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HEA Teaching and Learning Conference

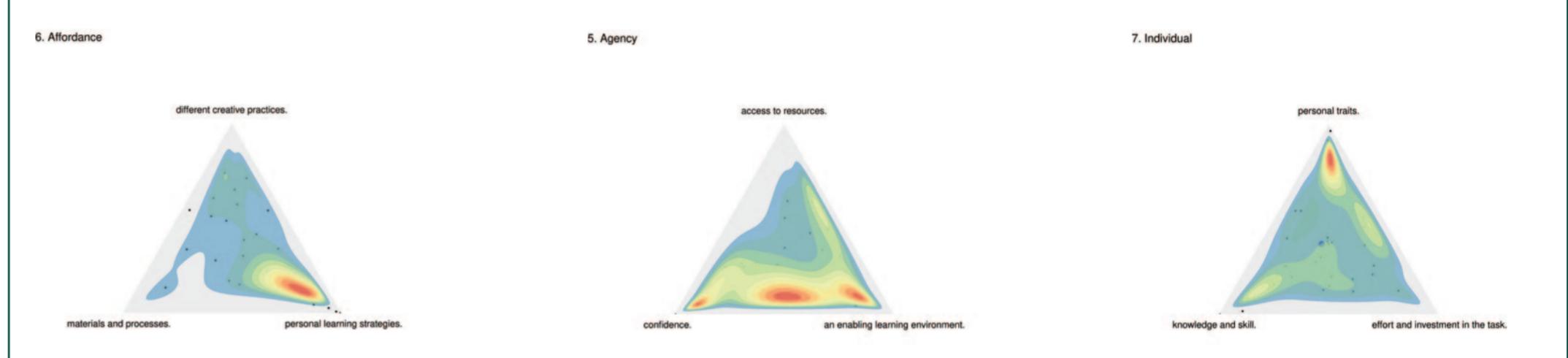
December 2025

Leading Change Together: Building the Future of
Teaching and Learning in Higher Education



Assessment and epistemic belonging

**NATIONAL
COLLEGE
OF ART
& DESIGN**



Institution(s) and Partner Organisations Involved

The project was led by the Teaching and Learning Office, in partnership with the Student Experience Office & the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Office. The research team included 7 lecturers and 8 student research assistants. We used a proprietary research app, called SenseMaker and received consultation from the parent company, The Cynefin Co.

Contributor(s)

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What level(s) of your institution does this work affect?

- Programme level
- Academic unit/school/faculty level
- Across multiple units/schools/faculties
- Institutional level

Date and Timeframe

May 2025 – August 2026

Alignment and Focus

Focus

- Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Frameworks, Policies, or Strategies Aligned

- NCAD Strategy
- NCAD T&L Enhancement Plan
- National Access Plan
- National Framework for Student Success in Higher Education UDL principles for engagement

Discipline

- Arts and Humanities
- Education
- Services
- Teaching and Learning

Impact, Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Impact and Evidence of Success

Staff members (7) and student research assistants (8) co-designed the study with the research leads. Narrative collection is ongoing but preliminary analysis of 43 narratives shows some interesting trends: 1) lecturers and students have different ideas about the value of the resources students bring to their learning (such as: *personal traits*, *effort and investment*, *knowledge and skill*); 2) a focus on outcomes in assessment (interpreting the brief) discourages students from drawing on prior knowledge and skill, and to depend more on personal traits plus effort and engagement to succeed and 3) Students who are Irish citizens depend on an enabling learning environment to succeed, whereas non-citizens depend on confidence for success.

Future Plans and Sustainability

In line with participatory research design, faculty researchers and student research assistants will explore patterns identified during the first round of story collection to identify opportunities for small T&L interventions aimed at reducing assessment-related belongingness anxiety. A second round of narrative collection and analysis will reveal the effectiveness of the interventions. Researchers will present findings at NCAD's All Staff Meeting as well as NCAD's Teaching and Learning Symposium in June 2026, and intend to collaborate towards publication to allow for broader dissemination. It is the intention of the research team to submit to the *Equitas EDI Conference* in 2026 to present findings and allow for sectoral discussions.

Top Tips

1. Staff-student collaborations in the design phase enhanced the study by expanding and refining the concepts that were used for analysis. This collaboration also creates conditions for the research findings to find purchase within the College community.
2. The SenseMaker process lets students and staff describe real assessment moments in their own words (or voice notes), then interpret those experiences themselves. The app further enables the analysis of data and the identification of patterns, significantly reducing research workload.
3. Inter-Disciplinary Research Teams have been helpful to understand the breadth of experiences and concepts that may affect assessment and experiences of assessment conversations - our project team benefited from perspectives rooted in Psychology, Creative Practice, Teaching & Learning and Student Experience.

Initiative Description]

Aims and Objectives

- To understand the relationship between assessment conversations and epistemic belonging
- To identify and investigate any demographic trends in responses especially as it relates to minoritised communities.
- To develop small safe-to-try interventions that increase epistemic belonging for all students.

Outline or Description

NCAD has set, as a strategic priority, the objective of making the learning environment accessible to all students who gain entry through the institution's application process. Against that background, the message from student surveys that levels of belongingness at the College are lower than desired is troubling. This is despite the fact students describe academic and support staff as very caring and supportive. Belonging, it seems, is not causally linked to gestures of care and concern.

Students identified a connection between assessment processes and their experience of belonging or alienation, at NCAD, a link that is supported by published research. In particular, students report that confusion in the assessment context makes them wonder if they belong in the programme or the College. While belongingness is a multi-faceted concept, these narratives point to a subcategory that might be termed epistemic belonging, understood as the by-product of underlying social and cultural dynamics that position individuals, variously, as those who 'know/act meaningfully' or 'do not know/act meaningfully' in the assessment context.

This study has explored the components of assessment conversations and their impact on epistemic belonging. Framed by complex adaptive systems theory and the notion of epistemic justice, it employed narrative-based sense-making to 'map' the learning community that forms around assessment, as a system. The analysis of resulting patterns will allow us to develop small safe-to-try interventions, in collaboration with students and staff. Ethics approval was granted by NCAD's Research Ethics committee. Participation in the study does not pose a significant risk to staff or students.

Supported by the SATLE Pathfinder award, we procured a licence for the SenseMaker app and recruited faculty and students, from across the College, onto the research team. Faculty researchers and students research assistants participated in focus group meetings to identify concepts that would be used for analysis. Questions were designed by the research leads, with consultation from the Cynefin Co. and then reviewed by staff and students on the research team.

Participation links were sent to the NCAD community by email, social media channels and through the intranet. Research assistants also approached members of the community to tell them about the study and invite their participation.

We gathered self-indexed micro-narratives (stories) from staff and students about 'assessment experiences, which stayed with you.' Participants used Sense-Maker to enter narratives through text, voice recording or image upload, after which they interacted with the app to self-index their contributions.

The app converts participants' responses to numerical points, allowing for the identification of patterns in the data and facilitates cross-referencing of various indicators to identify areas that are ripe for intervention. While there are no 'right' or 'wrong' narratives, there may be stories we want more of and others we want less of. Identifying these, the next step is to ask how we get more stories 'like this' and fewer 'like that?'

Funding & Acknowledgements Details

SATLE Pathfinder Fund