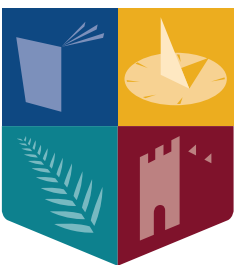## HEA Teaching and Learning Conference December 2025

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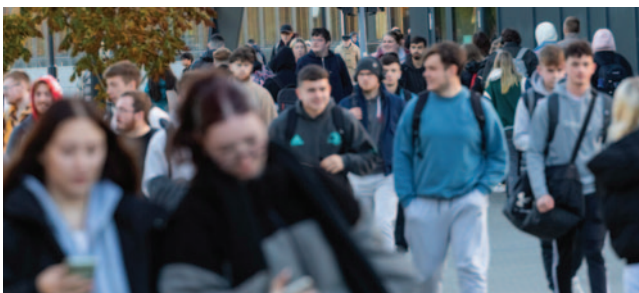
Higher Education responses to evolving student needs - What works and why?

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Institution(s) and Partner Organisations Involved

Maynooth University Centre for Teaching and Learning (MU)
Dundalk Institute of Technology Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (DKIT)

Contributor(s)

Lisa O'Regan, Head of Centre for Teaching and Learning (MU)
Dr. Gerry Gallagher, Head of Learning and Teaching (DKIT)
Dr. Ciara O'Farrell, Senior Research Fellow (MU)

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

- Institutional level
- Across multiple institutions

Date and Timeframe

June 2025 – December 2025

Alignment and Focus

Focus
- Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

Frameworks, Policies, or Strategies Aligned
- Maynooth University Student Success Strategy
- Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2023-2028
- DkIT Student Success Strategy
- DkIT Strategic Plan 2024-2028
- Review of the Irish National Framework for Student Success in Higher Education

Discipline

- Services
- Teaching and Learning

Impact, Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Impact and Evidence of Success

- Phases 1–2 analysed 400+ institutional documents, grey and academic literature, resulting in seven thematic briefings. Phases 3–4 will showcase best practice to guide institutional student success strategies.
- Our research shows many HEIs still operate on legacy views and inaccurate assumptions of students. There is a disconnect between strategic intent and operational delivery when addressing emerging student needs. A holistic, system-level approach is needed to reflect the complex realities of today's learners.
- Impacts include deepening institutional insight at MU and DkIT, shaping leadership discussions, and informing decision-making. Identifying shared challenges and approaches is strengthening inter-institutional collaboration.

Future Plans and Sustainability

- Findings will be embedded in ongoing student success, T&L policy and practice and inform Institutional Strategic Plans at MU and DkIT, ensuring continued relevance and alignment with sector priorities.
- Impactful approaches identified through our research can be adapted and scaled within MU, DkIT and beyond, embedding proven strategies into institutional frameworks.
- Further cross-institutional collaboration between MU and DkIT, emerging from the findings, will sustain and expand our initiative's reach.
- By sharing system-level insights, the initiative will inform institutional strategy and national policy, supporting scalable, evidence-based enhancement across HEIs.

Top Tips

- Integrate academic and grey evidence. Combining peer-reviewed literature with policy-practice sources and grey literature helped ensure sectoral relevance and grounded our findings in the lived experiences of students.
- Adopt a systems-level lens. Focus on strategic, coordinated, institution-wide actions. We feel that this approach generates insights that are replicable, scalable, and valuable for long-term planning and sustainable change.
- Build an up-to-date understanding of current students. Continuously identify who your current students are. This is the foundation for identifying real and evolving needs and responding in ways that are timely and meaningful.

Initiative Description

Aims and Objectives

- Identify and map evolving HE student needs in the literature across societal, economic, demographic, and technological contexts.
- Consider how HEIs respond to these needs at strategic and operational levels.
- Synthesize emerging patterns in the academic and grey literature to highlight effective, equitable, and scalable institutional practices.
- Provide actionable, evidence-based insights to inform sector-wide strategy, policy, planning, and future research.

Outline or Description

The higher education landscape is shifting rapidly as student demographics, expectations, and day-to-day realities evolve in response to economic, technological, and societal change. Maynooth University and Dundalk Institute of Technology are working together to understand how these shifts are reshaping the student experience so we can develop more meaningful approaches.

This research explores how HEIs across Ireland, the UK, and internationally are responding to students' changing expectations. Taking a systems-thinking approach, it identifies and maps key emerging student needs, examines institutional responses, and highlights innovative, system-level, evidence-based practices that respond to evolving student needs and strengthen student engagement, belonging, and retention.

Phase 1: Scoping and Prioritising Evolving Student Needs

First, we conducted an extensive desk-based review of academic and grey literature, institutional strategies, and student survey data (2023–2025). From this we developed a high-level thematic overview, mapping and contextualising emerging student needs within wider societal, economic, technological, and demographic change.

Phase 2: Thematic Deepening

From this broad evidence base, we prioritised two core areas for deeper investigation: financial hardship and the student work imperative, and the commuting student experience. We also identified four intersecting subthemes: belonging, extracurricular engagement, flexible timetabling, and flexible teaching patterns. We conducted a literature search (2020-2025) of 400+ academic articles, institutional strategies, student surveys and grey literature. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we identified recurring patterns across drivers, impacts, barriers, institutional responses, and policy considerations.

Phase 3: Institutional Response Typology and Case Study Development (Current Phase)

We have developed a broad typology mapping institutional responses to evolving student needs, identifying areas of strength, emerging practice, and notable gaps across the sector. Building on this foundation, we will now investigate and document case studies of successful institutional practice to demonstrate what effective, system-level change looks like in action.

Phase 4: Research Synthesis (Completion by end 2025)

The final phase will integrate insights across stages 1-3. Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations, we will provide a comprehensive picture of how HEIs are adapting to evolving student needs across our themes, synthesising system-level insights to inform future institutional strategy, policy and planning.

Emerging Insights Across Themes:

- Across all themes, a consistent message emerged: students today are navigating higher education under increasing constraints of time, finance, and flexibility. Financial hardship and the need to work are defining features of the student experience, often forcing difficult trade-offs between study, employment, and social life. Long commutes and rising living costs further limit time spent on campus, undermining access to extracurricular and social opportunities that foster belonging. Structural factors, such as rigid timetabling, inflexible teaching patterns, and limited on-campus amenities, intensify these inequities.
- Our research shows that when institutions meet students where they are and respond with flexibility and understanding, it strengthens their students' sense of belonging. This, in turn, drives greater engagement, higher satisfaction, improved well-being, and ultimately student success. However, our findings signal a need for system-level strategies to meaningfully and sustainably address the temporal, spatial, and economic realities of today's diverse learners.

Funding & Acknowledgements Details