week or across a whole day. A hybrid model with less time on campus reduces the opportunity for traditional modes of interaction and engagement, with a potentially disruptive impact on the bond of belongingness to campus and peers. SAI members described strategies they had developed to enhance belonging and support full engagement with the academic curriculum.

How to address these issues?

Building on the enforced experience of online learning, there is a critical opportunity to make academic programme delivery more flexible, while acknowledging that this brings a threat of academic or social disengagement. To meet learning and social belonging needs, space and time needs to be given within mainstreamed, scheduled learning activities to empower students to be active learners who can engage fully with each other and with lecturing staff when a module is delivered fully or partly online. Similarly, academic programme planners and lecturers require support to meet the emerging student expectation for hybrid course delivery. This includes upskilling to devise or co-create a curriculum delivery strategy that prioritises student preferences and need for engagement.



Academic and learning support

There was general concern among student affairs staff about the challenge of preparing students for digital learning and assessment during the pandemic. The ongoing need for student support in this area was highlighted, yet digital learning itself is an opportunity to address this issue, if the opportunity is taken to develop, host, and promote supports in mainstream virtual learning spaces. This was recognised to be particularly acute for the growing number of students identified with learning support needs or disabilities. Key areas of concern regarding strategies for delivery/assessment are outlined below.

Area of concern and gaps identified

While digitally savvy in other respects, some students struggle with engaging with learning and assessment that is delivered online. Student affairs professionals described students being challenged by the technical requirements of completing assignments when fully online, such as recording presentations or working in groups. Students can succeed in mastering the technical challenges but may wonder if their grades have been affected.

How to address these issues?

In order to support students not just through online learning, but online assessment too, there is a need for academic programmes to consider the challenges remote assessment poses. In addition to the support provided by lecturers, students need to be notified of where to find training videos and how to contact support personnel if they need further technical instruction regarding assignment submission. There is scope for collaboration within higher education institutions in the provision of supports and/or resources required to submit digitally-orientated assignments.

Health and well-being

Covid-19 severely disrupted the established working practices of career guidance, disability support, counselling services, and other health and well-being supports provided by HEIs (e.g., online classes, social media outreach initiatives, online inductions). SAI members innovatively connected with students on health and well-being issues while they were off-campus. However, there is still a need to identify digital strategies to engage and support students across diverse backgrounds and varied year groups. HEIs must continue to address how visible current supports are (online and onsite), and how health and wellbeing initiatives are embedded in the curriculum (e.g., consent, mental health), if at all.

Area of concern and gaps identified

As aforementioned, reaching the diverse student population is a key challenge. How do we promote engagement with workshops across varied year groups, and students with different needs? For example, there is recognition that postgraduate students are often an isolated group, and a cohort who are often neglected when it comes to making concerted efforts to offer health and well-being support throughout the year. How do HEIs ensure postgraduates — who are frequently new to the institution, or working on individual research projects — are looked after?

How to address this issue?

Bespoke health and well-being initiatives with the needs of postgraduate students, as an example, at the fore could be developed and implemented. Although students' identities sit within various intersecting categories (e.g. international, part-time, postgraduate, mature, etc.), there is scope to identify the needs of postgraduate students in particular, which are recognised as being distinctly different from those of undergraduate students. For example, HEIs may consider opening or running orientation events to postgraduate students specifically. Additionally, infographics, podcasts and videos are inclusive and accessible ways to support student groups who have specific needs. Bespoke initiatives that consider the relationship between health and wellbeing and diverse students' curricula is a challenge to be addressed.'



Digital and administrative support

The pandemic brought an unprecedented move to reliance on services provided through digital means. This presented challenges and opportunities to move existing services online or devise new strategies to engage and support students. Having access to the right digital infrastructure, technologies, and supports is vital to make this approach succeed.

Area of concern and gaps identified

There is a question over whether to communicate with students through one formal channel (e.g. the institutional VLE or email), or reach students through popular online social media platforms. Additionally, given that websites are becoming increasingly difficult to navigate, the most effective channels for students to contact the institution are continually shifting. Communication and information delivery during Covid-19 were of particularly importance, and some innovative responses were developed to engage students during this time.

How to address these issues?

Some institutions are now (i) operating an instant chat function via their VLE, (ii) experimenting with chatbots (i.e. artificial intelligence), and (iii) operating virtual help desks. The preferences of students regarding contact will depend on the needs of the student, the culture of the institution, and other factors. Institutions may find it fruitful to carry out some research with their student population regarding the preferred or most important modes of communication. Different student groups may value different modes of communication, and this would be valuable to know when fostering belongingness, or promoting health and wellbeing supports.

Key take-away points

The move to online teaching and learning has unearthed new ways of thinking and doing, revealing the opportunities and possibilities of remote teaching and learning that were previously unconsidered. It has also highlighted some concerns and gaps in knowledge, as outlined in this Insight. Accordingly:

- Many HEIs are planning for a hybrid approach to student support/learning more generally. There is an awareness among HEIs that hybrid learning may be a preferable model to the on-campus only model of learning.
- HEIs are cognisant of the challenges and affordances of online assessment, teaching and learning. HEIs appear to be largely planning for online support/teaching/assessment to remain in some capacity as it has some distinct advantages not least facilitating good outreach.
- There is an overarching concern that sometimes we are doing too little for students from diverse backgrounds, as well as certain student groups (e.g. postgraduate students). Understanding and supporting students based on their specific needs, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, is critical to ensuring students feel attended to.
- Many HEIs regard active and interactive social media as an important communication channel. Yet, the communication channels most valued by student may be institution specific and require further attention.

Conclusion

Notably, there is a desire for greater collaboration between institutions as well as within institutions to avoid duplication/diversion. Accordingly, there is potential to collate and understand what institutions are doing in a way that allows cross-collaboration. The primary motivation among SAI members is to ensure that HEIs learn from one another and work collaboratively to support students through the challenges Covid-19 has unearthed.

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