

Student Success in Their Own Words: Insights from Higher Education in Ireland



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Executive Summary

The Student Success Survey 2025 was undertaken by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to examine how students across Ireland define, experience, and achieve success in higher education. The study builds on the HEA discussion paper, 'Between Metrics: Rethinking 21st Century Student Success in Ireland' (2025) as well as the HEA Student Success Framework and Expert Review (2025), which positions student success as simultaneously student-defined, institution-created, and outcomes-oriented. This tripartite understanding reflects a holistic approach that recognises the personal, institutional, and societal dimensions of success, and underscores that success is a shared responsibility across the higher education system.

This report is based on the perspectives of students in higher education in Ireland. The survey was conducted from April to June 2025 and was open to all students enrolled in publicly funded higher education institutions in Ireland. Survey circulation was facilitated through National Forum Associates, Registrars' Offices, and Students' Unions, ensuring broad national reach. In total, 3,462 valid responses were received from students across 17 higher education institutions, encompassing all publicly funded HEIs and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), and representing a wide range of disciplines, study levels, and demographics.

The survey instrument, hosted on SurveyMonkey, comprised 27 questions and combined quantitative and qualitative elements. It explored how students:

- define and measure success
- identify supports and enablers of success
- describe the barriers and challenges that hinder it.

Permissions and information on data processing were embedded at the beginning of the instrument, and data collection complied with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act (2018). A full copy of the survey instrument is provided in the Appendix.



Key Findings

Student success is nuanced and multifaceted. While academic attainment remains central, students emphasise personal growth, well-being, employability, and belonging as integral to success.

The proposed tripartite model is reflected in student perspectives. Students describe success as self-defined (achieving balance and confidence), institution-enabled (through teaching quality, empathy, and support), and outcomes-oriented (linked to progress, contribution, and future readiness).

Peer engagement, belonging and community are essential. Over 90% of respondents reported that their own sense of success is influenced by the engagement of their peers, confirming that learning is relational and collective.

Moments of success are experiential. Around 80% of students recalled a specific “success moment” in college, often linked to personal growth, actionable feedback, and/or positive lecturer interactions.

Teaching and institutional culture matter. Students placed strong value on lecturers’ Continuous Professional Development (CPD) (92%) and on staff demonstrating care and interest in their progress (67%).

Persistent structural barriers remain. Financial stress, mental-health challenges, accommodation pressures, and time constraints continue to impede success for many students.

Equity and inclusion require sustained focus. Students with disabilities, international students, and mature learners report challenges around flexibility, workload, and accessibility, but also highlight how empathetic staff and flexible learning can transform their experience.

Optimism endures. Despite challenges, students express pride, gratitude, and a strong sense of purpose, valuing environments where they feel seen, supported, and connected. However, it should be noted that one fifth of student respondents report being unable to identify a moment of success in their current higher education journey, and one in ten students are either unsure, or feel that their lecturers are rarely or never interested in enabling their success.



Implications

Findings from the HEA Student Success Survey 2025 reinforce that success in higher education is relational, participatory, and systemic. To realise the full vision and promise of student success, institutions should:

- embed inclusive and empathetic pedagogies
- strengthen student well-being, mental-health, and financial supports
- recognise and value diverse pathways and definitions of success
- foster environments that promote belonging, flexibility, and partnership between students and staff.

Students define success through achievement, growth, belonging, and well-being, shaped by the teaching and institutional cultures around them. The strongest enablers of success are effective teaching, empathy, and communication, while financial strain, accommodation, and mental health pressures remain the greatest barriers.

To realise the HEA Expert Group's tripartite vision of success as student-defined, institution-created, and outcomes-oriented, institutions must foster inclusive, flexible learning environments that enable every student to thrive academically, personally, professionally and socially.

These insights contribute to ongoing policy development within the HEA's national approach to student success, supporting Ireland's commitment to inclusive, student-centred higher education where all students are enabled to thrive and fulfil their potential.



Introduction and Methodology

This report contributes to the national and global conversation around what it means to thrive in higher education. The following introduction outlines the conceptual and policy foundations for this work and describes how the survey was developed and implemented.

Student success is a cornerstone of Ireland's higher education policy and a defining principle of quality and equity in the sector. The National Forum Student Success Framework (2019) and subsequent Student Success Framework Expert Review (2025) propose a national vision of student success as simultaneously student-defined, institution-created, and outcomes-oriented. This tripartite understanding recognises that success is personal as well as systemic: it depends not only on the efforts and aspirations of individual students but also on the conditions, cultures, and supports created by higher education institutions, and the outcomes valued by society.

Building on this foundation, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Student Success Survey 2025 was designed to explore how students across Ireland define and experience success in practice. The survey forms part of the HEA's ongoing commitment to evidence-informed policy and its efforts to promote inclusive, student-centred higher education. It complements the Student Success Framework and Expert Review (2025) by offering a relatively large-scale, data-driven perspective on the student voice, deepening the national understanding of what success means to students and how it is achieved, supported, or constrained within the Irish higher education environment.

The survey was open from April to June 2025 to all students enrolled in higher education institutions across Ireland. Circulation of the survey occurred through National Forum Associates, Registrars' Offices, social media, and Students' Unions, ensuring broad and representative participation. In total, 3,462 valid responses were received from students across 17 higher education institutions, including all publicly funded HEIs and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). The responses encompass a diverse range of institutions, disciplines, levels, and modes of study, offering a comprehensive picture of the student experience in Ireland.



The survey instrument was hosted on SurveyMonkey and consisted of 27 questions, designed to balance quantitative data collection with opportunities for qualitative reflection. Students were invited to share their perspectives on three central areas:

- how they define and measure success;
- the supports and enablers that contribute to their success; and
- the challenges and barriers that hinder it.

Question design was informed by national and international research on student success, as well as by findings from HEA-facilitated student focus groups ($n = 93$) conducted from February to April 2025. These earlier discussions explored students lived experiences of success and informed the survey's tone and structure, and because of this sequential design more in-depth analysis was possible. Themes found throughout the focus groups were found in the survey participants' data. As previously stated, data processing permissions were embedded at the start of the survey, and collection was conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act (2018).

The findings presented in this report provide a detailed portrait of how students in Ireland conceptualise and experience success. They illuminate both individual and structural factors that shape success and identify opportunities for policy and practice to enhance belonging, achievement, and well-being across the higher education sector.

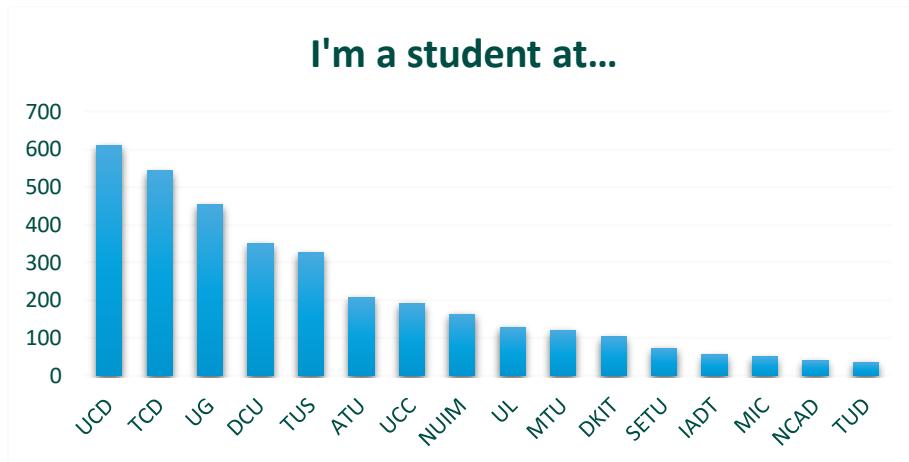
The following section provides an overview of the students who participated in the survey, summarising key demographic and educational characteristics that contextualise the findings presented in the report.



Respondent Overview

A total of 3,462 valid responses were received to the survey. Of these, 3,450 were students from 16 public HEIs; 12 were from the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland (RCSI) students or preferred not to say. The sample reflects a diverse mix of learners, encompassing a wide range of study modes, disciplines, and backgrounds.

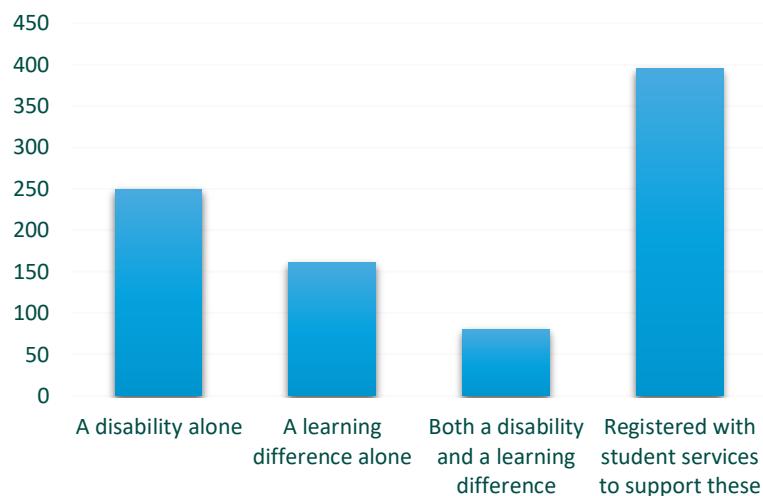
Most respondents (82% n=2840) were full-time students, with the remaining 18% (n=622) studying part-time or through flexible arrangements. Just over one in five (20% n=712) of all participants identified as international students.



When asked about their mode of study, 82% (n=2833) indicated that their learning was mainly on-campus, 13% (n=452) were studying mainly online, and 5% (n=177) described their programme as blended. This distribution highlights the continued predominance of in-person learning, while also capturing the growing relevance of digital and hybrid learning environments.



Disability and Learning Differences

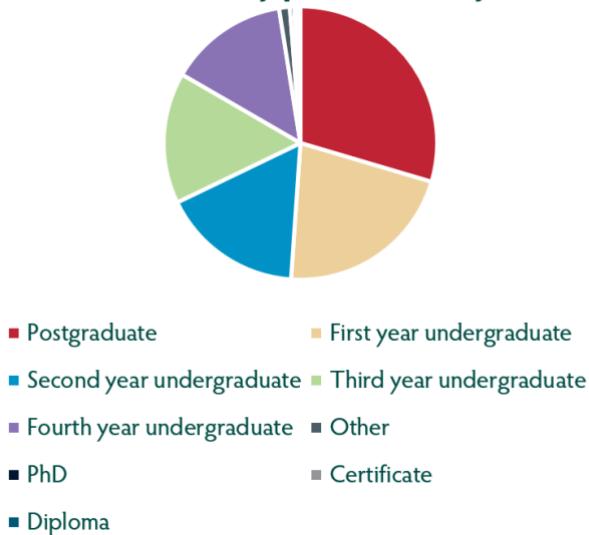


Gender identity among respondents showed that 63% (n=2187) identified as female, 33% as male (n=1143), and 2% as non-binary (n=72). A small proportion preferred not to disclose or selected other gender identities.

Nearly one in ten respondents (n=329) reported having a disability, while 7% (n=241) indicated a learning difference. Just over 11% (n=395) were formally registered with student services for support. These figures suggest that a significant proportion of students are engaging with supports or accommodations to enhance their educational experience.



Year / Type of Study

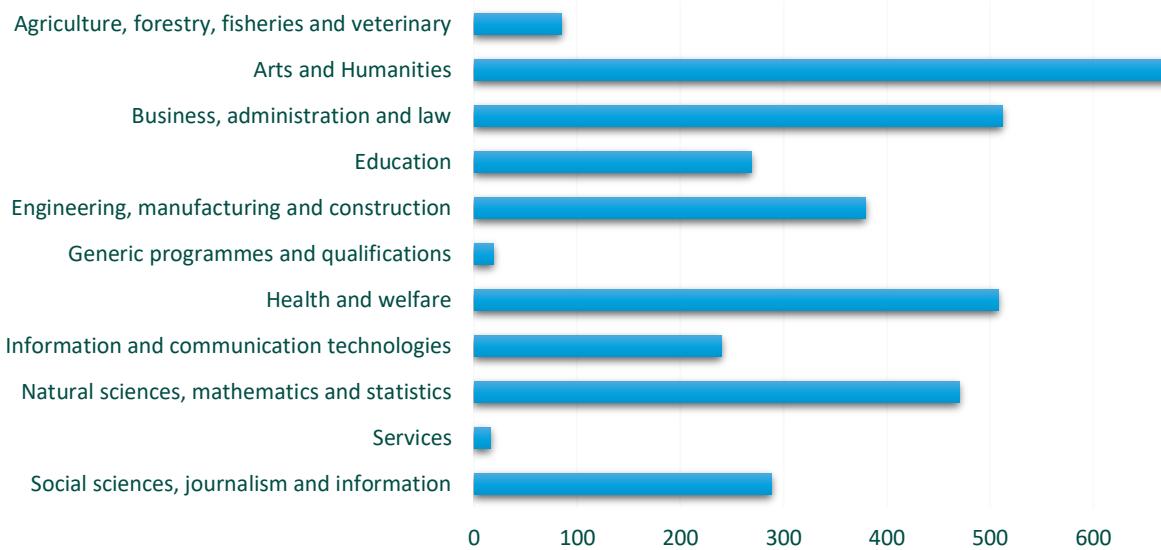


Mature students accounted for almost 38% (n=1304) of respondents, perhaps reflecting the fact that almost 30% (n=1024) were postgraduate. The remaining respondents (2% n=87) were undertaking other qualifications, including certificate or diploma programmes, PhD studies, access courses, apprenticeships, and micro-credentials.

Four subject areas together accounted for nearly two-thirds of all responses, being Arts and Humanities, Business, Administration and Law, Health and Welfare, and Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics. A substantial proportion of students (41% n=1424) reported that they were not in paid employment at the time of the survey. Among those who were working, 17% (n=598) were employed full-time, while 31% (n=1078) were working part-time for more than 10 hours per week. A further 15% (n=512) worked fewer than 10 hours weekly.



Course Area



These data highlight the varied balance between study and employment commitments with a notable share of students combining substantial work hours with their academic studies.

Understanding who took part helps illuminate how diverse the concept of success can be. The next section explores how students themselves define success — revealing the range of personal, academic, and social dimensions that shape their understanding of achievement.



Student Perspectives on Success

When asked to reflect on what success in higher education means to them, students demonstrated a strong and pragmatic orientation towards completion, personal growth, and employability, while still recognising broader societal and developmental goals. The question invited students to rate the relative importance of six indicators of success:

- Achieving high academic attainment
- Completing my course and graduating
- Contributing to society and making the world a better place
- Developing skills to maximise my employability
- Doing my best and achieving personal potential
- Progressing to a postgraduate programme

Respondents were asked to rate each statement by importance and then to select the single most important one, encouraging reflection on priorities and trade-offs.

By a notable margin, ‘Completing my course and graduating’ emerged as the most important indicator of success. Over 92% (n=3198) of respondents regarded it as a ‘key indicator of success and what I came to college to achieve’, while more than 30% (n=1092) identified it as the single most important factor when ranking the options.



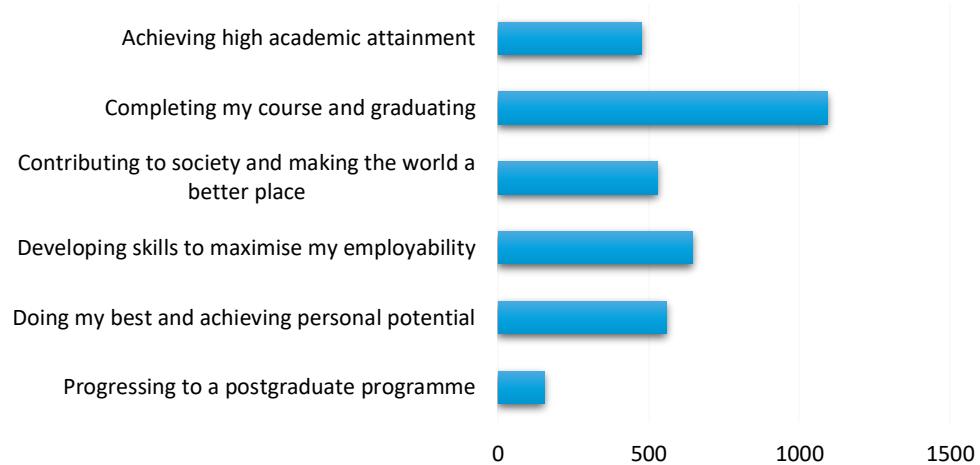
Indicators of Success



The second-highest rated item in terms of strength of agreement was ‘Doing my best and achieving personal potential’. A large majority of students (78% n=2695) selected it as a key indicator, reflecting a strong intrinsic motivation towards self-development and personal fulfilment. ‘Developing skills to maximise my employability’ was selected to be almost as important (73% n=2531), followed by ‘Achieving high academic attainment’ (60% n=2085), and ‘Contributing to society and making the world a better place’ (50% n=1741). Progressing to a postgraduate programme (30% n=1045) was regarded as valuable but less critical to students’ immediate sense of success.



Most Important Indicator of Success



However, when forced to prioritise, ‘Developing skills to maximise my employability’ overtook personal achievement in the comparative rankings, receiving almost 19% (n=646) of the top preference, compared with 16% (n=559) for personal potential. Contributing to society and making the world a better place followed closely behind at 15% (n=528), along with ‘Achieving high academic attainment’, at 14% (n=475).

These results imply that, for many students, success is defined more by tangible progression and employability outcomes than by academic excellence alone or by longer-term aspirations such as further study.

While definitions describe what success means to students, indicators show how they recognise it in practice. The next section examines how students measure or experience success in their studies, from academic milestones to personal growth and confidence.



Interpreting the Meaning of Success

To explore whether students shared a traditional view of success, respondents were presented with the statement: 'Traditionally, student success in higher education is defined and measured by grades, progression from year to year (progression/persistence), and graduation (completion). Do you agree with this definition?'

A clear majority of students (68% n=2370) agreed with the traditional definition. This indicates broad recognition of grades, academic progression, and completion as the conventional benchmarks by which higher education success is understood and measured. However, while most students accepted these criteria as valid, the accompanying open-text responses reveal a desire for a more holistic understanding of success, suggesting that agreement does not necessarily equate to full endorsement.

Among those who disagreed or chose to elaborate (32% n=1027), many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with what they saw as an overly narrow, grade-based conception of success. The most common themes included:

- Students felt that grades, while important, capture only one dimension of achievement. Many emphasised the importance of developing practical and transferable skills that prepare them for employment and professional life important for these students, success is linked to readiness for future challenges rather than academic metrics alone.
- A significant number of students identified personal growth, confidence, and self-improvement as integral elements of success. Higher education was viewed as an environment for becoming well-rounded individuals, capable of independent thought and lifelong learning.
- A notable proportion of respondents referenced the role of well-being and balance in defining success. Some highlighted the stress and anxiety associated with grades and competition, calling for a broader framework that recognises mental health as both a precondition and an outcome of success.



Having established what success looks like, the report now turns to the factors that help students achieve it. This section explores the supports, relationships, and institutional practices that students identify as enablers of their success.

The Role of Peer Engagement in Student Success

Students were asked to consider the social dimension of success and to reflect on the influence of their peers: ‘Research shows that attending and engaging in college is important for your own success. But how important do you think your experience is shaped by the attendance and engagement of other students on your course?’ The results were strongly positive, with almost 90% (n=3078) of respondents indicating that peer attendance and engagement was either extremely, very or somewhat important to their success.

This suggests that students view learning not as a solitary pursuit but as a shared process, influenced by collective participation and the social environment of the classroom, something which was further supported in the associated comments.



Moments and Enablers of Success

To explore how students experience success rather than just how they define it, respondents were asked to reflect on personal moments of achievement and to identify which factors most contributed to that feeling. When asked 'Can you think of a time in college when you felt successful?', most students (80% n=2773) said yes, while 7% (n=252) said no and 13% (n=437) were unsure or preferred not to say. This indicates that most students can recall a specific experience or milestone that made them feel successful, though a significant minority either had not yet felt that way or found it difficult to pinpoint a particular moment.

The high proportion of affirmative responses suggests that most students are able to connect emotionally with their progress and achievements, an encouraging sign of engagement and self-reflection.

Students were then presented with a list of eight experiences or enablers and asked to describe how each one contributed to their sense of success.

The most valued enabler was 'Experiencing personal growth in my course', which received the highest proportion of 'This makes me feel very successful' responses (75% n=2563). This finding is consistent with earlier results showing that students view personal development and self-improvement as core dimensions of success in higher education.

The next most important factors were 'Getting actionable feedback from my lecturer on an assignment or piece of work' (71% n=2455), followed closely by 'Being able to explain to someone else something I've learned.' (70% n=2403). These responses point to a deep appreciation for understanding and application, whereby students feel most successful when they receive constructive feedback that helps them improve and when they can confidently share their learning with others.

By contrast, 'Recognition from other students' (39% n=1349) and 'Collaborating successfully with a student team on a project' (40% n=1373) were the least frequently associated with feelings of success, apart from with mature students who recognised the value of this significantly more as 46% of mature students (n=599 of 1304) versus 36% for other students (n=767 of 2134). While teamwork and peer recognition are



valued in many learning contexts, these results suggest that, for this cohort, success is experienced more through personal growth and academic mastery than through social validation or group achievement. Additionally, external recognition in the form of prizes and high grades are also important:

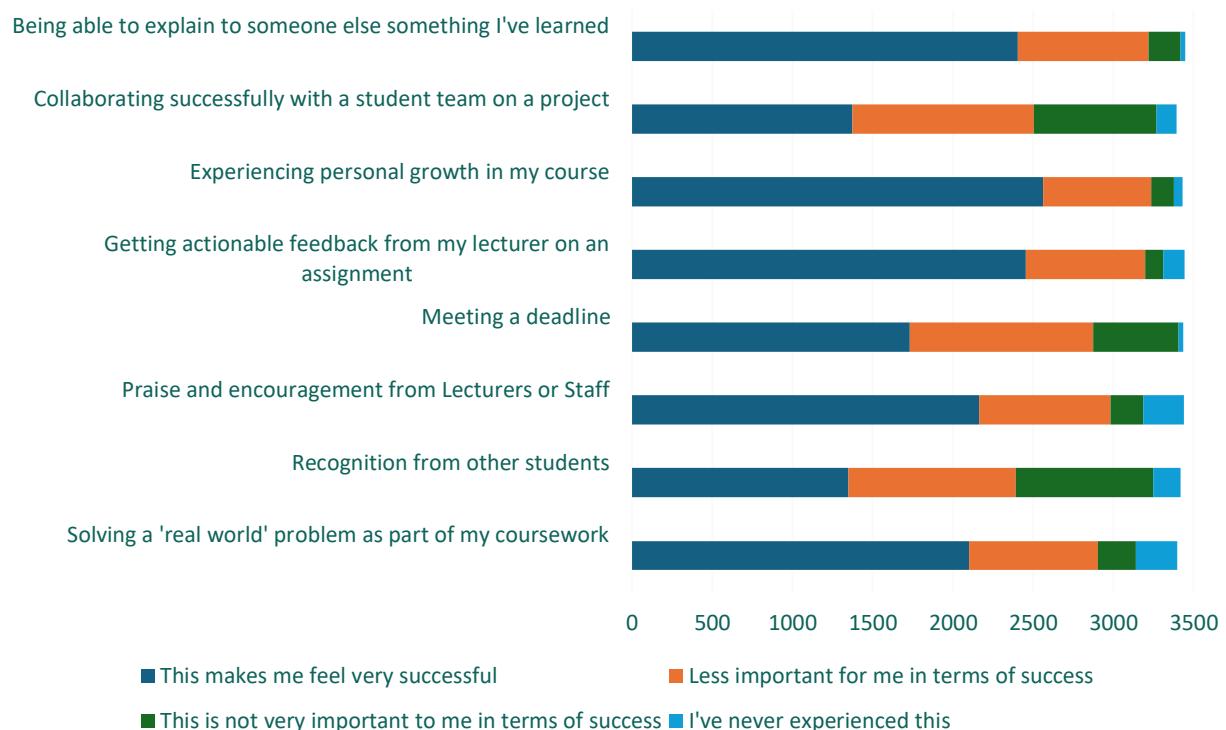
“Bhain mé amach na grádaí b'airde sa tír i mo réimhse agus bhuaigh mé duais. Tá sé an-tábhachtach rudaí mar seo a dhéanamh, an moladh ceart a bhronnadh nuair is féidir.”

(“I achieved the highest grades in the country in my field and won an award. It's very important to do things like this, to give the right praise when possible.”)

Male, Undergraduate, University of Galway

When examining gender-based differences in student experience, this is one area where the most pronounced differences were revealed. Female students, when adjusted for share of survey responses, were 14% (n=2187) more likely than males to report that ‘Meeting a deadline’ makes them feel very successful. This suggests that female respondents generally perceive consistency and organisation in managing coursework

Enablers of Success





as more important than males, who were more inclined to describe difficulty meeting deadlines. Mature students are ten percentage points more likely to say that meeting deadlines makes them feel successful. This may suggest stronger satisfaction and self-efficacy around managing coursework, possibly due to greater experience balancing commitments.

Additionally, responses on praise and encouragement revealed a distinct pattern of perception and engagement. Female students were twelve percentage points more likely to state that they valued 'Praise and encouragement from Lecturers/Staff'. Male students tended to value recognition or encouragement less, which may reflect either lower sensitivity to such feedback or fewer explicit expressions of positive reinforcement in their learning environments as described in the comments.

The findings present a picture of success that is reflective and inwardly focused. Students derive their strongest sense of achievement from developing, communicating, and being acknowledged for competence, and growing personally. Feedback, learning application, and self-assessment appear to be more powerful motivators than other external recognition.

Among all supports, teaching and learning stand out as the most influential. The following section examines how students perceive teaching quality, lecturer engagement, and classroom culture as key determinants of their experience of success.



Teaching Quality and Support for Student Success

Students were asked to reflect on the role of those who teach them, both in terms of professional growth and their interest in student success. The responses painted a largely positive picture, one that acknowledged the genuine care and dedication of many lecturers, while also highlighting areas where teaching practice and consistency could be strengthened.

When asked how important it is that lecturers continue to learn and improve their teaching through professional development, more than two-thirds (67% n=2334) said it was extremely important, and a further quarter (25% n=873) said it was very important. Only a handful of respondents (n=12) saw it as unimportant.

The question 'Do you think your lecturers are interested in enabling your success?', offered a more nuanced view. About one in five students (21% n=744) said their lecturers were always interested in helping them succeed, while nearly half (46% n=1590) said usually. Another quarter (23% n=812) said sometimes, and smaller numbers said rarely, never, or unsure (9% n=313).

The responses suggest that most students feel supported by their lecturers, but that this support is not experienced equally across the board. The word 'usually' appeared most frequently in these comments, suggesting support is common but uneven, and students recognise that not everyone shows the same level of engagement.

Interestingly, there was a perceived difference in these answers between the established Universities and Technological Universities. 27.83% of TU/IOT students (n=920) believe that lecturers are 'Always' interested in enabling their success whereas 19.25% of university students (n=2530) believe this to be true. All other metrics around teaching were in parity across the two groups.

Students who described both positive and negative experiences often mentioned timely, specific feedback that helped them understand how to improve. They appreciated lecturers who used practical examples, connected theory to real-world contexts, and created space for discussion rather than reading directly from slides. Many valued lecturers who were approachable and responsive, especially when they needed help or clarity outside class.



Several students also emphasised the importance of empathy, particularly flexibility around deadlines, understanding of personal challenges, and support for mental health. For international students, sensitivity to cultural differences and communication barriers made a significant difference to their sense of belonging.

Interestingly, mature students were almost 13% (n=1304) more likely to agree that lecturers are always interested in enabling their success. Their qualitative comments frequently describe lecturers as supportive, flexible, and respectful of life circumstances.

Building on the earlier questions about professional development and lecturer engagement, students were invited to consider how teaching staff can best support their success. The question asked them to rank a list of lecturer attributes from most to least important. At the top of the rankings was 'Being able to include related research, real-world relevance, expert knowledge, and work practices in their teaching.' (38% n=1323), showing that students appear to value lecturers who bridge the gap between the classroom and the wider world of research, industry experience, and professional practice to make their teaching meaningful and current.

This finding aligns closely with earlier responses about employability and personal growth, where students indicate that developing skills and applying knowledge are central to their sense of success.

The second most important attribute was 'Being a good listener and communicator' (35% n=1203). This highlights the relational nature of effective teaching. Students value lecturers who engage openly, communicate clearly, and listen to their perspectives. Students' earlier comments would suggest that being heard, understood, and respected are all seen as hallmarks of lecturers who genuinely care about student success.



Most Important Teacher Attributes



At the bottom of the list were 'Being familiar with and using digital technologies' (3% n=106) and 'Being organised and on time' (10% n=336). While these qualities are still valued, their low ranking suggests that students take a baseline level of digital competence and professionalism for granted. This may also reflect a post-pandemic normalisation of digital learning tools, and instead students now prioritise other aspects of teaching.

While most students describe lecturers as supportive and engaged, they also identify systemic pressures that challenge success.



Challenges to Student Success

While most students could identify moments when they felt successful, many also acknowledged ongoing challenges that make achieving and sustaining that success difficult. The survey asked students to rate how strongly a range of potential challenges affected their progress and sense of success in college.

By a clear margin, cost of living and financial pressures (22% n=721) emerged as the most significant challenge for students. It was the top-ranked obstacle overall and featured prominently across all groups of respondents, regardless of study mode or discipline.

Students described financial strain as an ongoing and persistent obstacle, with rising rents, food prices, and transport costs putting sustained pressure on their ability to study effectively. In the supporting comments, many noted that the need to work long hours to meet expenses left less time for coursework, rest, or participation in campus life. As one student explained:

I will get stressed if I can't work enough hours because classes are being moved around daily which then I have a financial difficulty paying rent and bills, this effects my mental health. Balancing work, college and placement is hard as I don't have enough time to study, and I need extra time to study too. I also have sick mum at home so it's like a maze I am trying to get through every day and balance.

Female, Undergraduate, Mature Student, Leinster Region, DKIT

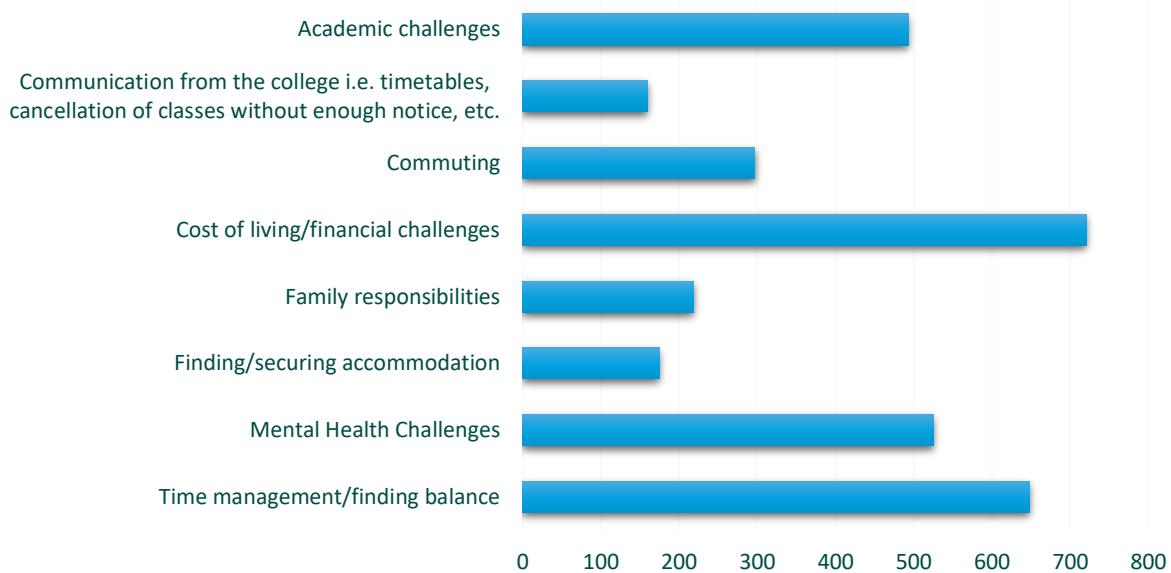
The findings echo national student concerns about affordability in higher education, particularly for those balancing study with employment or dependent family members. The second major challenge was 'Time management and finding balance' (20% n=648). Students consistently reported difficulty juggling academic workloads, part-time jobs, social commitments, and personal responsibilities. Even when not facing acute financial pressure, many found it challenging to manage competing demands on their time.

Although not the top challenge overall, 'Mental health challenges' featured prominently (16% n=525) as a recurring issue. Many students (43% n=1590) selected this as a regular or occasional obstacle to their success. The results suggest that while mental



health challenges may not be universal, they are widespread enough to shape the learning experience for a substantial proportion of students. Mental health also

Most challenging to your success



emerged as a moderate but consistent gender difference. Female respondents were more likely to describe mental health as a 'regular or significant obstacle' to success, whereas males more often reported that it was 'not a challenge'. The overall gap was around six percentage points.

The relationship between mental health, workload, and financial strain was implicit across many comments, reflecting how these pressures often reinforce one another. For example, students struggling with financial insecurity were also more likely to describe stress and anxiety in their comments. Furthermore, for non-binary students, mental health challenges are selected as the most significant challenge more than twice as often (39% n=28) compared to the average. By contrast, mature students (9% n=113) and those studying primarily online (8% n=34) were almost half as likely to report mental health as their most significant challenge.

Finding and securing accommodation was another notable theme. Although not as universally ranked as cost of living, it was described as a significant challenge by those affected (20% n=649). Students highlighted issues such as affordability, distance from



campus, and the insecurity of short-term leases. It is a particularly significant challenge for international students (31% n=219), who raise this twice as much as domestic students. For many, these housing difficulties added daily logistical and emotional strain, particularly for those commuting long distances or sharing crowded living spaces.

At the lower end of the scale were communication from the college (such as timetable updates, last-minute cancellations, and unclear notices) (12% n=399) and family responsibilities (17% n=540). While these issues were less common, they still had a marked impact for some students. For example, a number of mature students balancing childcare or elder care duties noted that inflexible scheduling or poor communication could significantly affect their ability to attend classes or complete work on time. Unsurprisingly, mature students are 13 percentage points (n=311) more likely to identify family responsibilities as a barrier to success.



Final Reflections and Open Feedback

At the close of the survey, and at strategic points during the survey, students were invited to share any additional thoughts on student success or to offer feedback on the survey itself. The open-ended responses (n=5360) were varied, thoughtful, and often deeply personal. Five broad themes emerged, together offering an authentic window into how students view their experiences and what they believe higher education could do better:

- Gratitude
- Need for greater empathy
- Mental health and wellbeing support
- Importance of teaching
- Financial constraints of HE

Many students used this final space to express gratitude, for their lecturers, their programmes, and the opportunities that higher education had provided them. Some praised specific modules or teaching approaches, while others commented on how the experience had helped them grow personally and intellectually. A number of students also appreciated being asked for their views, describing the survey as a valuable way to feel heard within their institution.

Great survey! I think it's so important to share student stories to younger students to help them with motivation and feeling less pressure at times.

Male, Undergraduate, Munster Region, UCC

These comments underline a strong sense of pride and appreciation for the college experience as a whole. Despite the challenges highlighted elsewhere in the survey, many respondents clearly associate higher education with progress, purpose, and community.

Alongside these positive reflections, a recurrent theme was a desire for greater empathy from HEIs. Students spoke of wanting lecturers and administrators to better recognise the pressures they face, balancing academic work with employment, caring



responsibilities, financial constraints, and personal struggles. One respondent highlighted the multiplicity of small actions that together build confidence:

"Be more engaging. Less contradictory about [what they] say. And not talk about themselves all the time. Be more confident in a lecture. More helpful when a student is looking for help replying in a clear and helpful way. Reply to messages. Acknowledge worried students in person and check in about their work."

Female, Postgraduate, Mature Student, Connaught / Ulster Region

The comment points to an expectation that lecturers should not only deliver content but also actively notice and respond to students' needs. It is striking how practical the requests are: engage more, avoid contradiction, respond to messages, and show care.

Mental health featured prominently once again in these open comments. Students consistently called for more accessible and visible counselling services, greater awareness among lecturers of mental health challenges, and stronger institutional supports for well-being.

Tailored counselling and peer-support programmes for PhD students juggling academic and personal responsibilities can go a long way in preventing burnout.

Male, PhD, International Student, Dublin Region, TCD

The prominence of teaching in students' narratives reinforces the importance of pedagogical quality and staff-student relationships as key levers for institutional enhancement. It suggests that improvements in teaching practice and lecturer engagement may have a more visible impact on students' sense of success under the control of HEIs than any other single intervention.

Students reflected candidly on the variability of teaching quality, noting that while many lecturers were engaging and supportive, others seemed disconnected or unprepared. Requests centred on improved course organisation, consistency in teaching standards, and more interactive, discussion-based learning. For example, one comment describes the impact of late provision of assignment details:

"Very few lecturers give feedback in a timely manner so it can be implemented in the next assignment. Some lecturers do not provide us with details of the assignment until a week or two before whereas other people in the same course doing a different elective will receive info about all assignments months in advance, usually the first or second



week of the new semester allowing them to plan for assignments and know what parts being discussed in the lecture are most valuable.”

Female, Undergraduate, Dublin Region

The frustration here is not about academic content itself but about predictability and equity. As evidenced in the open comments, when students feel they are disadvantaged compared to peers in other streams, dissatisfaction rises sharply.

Finally, a smaller but forceful thread of feedback addressed the financial realities of higher education. Students spoke of the growing cost of living, tuition, and accommodation, often framing these as barriers to equal access and participation. Some called for reduced fees, expanded bursaries, or practical measures such as subsidised food and transport options. One student’s response illustrates the compounded burden:

“Being a student, having responsibilities of family it’s a huge challenge and have to commute to college 3 hours plus Mon-Friday [sic], it’s really taking its toll on my mental health.”

Female, Undergraduate, Mature Student, Connaught / Ulster Region

This narrative encapsulates how the material realities of transport and cost directly shape the ability to participate in academic life. This comment also highlights how individual staff can help mitigate, but not eliminate, structural barriers.

Among the responses were several comments that carried strong emotional weight, often describing extreme dissatisfaction or unique perspectives. One comment expressed anger at how accommodations for disability were handled:

“Many penalise me for trying to use the accommodations provided to me as a student with a learning disabilities [sic]. Very few are happy to make the lectures as accessible for me as possible... so many lecturers are completely out of touch with our reality and it shows.”

Female, Undergraduate, Dublin Region

This testimony not only signals a gap in inclusion but also highlights a deep disconnect between formal policy (accommodations offered) and lived experience



(accommodations resisted). The narrative is long, detailed, and full of frustration, pointing to systemic shortcomings that affect equity in education.

At the other end of the spectrum, some comments were brief but positive, reminding us of the variability of student experiences. One mature student reflected:

“As a mature student, I am more than delighted to be part of this course, it’s never to [sic] late to start, and every day is a learning day.”

Male, Undergraduate, Mature Student, Connaught / Ulster Region, ATU

Another wrote:

“It’s brilliant to be able to study as an online student.”

Female, Undergraduate, Mature Student, Dublin Region, DCU

These comments show that for certain groups, access and flexibility have been transformative, even amidst the broader challenges reported.

Taken together, the final reflections reinforce the central messages emerging across the survey. Students value their college experience and recognise the commitment of their lecturers, but they are also calling for a higher education culture that is more consistent, empathetic, and responsive to the realities of student life.

Stories of Success: Student Voices

As part of the survey, students were invited to respond to an open-ended question: “If you’d like to share a story of your success, please do so below.” More than four hundred students (n=474, or 14% of the overall participants) took this opportunity to describe moments of pride, resilience, and transformation in their educational journeys.

Their stories reflect the proposed tripartite model of student success as student-defined, institution-created, and outcomes-oriented, illustrating how personal determination, supportive learning environments, and meaningful outcomes combine to shape genuine success. The reflections that follow range from moments of triumph and belonging to experiences of perseverance through difficulty. In total, they give voice to the lived reality of success in Irish higher education: complex, challenging, and deeply human.



Selected quotations in the following selection have been lightly edited for clarity, with identifying details removed.

Personal Growth and Perseverance

“Returning to education after many years away was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. But I discovered that I still love learning - and that I belong here.”

“I dropped out of mainstream education when I was sixteen. Coming back as a mature student was terrifying, but I’ve proven to myself that I can succeed.”

“I am able to say I have helped save a man’s life (during a student nursing placement one of my patients went into cardiac arrest and I was the first responder) and nothing has ever made me more proud!”

“Speaking Irish with a hospital patient who had never been able to use their native Irish language in the healthcare system before.”

“Balancing my studies with full-time work and raising two children taught me that success is often just showing up, even when it feels impossible.”

“My sense of success has come from many “first-time” experiences. The first time I communicated successfully in a second language, the first time I delivered a speech, the first time I wrote an academic essay, all in a language that was not my own. I progressed from knowing nothing to knowing a little, and eventually to being able to share my knowledge with others. As a student, I’ve learned that I don’t need to worry about what I don’t yet know, that’s precisely why I’m here: to learn. I believe that confidence is built through these “first-time” experiences. You can’t simply tell someone to be confident; instead, give them the chance to accomplish something. Once they see that they can do it, confidence will follow. That’s what I’ve learned from my own journey. And I believe that is the true meaning of education: to uncover one’s potential and to cultivate the belief that one can accomplish things they may have never imagined possible.”



Academic and Professional Pride

“Receiving a First Class Honours in my dissertation made all the late nights worth it.”

“Being recognised for my research at an international conference gave me confidence I never had before.”

“Being published and in some instances getting the highest grades in a class or just getting a grasp of how theory relates to a real world issue.”

“When my placement supervisor said, ‘You’ll make a great nurse,’ I finally believed it.”

Resilience and Recovery

“I completed my degree despite becoming a single parent halfway through. Every assignment felt like climbing a mountain.”

“After months of burnout and panic attacks, I still managed to submit my dissertation. It’s not perfect, but it’s mine — and I’m proud of that.”

“I failed second year, repeated, and managed to finish my final year with a first class honours in economics and a 2:1 in my overall degree. From the low point of failing, graduating in this fashion is truly a success story to me.”

“There were moments when I wanted to quit. Between rent, work, and anxiety, I felt like I was failing. But I didn’t quit — and that, to me, is success.”

Community and Belonging

“The friendships I made in my course are my biggest success — I never thought I’d feel part of a community again.”

“During a group project at university, I worked with classmates from different cultural and academic backgrounds. At first, we had different approaches and opinions, which caused some misunderstandings. I initiated open discussions to understand everyone’s perspectives and encouraged equal participation. By compromising on ideas and dividing tasks based on individual strengths, we created a balanced and effective workflow. In the end, our collaboration led to a successful presentation and a strong sense of teamwork.”



“My success came when I finally felt seen — when a lecturer took the time to ask how I was doing.”

“Mentoring first-year students reminded me how far I’d come and that I had something to give back.”

Discovery and Innovation

“Working with 4 other people to make a buggy drive faster than everyone else’s.”

“Offering value to a company through group project.”

“I am currently on an occupational therapy placement and I recently implemented a very small intervention for one of the service users in the service I am working in and it was successful. I feel like I have made a small, but meaningful, difference to her life and that is a success.”

“Coming up with a method for finding the path of a nebula moving across the sky.”

These reflections illustrate the journey of student success as rarely linear or effortless, rather personal and profound. Success is a process shaped by imagination, growth connection, grit and resilience. In the voices of Ireland’s HE students, success is found as much in persistence and recovery as in grades or graduation.



Conclusion and Implications

The HEA Student Success Survey 2025 provides a comprehensive national insight into how current students in Ireland define, experience, and achieve success in higher education. The findings confirm that success is not a single outcome but a dynamic process, shaped by students' own aspirations, the cultures and practices of their institutions, and the wider conditions of study and life.

Across the responses, students describe success as deeply personal yet profoundly relational. They value academic achievement and employability, but also highlight the importance of well-being, belonging, and the quality of their interactions with lecturers and peers. The proposed tripartite model of student success – student-defined, institution-created, and outcomes-oriented – is clearly reflected in their perspectives.

Students' voices in this survey underscore that effective teaching, empathy, and consistent communication remain the strongest enablers of success under institutional control. At the same time, structural barriers, especially financial strain, accommodation challenges, and mental health pressures, continue to limit the full realisation of that success for many. It is a concern, however, that one fifth of students' report being unable to identify a moment of success in their current higher education journey, and one in ten students are either unsure, or feel that their lecturers are rarely or never interested in enabling their success.

Despite these pressures, the overarching tone of the data is hopeful. Students express pride in their education, gratitude towards supportive staff, and a strong sense of purpose. Their reflections call for a higher education culture that values consistency, understanding, and authentic engagement, where success is possible for every student, in every context.

These insights will inform the ongoing implementation of recommendations arising from the HEA Student Success Framework Review (2025), supporting institutions to create environments that enable all learners to flourish academically, personally, and socially.



Appendix

Thank you for your valuable contribution in sharing your experience of Student Success in Higher Education Ireland. Your views will be held confidentially and will help shape recommendations for policy development, ensuring all students are enabled for success. This survey is part of a broader review by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) of Student Success in Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland. Your Data: The HEA processes personal data at all times in compliance with GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. Once the review is complete and published, these details will not be retained or used for any other purpose. Your information will be stored securely by the HEA and access controls will apply to this data.

Contact: If you have any questions or feedback, please contact Rebecca Roper on rroper@hea.ie.

Again, thank you for your time and insights. This survey will take approximately 13 minutes to complete and includes 27 questions across three pages. Be frank, celebrate your experience and enjoy.

* 1. I confirm I am over 18 years old

- Yes
- No

* 2. I am currently a registered student at...

- Atlantic Technological University (ATU)
- Dublin City University (DCU)
- Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)
- Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)
- Mary Immaculate College (MIC)
- Maynooth University
- Munster Technological University (MTU)
- National College of Art and Design (NCAD)
- South East Technological University (SETU)
- Technological University of Dublin (TUD)
- Technological University of the Shannon (TUS)
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- University College Cork (UCC)
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- University of Galway
- University of Limerick (UL)
- Prefer not to say

If your college is not on the list above, please write it here:

* 3. Are you....

- A full-time student
- A part-time student

Other (please specify)

* 4. Are you an international student attending college in Ireland?

- No
- Yes, via Erasmus
- Yes, but not via Erasmus

Other (please specify)

* 5. My gender is:

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say
- Other

If 'other', please specify if you wish:

* 6. Are you a student with...(select any that apply)

- A disability
- A learning difference
- Registered with student services to support a disability and/or learning difference
- None of the above
- Prefer not to say

* 7. Are you a mature student; were you over 23 years old in January of the first year you came into college?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

* 8. What year of study are you in currently?

- First year undergraduate
- Second year undergraduate
- Third year undergraduate
- Fourth year undergraduate
- Postgraduate
- Other

If 'other' please specify:

* 9. My course is delivered:

- Primarily online
- Primarily in-person, on campus
- Both online and in-person in approximately equal amounts each week

* 10. My course is in the area of:

- Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary
- Arts and Humanities
- Business, administration and law
- Education
- Engineering, manufacturing and construction
- Generic programmes and qualifications
- Health and welfare
- Information and communication technologies
- Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics
- Services
- Social sciences, journalism and information

Other

* 11. I am currently:

- Not in paid employment
- Working part-time (10 hours per week or less)
- Working part-time (up to 20 hours per week or over 10 hours per week)
- Working more than part-time (over 20 hours per week up to 35 hours)
- Working full-time (36 hours or over per week)
- Prefer not to state



Your Success - Indicators, definition, enablers of your success

* 12. What are the most important indicators of success for you as a student? Though all may be important, rate each based on how strongly it affects your sense of success in college. Consider each item in relation to the others.

	This is a key indicator of success and what I came to college to achieve	Less important, but still valuable	This is not very important to me	Not important to me in terms of success in college	N/A not applicable
Achieving high academic attainment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Completing my course and graduating	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Contributing to society and making the world a better place	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Developing skills to maximise my employability in my chosen field	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Doing my best and achieving personal potential	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Progressing to a postgraduate programme	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 13. Which from the list above is the MOST important to you

- Achieving high academic attainment
- Completing my course and graduating
- Contributing to society and making the world a better place
- Developing skills to maximise my employability
- Doing my best and achieving personal potential
- Progressing to a postgraduate programme
- Other

If 'other' please specify:



* 14. Traditionally, student success in higher education is defined and measured by grades, progression from year to year (progression/persistence) and graduation (completion). Do you agree with this definition?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

15. Is there anything you'd like to add to this definition?

* 16. Research shows that attending and engaging in college is important for your own success. But how important do you think your experience is shaped by the attendance and engagement of **other** students on your course?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not so important
- Not at all important

Comments:

* 17. Can you think of a time in college when you felt successful?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer



* 18. Below is a list of feelings and enablers of success in college. Please choose the statement that best describes your experience of each one.

	This makes me feel very successful	Less important for me in terms of success	This is not very important to me in terms of success	I've never experienced this	N/A
Praise and encouragement from Lecturers/Staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Getting actionable feedback from my lecturer on an assignment or piece of work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Recognition from other students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Solving a 'real world' problem as part of my coursework	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Meeting a deadline	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being able to explain to someone else something I've learned	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Collaborating successfully with a student team on a project	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Experiencing personal growth in my course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. If you'd like to share a story of your success as a student, please do so below:

* 20. There are many ways in which those who teach in higher education make efforts to ensure that they are always learning and enhancing their teaching. This is sometimes referred to as professional development. How important do you think it is that those who teach you engage in professional development?

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not so important
- Not at all important



21. Do you think your lecturers are interested in enabling your success?

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Unsure

Additional comment box:

* 22. Think about how those who teach in higher education can support your success. Please read the list of attributes below and rank them from most Important (first on your list) to least Important (last on your list).

- ☰ Being a good listener and communicator
- ☰ Being able to include related research, real world relevance, expert knowledge and work practices in their teaching
- ☰ Being familiar with digital technologies and able to use them to enhance student learning
- ☰ Being organised and on time
- ☰ Modelling and upholding mutual respect in all interactions with other people

23. What one thing could your lecturers do to further enable your success?



Your challenges to success and final questions

* 24. Your challenges to success:

Please read all of the statements below and rate them in terms of how strongly they affect your success in college. Try to reflect on each statement in relation to the others.

	This affects me daily and is a significant obstacle to my success	This affects my ability to be successful regularly, but not all the time	This is an occasional challenge to my success	This neither affects my success positively or negatively	This is not a challenge to my success currently	N/A not applicable
Academic challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Commuting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Cost of living/financial	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family responsibilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding and securing accommodation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mental health challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time management/Finding balance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Communication from the college i.e. timetables, cancellation of classes without enough notice, etc.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 25. From the list above, which is the MOST challenging to your success? Please read all of the statements and then choose your answer.

- Academic challenges
- Commuting
- Cost of living/financial challenges
- Family responsibilities
- Finding/securing accommodation
- Mental health challenges
- Time management/finding balance
- Communication from the college i.e. timetables, cancellation of classes without enough notice, etc.

Other (please specify)



26. How might your college further support and enable your success?

27. Finally, thank you for your time and your valuable contribution. Please feel free to add anything else below regarding student success or feedback on this survey.